Education in Syrian State Schools before 2011

Written by Sara Rammal

Part of a series of research papers entitled
"Syria and its people"

Produced by Sharq
in partnership with
the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

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“Syria and its people”

A series of research papers about life in Syria prior to 2011
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We at Sharq have in recent years interviewed Syrians from diverse socio-economic, religious, ethnic and geographic backgrounds about their lives in Syria prior to 2011. Each interview focuses on a specific topic in which the narrator has experience, and all provide detailed personal accounts of life as a Syrian in a particular community and town living under particular pressures and privileges.

Listening to the individual stories, it becomes apparent that certain problems impacted Syrians across the country, regardless of ethnicity, religion, class or location and that these stories, collectively, add insight into the difficulties Syrians faced in the decades leading up to the 2011 revolution.

It would serve the future leaders of Syria, and agencies and organisations concerned with the development of the country post-conflict, to consider the lessons presented through these collective stories and experiences to ensure the development of a peaceful and prosperous society.

This is the motivation behind this book, this collection of studies on six interrelated spheres, each of which was written following a review of over 120 personal stories and a study of existing research. Despite the massive destruction, the country is not going to be built on a blank canvas. Its people and diverse communities carry with them fond memories, valuable experiences and crucial knowledge that if heard, nurtured and shared can provide the foundation needed for rebuilding a strong and inclusive Syria.

The ongoing conflict has resulted in the destruction of much of the country and many aspects of its society, but warm memories and relationships abound. When looking to rebuild, be it physical structures, institutions, programmes or communities, looking to Syria’s past should inform design for the future. It is not enough to only understand the experience of Syrians during the conflict, but also to know about their lives, loves and concerns prior to it.

Peaceful coexistence and post-conflict development require above all else empathy and understanding of the other. Effective and constructive development in our understanding of the causes and impact of different actions, events and environments on individuals and communities pre-conflict is key to our ability to develop approaches that can both help end conflict and build sustainably peaceful communities.

For decades, Syrians were denied the opportunity to honestly and constructively share their experiences, their dreams and their concerns. As such, we must focus on building trust based on a unifying desire to build a harmonious and inclusive society. Such trust can be built through storytelling. The telling of and listening to individual people’s stories of struggle and success, woes and wonders, nurtures connections and helps build stronger communities based on empathy, acceptance and respect.

Reem Maghribi
Managing Director, Sharq.Org

You can read and listen to the interviews referenced in this paper at www.SyrianHistories.org

Education in Syrian State Schools before 2011

Written by Sarah Ali Ramal
Produced by Sharq.Org, 2018

Abstract

Nearly seven years after the outbreak of the bloodiest strife in Syria's modern history, what emerges as crucial to the country's present and future is the study of the education sector. War conditions deprived hundreds of thousands of Syrian children of schooling. Displacement, degraded economic conditions and the destruction of a large number of schools prevented children from attending school in Syria, and a significant percentage of Syrian refugee children in neighbouring countries lacked access to schools.

To develop a coherent educational system - one modeled on sound international practices applicable to this context - we must start by examining the strengths and weaknesses in the education sector before the war commenced. This study identifies and evaluates the challenges in education before the war, drawing on individual accounts and testimonies collected from Syrian students, teachers, school directors and others, as well as on reliable scientific and academic data, statistics and references. These sources can help researchers design systemic, applicable models that will enable the development of legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as comprehensive policies that address all aspects of education in Syria.

This study is a critical and analytical reading of the educational sector in Syria. It aims to uphold education as one of the priorities of Syrian governance. Focus on the needs of children deprived by conflict and on the structure and organization of the education system is required, as is reform in line with methodical, international standards capable of surmounting the significant obstacles to such development.

Introduction

"I learn therefore I am" is a rewriting of Philosopher René Descartes' famous words which inspired demands for educational reform. The education sector is arguably the most important one strategically. It is this sector that is capable of creating new job opportunities, reducing unemployment, and enhancing economic and social growth. It is education that enables people to discover their abilities, appreciate themselves, and develop the skills needed to remain active and effective in their society. Sound experiential and structural connections between individuals and their environment can provide the solid grounding on which a new generation depends to be capable of good work, and of surmounting any difficulties that may impede cognitive and intellectual development.

This is why the world community, in its various international and regional conventions, affirms the right of education for all. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 calls for all peoples and nations to secure the respect of rights and liberty through education, and to take persistent measures, both national and global, to ensure the universal recognition and observance of these rights. Article 26 of the law stipulates that the right to education should be compulsory and free of charge, at least at the basic stage.[1]

In 1990, fifty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in recognition of the importance of education for economic and human development, the United Nations issued the International Declaration on Education for All and called on the governments of the world to:

* provide for basic educational needs, including reading, writing, oral expression etc.

* adopt the basic premise that individuals need to develop a society capable of discovering and promoting skills for human development and of improving living conditions.

Of particular interest is that the quality of education improves in tandem with human development.[2] Recent scientific advances in the field of information and telecommunications have created a digital revolution that has rendered the world a global village. Individuals must then keep abreast of these developments in order to acquire global skills useful at the national level.

Successive Syrian governments have tried since the early sixties to achieve justice and uphold the principle of equal opportunity in education. Through the equitable allocation of funds and development of incentive policies, these administrations sought to attract the largest number of students, create a strong and coherent infrastructure, and produce new eminent scientific elites.[3] The Syrian Arab Republic also joined a number international and regional organizations specializing in education. Among these organizations are the Arab Organization for Education, Culture and Science, the Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization.[4]

The education sector in Syria did develop in the decades before 2011. The Syrian government ratified the Compulsory Education Act in 1981 for primary school children between the ages of 6 and 12 years old.[5] In 2002, Legislative Decree No. 16 renamed the Department of Literacy "The Directorate of Adult Education and Cultural Development" in order to ensure comprehensive and continuous education.[6]

Horizontal growth during the decade between 1992 and 2002 led to an 18% increase in student enrollments in Syria; the number of teachers increased by 33%, and the number of schools by 23%.[7] Despite these positive achievements, the digital and non-digital revolution in knowledge and information systems presented significant challenges for the educational sector. It lagged behind in terms of methods (including those of scientific research), pedagogy and teacher training. The process of review and evaluation, particularly of the legal and organizational systems, must be central to educational reform and to Syria's mission to build a modern educational system.

Some researchers observed that educational methods in Syrian schools are recitative, traditional, and lack modern technological means commensurate with the complexity of academic curricula and theoretical courses. This system altogether exhausts students and demands passive learning, memorization, and the retention of information without analysis or research. Memorization is firmly ingrained in practice and in mentalities imposed by traditional methods of education.

No less critical to education are the extracurricular and artistic fields of music, art and sports. Although included in the Syrian curriculum, in reality these classes serve to fill space, and not to engage and motivate student creativity. Supervised by specialized teachers, a limited number of students are able to develop their talents, participate in the "Pioneers of the Ba'ath Competition," and win.[8] But the remaining the students benefit from no such training or attention.[9]

"School closes in your face the many doors of creativity, through which you could develop talents in music, art, or creative writing." [10]

Despite the efforts made by the state to ensure the right to education, successive Syrian governments faced increasing burdens, such as debt, risk of recession, economic decline, rapid population growth, widening economic disparities within the country, and widespread environmental degradation. These were obstacles to meeting basic educational needs in Syria, which may have encouraged the state to demote education in government policy-making.[11]

This study focuses on 5 subjects:

1) Education and the Promotion of Equality
2) The Curriculum and its Impact on Student Learning
3) Human Relations in School
4) Home and Society's Impact on Student Learning
5) Educational Environments and Challenges

1) **Education and Equality**

The Ministry of Education divides the educational system in Syria into several stages.[12] The first is kindergarten, which is a non-compulsory preparatory stage lasting two or three years. There are no official government kindergartens. They are part of the private sector, affiliated with civic associations, or attached to certain government institutions to serve government employees' children. Compulsory and free primary education follows, and is divided into two programs.[13] The first cycle covers first to fourth grade, and the second covers fifth to ninth

grade. The next cycle is general secondary education and covers grades ten to twelve, including students between ages 15 and 18. There are two sections in secondary school - scientific and literary. In addition to general secondary education, the government offers vocational secondary school (for women, in commerce, industry, agriculture, tourism and hotel management, and information technology). Legal studies constitute a special branch of secondary school education.

Enrolment in secondary school depends not on student preference but on grade averages achieved during primary school (particularly in the ninth grade based on the Brevet Certificate).[14]

We will discuss four themes relevant to the subject of education and equality:

a. Mandatory free education
b. Education and the regime
c. Social class in private and government schools
d. Gender equality in education

a. Mandatory Free Education

In 1950, after the independence of Syria from the French Mandate and the victory of the National Bloc in the elections, the first Syrian constitution appeared. In this, the idea of education had an Arab character with a Syrian Arab nationalist outlook. The Constitution included various provisions ensuring Syrian citizens' right to free and mandatory education.[15] The Constitution was amended in 1973 (after the Ba'ath party took power), and the state based its legal system thereafter on this comprehensive constitutional document. Article 37 guarantees the right to education and stipulates that it must be free at all levels and mandatory in its primary stage. This regulation also notes that the State is working on extending these rights to other educational stages, and on regulating education to better align it with the needs of society and production.[16]

The Mandatory Education Law No. 35 of 1981 stipulates that the Ministry of Education must sustain the education of children enrolled in mandatory education until the completion of primary school, even if they are over the age of 12. Under this law, parents of Syrian children between the ages of 6 and 12 are obliged to enroll them in primary school. Mandatory education offices established by law in the various Syrian governorates are responsible for warning those violating this regulation to comply within ten days, under penalty of punishment, either by imposing a fine or imprisonment or both.[17]

"Yes, education is available to all, and a law is in effect that legally requires education until the end of the preparatory stage. Such laws are very good, but follow-up is lacking. Any law issued with no mechanism to ensure its implementation will be circumvented. Many parents do not want their children to pursue education, either for economic or social reasons or because of the practice of marrying-off girls."

"A law preventing fathers - by pain of prison sentence - from depriving their children of education is in effect. Were this law implemented properly, we would not see such high

dropout rates." I think this phenomenon is more common in the countryside than in the city."[18]

In 2004, 95% of school-age children were enrolled in primary school, while only 58% were enrolled in secondary school.[19] In 2009, the literacy rate among children and teens was 94.43%, and among adults 84.19%. For girls, the number of students enrolled in different stages of education has increased significantly since the 1970s. In 2004, the proportion of girls enrolled in primary school was 96%, with 40% in secondary school, and 13% in higher education by the end of the last decade.

Despite the abundance of constitutional and legal provisions, there were abuses and failures to implement regulations or record dropout cases due to economic, social and other reasons. According to the UN Human Development Report 2005, the reasons for not attending school were as follows:[20]

- 35% of children do not want an education
- 17.4% of the students drop out of school to avoid repeating a grade
- 14.2% of students drop out of school to work
- 3.4% of children do not attend school due to health conditions

"My mother prevented me from continuing my education after my father suffered an injury while working in the fields which stopped him from working. He could no longer afford the tuition, and even my older brothers left university and started to wake up early to travel from our village to Damascus to work."[21]

b. Education and the Regime

Educational institutions in Syria play an essential ideological role in adding the dye of legitimacy for the regime. They also play an essential role in shaping social awareness among various social groups, adopting curricula that implant the ideas of the Ba'ath party in the minds of young people to produce an obedient generation that lacks critical thinking.[22]

The first school uniform was military (dark green) and was worn by all students in preparatory and secondary schools in 1966.[23] The students wore yellow or red badges on their shoulders as "military ranks" identifying the different stages of education. For example, first-grade students wore one yellow badge each, while third-grade students wore three. The same was practiced in secondary school but with a change of color so that three red badges indicated that the student was in the third grade of secondary.

"We used to undo our shirt buttons from the wrist as a kind of rebellion as if we were telling them that you cannot even control the buttons of the outfit we wear ... Everything was programmed, which meant first complying and then objecting, and not discussing requirements, whether consequential or not. We had to comply and then complain so everyone conformed to the same model."[24]

In 2003, the Ministry of Education replaced the school uniform, adopting light blue ones for primary school students (primary education, first stage), while students in the preparatory stage (primary education, second stage) wore dark blue uniforms (trousers and jackets) with

pink shirts for girls and light blue ones for boys. High school students wore gray belts and again light blue shirts for boys and pink ones for girls.[25]

"Regulations in Syrian schools were severe and Saturday inspection was mandatory. Girls were not allowed to wear cosmetics or any bracelets or jewelry."

"We had a very strict director. The students were required to wear loose trousers with a width of at least 22 cm. If he felt that something was amiss, he would take a number of punitive measures, such as not allowing girls to enter school grounds, calling their parents, and so on.[26] Party control in Syrian schools was one of the most difficult challenges facing the education sector. Each district had a party unit that put security and surveillance pressure on schools, teachers and students.

"We were under strict supervision by military education instructors, who watched us as we left school, ordering us to hold our school bags in our left hands. Whoever held her bag with her right hand would be punished the next day. This was justified by saying that leftist people must carry things with their left hands."[27]

In the Summer Youth Camps organized at the end of 10th grade (during the summer of 11th grade) in the large schools, the party treated young men and women as a military battalion they called "secret."[28] They indoctrinated them with theoretical lessons related to the tenets of the Ba'ath Party and the regime.[29] The party imposed its influence and exercised its hegemony over young people by convincing them that belonging to the party was an essential step to building a promising future at all levels, including that of employment. However, this affiliation sometimes did not benefit students or teachers because they did not meet certain requirements.

"Like many of my fellow teachers, I joined the ranks of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, attended regular meetings and became an active member. Yet this did not afford me employment opportunities and I remained a teacher as a fallback position. I had something undesirable, really disliked, which was wearing the hijab after completing the religious obligation of the Haj. My hijab prevented me from reaching advanced employment positions."[30]

Party membership required filling out a form prepared in advance by the party.[31] However, active party membership was not necessary. Numbers were what counted.

"Like other colleagues, I joined the ranks of the youth organization with two or three active members. Others paid 25 pounds a year to maintain party membership and benefit from it during registration at the university, or when the party division intervened in the case of a disagreement with another teacher."[32]

"The ruling concept of discipline in Syrian schools from the sixties was absurd. Students had to abide by requirements such as wearing military uniforms, including swords and boots, and enduring nail inspections, and girls were forced to wash their faces to see if they had put on kohl (which would drip down). Students had to memorize texts with no regard to understanding. For example, the statements of President Hafez al-Assad and then President Bashar al-Assad were treated as sacred texts like religious books. In preparatory and secondary school, students studied the achievements of the Father and the Son, their actions, as well as their sayings. Instead of focusing on political society (a subject of national

education) or military education classes, students studied information about the Ba'ath Party that was difficult to follow or about assembling and disassembling arms."[33]

"I always remember this period and laugh. How can you explain to a thirteen-year-old student how to disassemble and reassemble a gun and know all parts of it? I was firing live bullets when I was in grade 10. We went to the firing field and fired five shots with a Russian rifle, and I blinded my eye. I did not know about rifle kickback."[34]

Members of the Ba'ath Party and the intelligence services (security forces) regularly visited schools to uncover, monitor and inquire about what teachers and students said at school.

"The security agents visited school from time to time, every fifteen days to two months. My status was different because I was in the party as well as a member of the leadership, whereas other directors were afraid of these visits. They were asking who prayed at school, or what was being said and what circulated between the teachers."[35]

c. Social Class in Private and Government Schools

Public schools in Syria admitted students from different social classes. The schools were said to include everyone from the children of the poor to those of government ministers. However, with the emergence of private schools and the poor conditions of public schools, good education became available only to the financially capable. Public schools, which were said to be free, actually cost families a lot. They charged students weekly or monthly fees under various pretexts such as extracurricular activities, cleaning, building renovation, and so on. This, in addition to the high cost of textbooks.

"Unfortunately, there were a large number of professional educators who also ran private schools that they owned or managed, and for these institutions they chose the teachers they liked." [36]

The Human Development Report on the Education System in Syria submitted to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2005 stated that tuition in private schools cost 150,000 Syrian liras per student, and that one student in these private schools was equivalent in tuition costs to 1440 students in public schools per year. Clearly, the State did not spend as much as it should have on the education sector. Schools were poor, and teachers lacked knowledge, tools and skills.[37]

This reality is challenging on many levels regarding the quality of education, equal-opportunity education for the rich and poor, and equal treatment of students from families with different social backgrounds and financial abilities.

"We want to learn, but we cannot attend the training courses because of our modest financial means. So we stood up against some students for wasting class time ... the issue is about our future."[38]

d. Gender Equality in Education

In Syria, there exists both co-education and segregated schools for girls and boys. Specialized committees on the board of education decide which system is suitable, depending on the

needs of the population. There are areas of the country where the number of students is not sufficient to open two secondary schools, one for boys and another for girls, so in such cases there is a single coeducational school.[39]

Article 45 of the 1973 Constitution provides that "the State shall ensure all opportunities for women to contribute effectively and fully to political, social, cultural and economic life, and remove restrictions that prevent their development and participation in the building of the Arab socialist society."[40]

Although successive Syrian governments have paid some attention to Syrian women,[41] the percentage of girls in education varies according to the environment in which they live.[42] In some areas, the ratio of girls to boys in education is almost equal; in others it is very uneven, indicating differences between rural and urban contexts.

"Perspectives on female education are advanced in the city of Aleppo, a large industrial city that includes writers and scientists. Similarly, in the town of Siraqib in rural Idlib, parents encourage education and consider it important. In the ten years before 2011, young men refused to marry uneducated girls as parents were not allowing their daughters to get married before finishing their studies. They considered diplomas to be weapons in the hands of girls."[43]

"In our environment, women were not abused, and they received their rights without difficulty. We did not have a custom that forced girls to marry or abandon their education."[44]

In some rural areas, especially those far from city centers, it was widely believed that female education was secondary, and that it was enough for girls to read and write while marriage was a social duty and a priority. However, there were many cases in these same communities where women pursued their studies even after marriage with the encouragement of their husbands.[45]

"With my husband's support, I decided to go back to school when I was 25. I went on to take the Baccalaureate exam after attending one of the private institutes. Although I was out of school for a long time, I was a good student and managed to succeed. My family finally realized their mistake when they saw what I could achieve despite a long lapse in my studies."[46]

2) Educational Programs and the Impact on Student Learning

The quality of educational programs in schools is crucial to shaping a generation capable of dialogue and communicating ideas persuasively and without fear. Students are the most valuable members of society. Educational policy should evolve in tandem with social and technological advancement, and it is vital to human development generally. Indeed, a robust educational policy enables the development of students' abilities, encourages self-confidence, perseverance, and a sense of responsibility and belonging to the homeland.

This topic addresses two main issues:

(a) The traditional curriculum and (b) Student camps and extracurricular activities

a. The Traditional Curriculum

Traditional narrative styles dominated curricula in Syria. Cumbersome for both teacher and student, these methods required student memorization without ensuring understanding, and without teaching students how to conduct research in electronic and print libraries or on the Internet. While some teachers used discussion methods and organized groupwork, the majority depended on memorization and theory, requiring students to function like machines that abstractly received information. Essentially, they did not employ modern teaching methods that depended on application and practice, the Internet, and experimental labs.

Regardless of whether these methods were right or wrong, the educational system underwent rapid change with new curricula introduced every two to three years. Teachers criticize these curricula on several counts. With regards to the study of Arabic, to name one subject, some teachers insist that the old curriculum provided students with the essentials for learning to speak, write and dictate. Today, these teachers note that students lack knowledge of basic spelling and grammatical rules, causing them to make many mistakes merely because they lack knowledge of grammar. Others feel that some subjects, such as mathematics, need constant updating. According to this perspective the field requires knowledge of new developments in tools and methods. [47]

"Traditional curricula were richer. When I was teaching sixth-grade students, there was a lesson in science about how to operate a diesel engine. We studied the whole of world geography and Arab history. In subsequent years, lots of material was cut out, and we taught only Syrian history. Even Arabic language lessons were abbreviated. Curricula in preparatory and secondary school are shorter, even though students are capable of retaining substantial amounts of information if taught well."[48]

In some public schools there was a two-session system in the mornings and evenings. Classes lasted 40 minutes each, with a 10-minute break after each session. Hence there were 20 minutes of break-time a day.[49] However, the intended 20 minutes was mostly lost between sessions while students filed into the school courtyard, wasted time lining up, and exited and entered classrooms. Time was short, and students were numerous, so they ended up with little engagement with the new curricula, especially among students attending the evening classes.[50]

"The percentage of students who attended the evening classes was 10% less than those who attended the morning classes. The teacher was often exhausted. We found the students who had been dressed in their uniforms since 9 am carrying their bags and playing in the street. The high school classes met for the morning session and the preparatory classes for the evening session and, in some schools, the two sets of students alterated between sessions for the sake of equal treatment."[51]

Regarding errors in the textbooks, there were many of them, so students would often learn fallacies rather than facts.[52] As such, some teachers focused on not overloading students with information or repetative questions, and instead concentrated on subjects relevant to students, eliminating unnecessary additions.[53]

Some teachers tried to correct or point out errors in the curriculum. However, these attempts often failed. Courses and training programs on methods of teaching modern curricula did not work very well. Training sessions on new curricula should have used projectors, computer systems, and other sophisticated methods. Despite the many training workshops held with the support of international and non-profit governmental organizations, these did not reach the teachers in small schools located in the countryside, or even in the marginalized neighborhoods within the capital, Damascus.

"At one point, an educational counselor visited us to attend a science lesson. He then gave the teacher nine lessons before the end of the class because he had a poor command of the new curriculum and did not know how to deliver the lesson ... The lessons at that time took the form of a small page with some illustrations, so the teacher was limited to the text and was not prepared to teach the new curriculum." [54]

"Administrations designed new curricula and held several training workshops ... However, an environment conducive to the application of these curricula was lacking."[55]

The Ministry of Education comprised several boards, including the Board of Research and Curricula. This board was entrusted with the development of educational curricula for Syrian schools, conducting research, monitoring current conditions, designing questionnaires for research, and training research teams to access and analyze data.[56] Although the purpose of such research was to develop recommendations and prepare studies for decision-makers, in reality the opposite happened.

"The Ministry of Education holds research findings in the documentation library, an important library in the Ministry of Education dedicated to postgraduate students. These findings never returned for mysterious reasons, as the Ministry of Education is allied to the political regime, and not even to the universities. It follows that funds allocated from the budget for scientific research in Syrian universities are not used as intended, and are transfered to some other item on the agenda."[57]

"The board was bound by rules that were regulated by the government and the military establishment, especially since the Minister of Education was a security agent and, like the rest of the ministers, was appointed by intelligence. As for this research, the Ministry of Education included staff, teachers and researchers with experience, many with important proposals but, unfortunately, all these proposals were kept in locked drawers."[58]

In 2000, there were many calls for curriculum development under the guise of modernizing education. A shift in education from indoctrination to methods of critical thinking was announced with the aim of training students in the principles of scientific research and raising the banner of active learning.[59] Despite the development nd creation of curricula, there was no suitable environment for their implementation, especially in the absence of a clear and comprehensive education spending policy. Public expenditure on education between 1975 and 2009 is as follows: [60]

Public expenditure on education in the Syrian Arab Republic

YEAR	1975	1985	1996	2003	2009
% of GDP	3,9345 0999	6.0700 4976	3.6982 9011	6.50606 012	5.1301 3983

b. Student Camps and Extracurricular Activities

Informal educational organizations (such as the Baathist Pioneer Organization and the Revolutionary Youth Union)[61] helped institutions of the regime achieve their political, and educational objectives through a variety of activities (cultural, political, health, social, scientific, athletic, artistic, informational etc). These organizations targeted a large number of students from the ages of 6 to 24 by enlisting them in camps, conferences, workshops, competitions and festivals, and honouring their achievements.[62]

For example, fifth graders attended a nine-day summer student camp in their province. These camps aimed to build students' characters, taking children out of the formal contexts of routine study and trying new approaches such as placing them in more open environments of creativity and dynamism.

"My experience of attending a Pioneer Camp was moving away from my home and family for the first time in my life. However, I enjoyed the experience and was happy with the activities we did with the teachers, my classmates, and the new friends I met there."[63]

As for school events (such as honours, poetry competitions, storytelling, theatre etc.), the aim was to encourage students to showcase their creations to teachers so that they would feel honoured, and to create an atmosphere of familiarity and affection between students. The Ministry of Education supervised the celebrations.

Parades relating to the state and national events were compulsory and not attending was a punishable offense. Students were forced to participate in ceremony teams charged with organizing the marches, depending on the event. Party representatives also took down the names of teachers and required school administrations to participate in these marches with no concern for personal or family circumstances.

"There were people from the Ba'ath party at some marches. They organized the marched and shut off the roads for an hour or two, and we marched out of school and continued to the beginning of the camp, ending in the cemetery of the martyrs. We could not escape from it."[64]

"The parades were compulsory, and woe betide those who dis not participate, as no one knew what would happen to them." A team from the party took down the names of the teachers and charged me with the task of accompanying the teachers to the march. I knew their particular

circumstances - one could not walk, another had children at home. I agreed with the driver for them to be dropped off following this spectacle, and then I, in turn, returned home." [65]

3) Human Relations at School

The success of the educational process in any educational institution depends on the student-teacher relationship on the one hand, and on the success of the different methods of learning on the other. Education is an integrative process based on how the teacher handles the material from exercising modern interactive methods ranging from dialogue and discussion to everyday student activities, to replacing theory with applied and practical methodology. The encouragement of students and systematic evaluation in a precise and conscious way, rejecting ridicule or subjugation, is essential for enhancing student understanding. Rather than repressing students and undermining their confidence in themselves, a positive evaluation process can encourage students' acceptance of their mistakes in order to learn from them.

This topic addresses five main themes:

a. The relationship between students and teachers
b. Corporal punishment in school
c. Age differences between students and teachers
d. Inclusive schools for special needs students
e. Marginalized social groups and juvenile delinquents

a. The Relationship Between Students and Teachers

A sound education program depends on the relationship between students and teachers and is based on dialogue and a profound understanding of the teaching material. Teachers may prefer industrious students, but they must treat students equally, work to attract students to learning materials, approach them positively, give them incentives to excel and compete, and help them cultivate openness to learning as well as exemplary behaviour.

Determining what each teacher needs to set educational goals and prepare a basic program for students according to their academic level is of utmost importance. The most essential of these processes is preparation before entering the classroom and determining the means and strategies teachers intend to use during the lesson in order to communicate concepts simply. Equally crucial is evaluating the performance of students according to specific criteria and indicators, such as checking attendance, employing different methods such as lecturing or direct teaching, encouraging collaborative work, questions and answers, games, puzzles, student presentations, as well as videos and pictures that can illustrate specific ideas for students.[66]

"I had a group of students in the ninth grade and their performance deteriorated, especially in Arabic and mathematics ... I would take the simplest idea for myself that I understood well and then explain it to them." [67]

"The principal of our school was an elderly lady, who would bend down in front of us to pick up a piece of paper thrown on the ground as an example of humility and care for cleanliness."[68]

"I came to like the teaching profession sometime later when I saw the results in front of my eyes. These results did not only depend on the information I imparted to students but also on the way I behaved and dealt with others when managing the class - all this greatly influenced the students."[69]

"I remember that my friend asked the Arabic teacher, one of the nicest teachers, about the meaning of the phrase 'hasten to success' in the call for prayer. Is it a salute to peasants, for example?[70] She laughed and explained the meaning, and we discussed why salutations to work exist.[71]

Others do not have the same ethics or conduct in dealing with students and destroy their morale either intentionally or unintentionally, discriminate between students, severely punishing them for minor mistakes that could be managed with simple words or reprimands.

"The teacher has absolute authority in class so that s/he can punish insolent, guilty or indolent students in the way s/he deems appropriate, such as by lowering grades, dismissing students from the classroom, sending them to the administration, or scolding them with harsh words."[72]

"The principal of the school was entitled and supported a particular group of students, who later received perfect scores for final grades even if their performance was lacking, allowing them to leave whenever they wanted. These favoured students were not subject to the same regulations as the others."[73]

b. Corporal Punishment in School

The phenomenon of beating students in school was widespread until the Syrian Ministry of Education issued circular number 373/1986 to all boards of education in all governorates. The circular stated that "the use of beatings or other harsh methods is not permitted, whatever the justification." Almost two years later, the Ministry of Education issued a decree confirming that beating should not be used for students, regardless of the reasons, in order to ensure the proper functioning of educational programs.

"The teacher entered the classroom and said, 'Every girl who has not prepared the map must approach me.' I had forgotten my notebook at home, so I received punishment - two blows with a stick on the hand. No one was allowed to speak, object, or even apologize or clarify their circumstances. These methods resemble military ones. I cried very hard that day because I felt such injustice."[74]

In 2001 and 2004, the Ministry of Education moved from issuing decrees and decisions to the creation of workshops and awareness campaigns on the prohibition of beatings in all schools for all ages. The Syrian government also began imposing sanctions on all those who violated the law, including 5% salary decreases, withholding promotion and transportation, and other penalties that varied according to the violation. In return, authorities imposed disciplinary measures on students who committed offenses against their teachers.[75]

"One of the teachers beat a student who misbehaved even though corporal punishment was forbidden. The boy's parents complained to the Board of Education, contacted me and the director of education personally, and then sent the police to arrest the teacher."[76]

This government policy came about as a result of the negative impact that corporal punishment had on the project of producing a new generation that was well-constituted intellectually, physically and socially. The Ministry of Education imposed regulations on all employees in the education system, requiring them - given their positions and educational roles - to renounce unsuitable methods. They were required to replace these methods with affirmative disciplinary action, such as verbal warnings, or transferring students to the front seats to distance them from their classmates etc.

"In our day, it was possible to receive a slap from the military education instructor if a student moved his foot in the wrong way but now students must always be accommodated, as hitting generates hatred."[77]

Despite the negative consequences of disciplining students with violence and beating, and despite the abundant rules and regulations issued and renewed annually forbidding such methods in schools, this phenomenon remains in some schools in a variety of forms such as beating, kicking, threats and insults.[78] The Ministry of Education continues to receive reports and complaints about cases of beatings in individual schools, often for minor offenses such as running in the courtyard or entering the classroom a minute or two late etc. There are also cases of verbal abuse directed at students for non-compliance with regulations concerning school attire, hairstyling and nail trimming. There are cases of collective punishment by teachers and school officials, and the use of offensive words.[79] Sometimes this happens because teachers are bitter about being assigned to a particular school. And so teachers inspire fear instead of providing moral examples.[80]

c. Age Differences Between Students and Teachers

Article 16 of the Insurance and Pensions Act of the State Civil Service No. 119/1961 provides that: "Beneficiaries shall cease to serve the provisions of this law upon reaching the age of 60, except for those whose employment laws allow them to retain their service after that age, and such employees may extend their services annually by decision taken in the Council of Ministers."[81]

Although teachers gain skills and experience during long careers, a significant age difference between teachers and students is a serious challenge that can prevent student understanding and transformation, as well as the development or implementation of new teaching methods.

The age gap between teachers and students can be four decades or more. Such a gap often produces a divergence in outlook, and it can become difficult for the teacher to communicate information successfully. Much older teachers may not necessarily know how younger generations of students think, nor how to deal with them. Also, developments in teaching methods and rapid technological development globally are challenging for older teachers to accept and they often resort to the old traditional methods.

" I saw a 50-year old teacher running behind a pupil in the courtyard and then grabbing and beating him. This teacher had been the director of a former school for about 18 years before being removed from his post and appointed as a substitute teacher. I saw what I might become in 20 years. I would not necessarily understand students of the same age as my grandchildren. I noticed that teachers who taught in primary schools guarded their mindsets over time,

perhaps due to their continuous handling of children, and this is normal, and I do not mean to belittle any of them."[82]

d. Inclusive Schools for Special Needs Students

In 2004, Law No. 34 on Persons with Disabilities aimed to transform disability into a community issue and to ensure the participation of disabled people in all sectors of Syrian society. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol were ratified by Legislative Decree No. 12/2009. In the same year, a national plan for people with disabilities was developed, including several measures and activities that would improve their economic and social realities qualitatively. The five-year plan included several programs to implement policies to improve the situation of people with disabilities in domains of health, education and security, including the establishment of inclusive schools to ensure the right to education following international standards.

Indeed, the Ministry of Education contributed to the implementation of the National Program for Inclusive Schools, which welcomed people with special needs after conducting a comprehensive assessment of children able to enter schools and integrate with students. The goal of the program was to work to change the culture and attitudes towards those with disabilities and to practice inclusiveness.

According to the National Report of the Human Rights Council in 2011, "the number of students with disabilities in the schools of the Syrian Ministry of Education reached 1083 in 70 inclusive schools, from kindergarten to secondary level. Disabilities represented in schools include deafness, blindness, cognitive disability including autism, physical disability including polio, paralyzed limbs, amputation or congenital deformity of limbs, as well as cerebral palsy. In addition to the inclusion school programs, there are centres for the disabled affiliated with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and spread across the various Syrian governates."[83]

In line with global developments, the Ministry of Education and specialized professionals attempted to enable children with special needs to enjoy their independence in society without burdening others. However, the technical capacities and human resources were not available in Syria. Government schools lacked adequate tools and means to receive these children and meet their needs. Also, teachers needed specialized training to care for these children, and the training necessary for physical and cognitive rehabilitation was lacking. These children need people to listen to them and treat them as people able to achieve and receive awards of excellence.

e. Marginalized Social Groups and Juvenile Delinquents

The Rehabilitation and Education branch associated with the Prison Division is responsible for the social rehabilitation of prisoners, and provides education at all levels, as well as literacy courses. The specialized NGOs also sponsor prisoners and their families, and students who study at all levels, providing moral support and materials in the form of notebooks, books, computer training courses, foreign language and literacy classes etc.[84]

State-run institutions consider juvenile delinquents to be criminals by court order. In other words, they are criminalized by law and thus held accountable without regard for the responsibility of the State and society towards them.[85] Children under the age of 18, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed and ratified by the Syrian Republic, are minors and are, therefore, not responsible for their acts. Yet, Syrian society treats them as young people and considers them to be criminals according to criminal law.[86]

The daily program for juvenile delinquents includes a variety of classes in the morning, including sports and artisan work (carpentry, blacksmithing, barbering, photography etc.). Evening activities include meetings and awareness sessions with artists, sports instructor or religious guides.

"We have a library and magazines in the Institute. I collected newspapers and magazines from publishing houses in Damascus, and also collaborated with many publishing houses that distributed free of charge."[87]

"The Institute organized cultural trips to the archaeological or tourist sites once or twice a month over a long period. The authorities recorded no cases of escape during dozens of trips except for one, and this runaway later handed himself in to his family and returned. He had intended to go to see his family in Lattakia on his own.[88]

A family reunion program endeavoured to understand and enhance the relationships between these juveniles and their families, to communicate with friends of the juveniles, and to improve dialogue. This program also sought to assess the environment in which they lived and whether they had committed misdemeanours as a result of painful realities, poverty, a state of neglect etc.[89]

"There are places in Damascus that we classify as neighbourhoods of delinquency, such as some of the lanes in Yarmouk camp, the Black Stone, Ruknuddin Jebel etc."

"The budget allocated to juvenile colleges was small, and Syrian society at that stage was not aware of the need to give attention to juvenile delinquents. When we met with good people to donate to juvenile institutes, they told us, 'Why should we help the zaarans (thugs)?' We worked hard to alter this mentality."[90]

There was no real follow-up by the State Institutes of Juvenile Delinquency after a juvenile was released given the potential costs of such follow-up. There was, however, an "operating specialist" within the Institute to assist the juvenile in finding a job that matched the profession or skill he had acquired at the Institute, such as carpentry, blacksmithing, electricity, shaving, computer programming etc. The operating specialist faced difficulties convincing employers to take on graduates of the Institute of Juvenile Delinquents.

4) The Impact of Home and Community Environments on Students

The social and familial environments of children have a profound and active influence on their lives and futures. Humans are affected deeply from a very young age by all social practices around them.

This topic addresses three main themes:

a. Home education and the positive influence of family communication
b. Child labour its impact on the completion of education
c. The security situation and parental fears

a. Home Education and the Positive Influence of Family Communication

The role of the family is fundamental to individuals' progress and growth in society. Parental awareness is not dependent on a specific level of education but is related to the environment in which they live, and the experiences they have acquired over the years. It is their lived, concrete experiences that enable them to convey lessons and messages to their children, and to motivate them to construct their ambitions and futures in a favourable and stimulating environment.

"Our evenings with the children involved parsing lines of poetry, a poetry contest, discussing a scientific question and such like."[91]

"My father was a distinguished person and despite his handicap he was a poet who made me love poetry and write it. I feel that Arabic is a sea, not just a language. He made me feel a sense of belonging, my Arab identity. I loved him more as a teacher than as a father."[92]

Dialogue within the family is considered to be the foundation for building a promising generation that expresses itself without fear or shame. From birth, parents play a crucial role in enhancing their children's ability to engage in dialogue. Answering their simple questions and inquiries and engaging in deep conversation with them enhances their critical and objective abilities. Continuous communication between the parents is a real guarantee for the healthy growth of children and the dissemination of human values.

"Some mothers and fathers hold no degrees but construct beautiful relationships and dialogue with their children. Also, some parents may be doctors or engineers, and between them and their children there is isolation and frightful breakdowns, and their children are in one place and their ideas are in another. Some parents may be asked questions once or twice or three times with no response, and therefore their children will not inquire again about any subject."[93]

On the other hand, the lack of family and community communication is a phenomenon that is aggravated by widespread communications technology and the diversity of social media. The time spent by young people with this technology exceeds hours spent with family members and parents. One study in Syria showed that about 70% of the children who were delinquent had either little connection with their parents or none at all, especially in cases where the father was absent, preoccupied or unable to communicate with the children.[94]

"One day the principal called me to tell me that one of the students had escaped from school. When I asked the student why he had run away, he replied, 'I do not want to go to school, my father's salary is 3,000 pounds. My friend is a barber in Omri. He works and earns 3,000 liras in addition to tips so why should I study?' We told his father, who then took his son aside quietly and tried to convince him that education was his best weapon in life."[95]

b. Child Labour and its Impact on School Completion

Syrian governments have attempted to reduce the phenomenon of child labor by adopting international legislation and conventions dealing with this problem. The Syrian Labour Code imposed sanctions on families and employers who employ children, denying them the right to education. The Law of Mandatory Education No. 35 of 1981 stipulates in article 7 that 'anyone who employs a child of mandatory education age shall be punished by imprisonment for two months or a fine of one thousand Syrian pounds. The penalty doubles in the case of repeated offence, in addition to the offending business being closed down for two months.'

However, due to the unfortunate economic situation of many Syrian families, children were suffered from being forced to work, either exhausting themselves by working and studying at the same time or leaving school altogether to work. The poverty report in Syria for 1996-2004 launched by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) found that in 2003-2004, about 2 million Syrians (11.4% of the population) were unable to procure basic food and other necessities. The total poverty rate in Syria rose to 30% (5.3 million people), six years before the beginning of the war in 2011.[96]

"Many children came to school with clothes stained with mud ... I asked them why and they said, 'Today is our turn to irrigate our land so we spent the night working in the field before coming to school in the morning.'" [97]

"I am like other people who killed their children's ambitions. Some parents took their children out of school to help the family. Life is sometimes unfair."[98]

c. The Impact of the Security Situation and Parental Fears

Humanitarian law (especially the four Geneva Conventions ratified by the Syrian government in 1953) imposes the obligation of continuing education in emergencies and ensures that the education of children affected by conflict be made possible under any circumstances.[99]

The onset of conflict between the regime and the opposition in Syria in the late 70s,[100] led to assassinations, internal clashes and strikes in schools. The application of the provisions of the humanitarian law was practically impossible, and the educational process and the students who lived through these times were set back.

"I remember when the constitution was amended in the seventies and a new paragraph was added stating that the President of the Republic should be an Arab Syrian. Then there were protests by groups of people demanding that the president be Arab, Syrian and Muslim. The war began, causing psychological instability, and everyone tried to finish their work and return home quickly, for fear of killings or such like."[101]

In the absence of comprehensive educational strategies that could accommodate this type of disorder, parents became increasingly worried about their children. They were keen to keep watch over them, so they did not get involved in the political struggle or associate with undesirable companions.

"At that point, people avoided getting involved in conflict and stayed at home. As a result, they could not develop their careers. The country entered a state of economic stagnation. It

was not safe for children to go to school, both because of the lack of security in schools themselves, and the lack of security moving from home to school. "[102]

"I remember the first day my daughter attended a school near our house. I opened the door and stood waiting for her to arrive home. She asked me, ‘why you are waiting, mama?' The school is very close by, so she understood my fear for her and wanted to reassure me."[103]

5) Educational Environment and its Challenges

The school environment can help harmonize all elements of the educational process, facilitate creativity, critical thinking, student talent and foster development in various disciplines. As such, the existence of dilapidated schools, structures and facilities does not serve the educational process but negatively impacts it. Schools need physical and human resources and modern technological means to facilitate education. They need the necessary funding for the maintenance of buildings, renovations in classrooms in terms of proper seats, lighting, ventilation, cleanliness etc., and to ensure an appropriate and comfortable environment for teachers with respect to salary and contracts.

This topic addresses five main themes:

a. Health and hygiene in schools
b. The school infrastructure
c. The educational staff
d. Teacher salaries
e. Overcrowding

1. Health and Hygiene in Schools

In each governate of Syria, there is a service called School Health, which is associated with the Teachers Syndicate. Its purpose is to provide prescriptions but not treatment, to visit and inspect schools, to offer group lectures, to educate students about personal hygiene, and to register students for regular eye and dental examinations, and for vaccinations against diseases such as polio, measles and whooping cough.[104]
However, these school visits do not occur spontaneously. School administrations are aware of them in advance, especially in rural areas where everyone knows one another, including local doctors and school principals. The high level of corruption and abuse among some school health teams render many of these school visits mere formalities, ineffectual procedures occurring weekly or more, and the rest of the year there are no lectures or educational activities.”

“Doctors take work with a school's health team if they want an easy job. I know a psychiatrist who studied in Russia with the financial support of the state, so he had to enter state services. He obtained an appointment in school health, but after some time he went to work in the UAE as he did not want to sit all day ‘drinking the dead’ like other employees, leaving to oblivion all that he had learned."[105]

UNICEF reported on the education sector in Syria between 2010-2015. Some government schools achieved acceptable health standards before 2011 but in others, conditions were unacceptable. The report pointed out that the reason for the low health status in schools was due to a lack of state interest and the spread of corruption, especially in areas far removed from city centres. Examples included the accumulation of garbage around schools for long periods of time, muddy roads, unpaved school grounds etc. which affected student health.[106]

"When we asked the headmaster why this was so, he would make the excuse that no one responded to his requests, and the reason was that the schools closest to the centre were more accessible than the distant schools. However, these schools were only roughly fifteen kilometres away from the city centre. This exchange happened around 2001."[107]

d. School Infrastructures

The Ministry of Education included a Board called the School Buildings Department which supervises maintenance and renovation.[108] Engineers who were assigned to inspect construction identified risks and reported on the state of buildings and any necessary demolitions, renovations and improvements. They also reported on any required painting or maintenance of sanitary installations, and on improvements needed to classes and seating. These school inspections were often regular and coordinated and carried out one to three times a week.

"Our work was based on trust and honesty in the beginning. I had to trust the headmaster of the school. We gave him a sum of money. He had to carry out the maintenance but under my supervision so I told him what was permissible and what was not ... Later, the projects became large, costing millions. Hired contractors produced estimates of more than 100 million liras per year."[109]

In Deir al-Zour, to give just one example, there were some schools built of clay, and others built over caves and water that compromised the foundations. These buildings risked more cracks and even collapse with the danger increasing over time. Based on engineers' findings, the recommendations were for these schools to be demolished, and for student entry to be paused until these problems were addressed. Priority was given to schools that were at higher risk.[110]

"The state of public-school buildings was deplorable, and their structures were like prisons, designed by the military housing institution in a way that diverged from scientifically approved conventions and standards. Classrooms were oriented towards the north and so students would freeze in winter as no sun reached them."

"The reason for these errors and negligence was corruption in government departments and the lack of integrity of public contractors in the construction of public schools. The open and pressing question was why did they entrust the job to the Military Housing Corporation? Was there a dearth of development companies?"[111]

In 2010, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers issued a circular stating that 'no contract is acceptable if the contractor is not registered with the Contractors Association.'

“In addition to the failure of these departments to send copies of the proposals submitted to the contractors' union, some projects were outsourced to contractors based on personal relations”. The bidding step was useful if managed reasonably and organized as planned on paper, without any other intention; in practice, proposals were revealed to be false, the results preset, and projects pre-assigned to specific contractors.[112]

The cadres of the school building department conducted surprise inspections of contractors in order to monitor implementation and ascertain the quality of the cement and the quantity used. However, it was not easy to control corruption, nor to safeguard against design and operational errors.

Department supervision was not limited to the foundations and structures of the buildings, but also included the tools used for learning, such as school desks and blackboards.

Some practices led to the depletion of funds, and with no benefit. There was no organization or procedure for spending money on schools. Such waste opens the door for a great deal of theft, corruption and bribery. Some engineers did not even provide the amount required for building renovation until they were arrested.[113]

"When we refused to take a bribe from one of the contractors, he accused us of squandering his work and bribing him. At the end of the day, he betrayed the trustworthy and trusted traitors! I wished I could get rid of that job, and I submitted my resignation many times but the contractors repeatedly rejected it. There were few engineers, and about 2000 schools in our sector."[114]

e. The Teaching Staff

Educational staff in cities or in any area of Syria were recruited from different regions. This method could sometimes be challenging, considering differences in customs and traditions and the nature of the interaction between teachers in their places of employment.

“The first meeting was to introduce ourselves, our names, and where we came from. They were eager to find out and happy to meet us. One of us was from Homs and the other from Tartus and others were from Banias or Lattakia, and we were all sent to a school in Deir Al-Zour, where the number of teachers was relatively large at about twenty."[115]

The method of assigning teachers and preparing them to educate played a vital role in the learning process. The principal was the head of education in school, and so it would have made sense for him to be accomplished and to be capable of evaluating the staff in the school that he managed. However, qualifications were lacking in the case of many principals, who could not make competent assessments of teaching performance. For teachers, their numbers were sufficient and, if necessary, school administration hired secondary school graduates who already had years of experience in teaching. Yet studies and statistics on education show that schools in slums and marginalized areas and remote governorates suffered from a lack of teachers. In some villages, a single teacher taught most subjects to the students.

"What I know is that there was large numbers of graduates from universities, private schools, and teacher training colleges, so where did these teachers go, and why were they not assigned to job vacancies? Unfortunately, many people came to study in teachers' training colleges and

did not intend to work as teachers. My husband was one of the students at the institute and noticed that many others could not spell correctly. He asked one of them, 'how will you be able to teach if you do not know how to write correctly?' The student responded by saying, 'who told you that I want to work in education? I wish to be a school principal."[116]

In the past, teaching was not specialized. A teacher would be responsible for teaching all subjects to one of the primary classes, including drawing, handicrafts, art and music. Teaching remained like this for a long time until there was specialization training. Then teachers were able to specialize in music, art or physical education etc. In teacher training colleges, specialized training was also available in academic subjects such as Arabic, English, physics and chemistry.[117]

"Primary school was previously supervised by two or more teachers, whereby a teacher taught more than one subject. For example, the agricultural engineer taught physics, chemistry and English, while the Arabic teacher taught religion and social studies in addition to the Arabic language.[118]

"In the province of Raqqa, the percentage of women teaching was higher than the percentage of men, and teaching careers were more prevalent among women than men. Only about 5% of teaching staff were men, and some of these held management, guidance and secretarial positions. In contrast, 90% of the teaching staff was women.[119]

Of the difficulties faced by teachers, especially during their first years of work after their studies, was work assignments. Intermediaries played a prominent role in determining the place of work. Anyone who knew an official or someone influential in the state was appointed wherever they liked, and this was a source of resentment and anger among many teachers.[120]

"I finished my studies at the institute and started my work in education. According to the rule that the top ten students would obtain employment in the city or the nearest countryside, I should have received an reward from the Directorate of Education and Ophthalmology. However, unfortunately, I faced the bitter reality of being appointed to a school in the distant region of the ambassador. I used to lose my temper when I saw that those whom I had helped study and helped in examinations at the institute had been appointed to jobs in schools close to the city of Aleppo."[121]

"The most difficult thing was that I needed more than an hour and a half to get to my school, and the administration assigned me to a remote area for a year. I attempted to move after this, but the school administration did not allow me to do so."[122]

f. Teacher Salaries

Teacher salaries in Syria are meagre in relation to living conditions and daily expenses (electricity, water, telephone bills, food expenses, clothing, emergencies etc.). 'The state does not spend on the education sector; schools are poor, teachers lack tools, skills and knowledge, and are frustrated by their low salaries,' states the Human Development Report on Syria's Education System presented to UNFPA in 2005. The reality of education is a difficult one, and slogans about modernisation and the development of schools ring hollow with the lack of state spending."[123]

"At the beginning of my appointment in the 1970s, my salary was 220 Syrian liras, which was good, but the prices went up a great deal over time and the salaries did not increase proportionately. The situation deteriorated, especially for newly married teachers who did not have homes. Funds ran out with the payment of rent and daily expenses, and this situation continued beyond the 1980s.[124]

"I received only 200 Syrian pounds, and this did not change. 200 liras were sufficient at that time, and living conditions were acceptable. A teacher's salary in Syria was 210 liras, with ten liras deducted for taxes and unknown reasons. When someone got a stable post, his salary increased. The increase was tiny. The salaries of the working classes of employees, teachers, and others were very meagre until the state issued some decrees which resulted in small increases in salary."[125]

This reality contributed to demoralizing teachers, whose salaries were hardly commensurate with their efforts nor the proper value of their work. Teachers play an essential role in raising and educating future generations, and therefore if they do not receive adequate compensation, they will not be able to give. In this sense, many teachers started working according to the salary offered to them, meaning that they lacked dedication to their work. This diminishing of efforts impacted negatively on the standards of education generally and contributed to the increase of private lessons. All this is, of course, due to the deterioration of economic conditions and lack of state interest in education.

"One of the teachers stood at the door of the classroom waiting for time to pass. As long as she was from Lattakia and not from the Damascus countryside, and she was teaching another sect in a different community, she could neglect to make the effort she should have. It was a miserable situation, but no one could react or hold her responsible because her husband was an army officer."[126]

"I continued to teach courses and give private lessons. I would go to a family with three children to give them private lessons for about four hours after school. I earned 4000 or 4500 liras a month, which was a good amount then, but I was exhausted. Even so, I continued to give private lessons for about 20 years, even after retirement.[127]

The reality of employment in Syria limited employment opportunities for graduates. Education for many teachers was the last, if not the only, option to ensure relatively rapid employment. Herein lay the seriousness of this situation given the sanctity of the profession and its importance in promoting awareness, love of learning and progress in generations of students. The question was not only about transferring information to the student but also about how to transfer that information and what to do with it."

"It was difficult for graduates to find job opportunities after university. After I graduated, I applied for many job openings and got interviews, but months and days went by with me waiting."[128]

g. Overcrowding in Schools

As mentioned, some public schools in Syria adopted a two-session system (morning and evening) because of crowding in classes. According to the UNICEF report, about 60% of the public schools had 40 students per class,[129] which presented problems for students and their

education generally. Teachers also described the many pressures which caused psychological, health and academic difficulties for students.

"Classroom overcrowding and the scarcity of schools were the most difficult problems we faced. Recently, while teaching first-grade students, I had 57 children in a single classroom, all needing much attention, care, guidance and encouragement to learn. It was exhausting."[130]

The increase in the number of students in some public schools was due to the scarcity of schools in some regions in relation to births and deaths. A population study for the years 2005 - 2015 conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers indicated that the population grew in Aleppo governorate by 25.24 % during the years 2006-2010, while in Lattakia growth reached 13.52 %, and in Souaydat 12.83 % during the same years.[131]

This disparity is often a challenge for government schools in terms of their ability to attract new students and ensure access to education. In the absence of strategies and mechanisms for proper spending on the education sector, the education system is at risk. Furthermore, families' economic situations prevent them from enrolling their children in private schools to finish their studies.

Conclusion

Pre-university education is the formative stage that shapes individuals' personalities and determines growth and future success. It is the stage at which they acquire most habits, social behaviours and attitudes.

In Syria, the efficiency of the educational process depends on factors that can be summarized as follows:

• Acceptance policies in the different educational stages
• The number of students in each grade
• Average expenditure per student by educational stage
• Teachers' salaries
• Dropout rates (departures or digressions)
• Curricula, teachers, teaching methods and classroom interaction
• Evaluation systems and examinations
• School buildings, classrooms, offices, laboratories and information technology rooms
• Extra-curricular activities and student camps
• Community and family participation

It is clear from this study that all these factors require objective and analytical approaches that investigate the educational system in Syria before the beginning of the 2011 war on three basic levels: the legal system, institutional development, and social development.

This study offers many recommendations applicable at the national level, following international best practice, and considering the current circumstances in Syria and the short-term challenges that reform measures could face. A healthy educational system relies on efficiency. A first, necessary step lies in identifying the shortcomings of the existing Syrian educational system, and in developing sound educational policies with an awareness of available material and human resources to achieve the best possible results.

Legality and Governance of Education

- Develop a comprehensive legal study of the laws and internal legislation that concern the education sector, highlighting any gaps, and working to abolish or amend this legislation.

- Introduce the necessary legal amendments to local laws, in line with the latest international developments regarding education sectors, and in line with the relevant international treaties and laws to which the Syrian Arab Republic is already committed.

- Issue circulars and proclamations detailing the record of laws implemented that concern the education sector.

- Develop uniform codes of conduct for educational staff and students.

- Require government schools to conduct standardized testing of a random samples of students (in reading, writing and math) to determine whether students are achieving the level of competencies determined by the Ministry of Education.

- Prepare well-budgeted spending plans for the education sector, giving priority to the development of government policy.

- Prepare a comprehensive formal study to examine abuses and the reasons for school dropout rates despite the many laws that impose penalties on anyone who contributes to the exclusion of students from compulsory education.

- Include additional expenditure in annual budgets to cover the legislation and programs that serve to reduce gender gaps. The Ministry of Culture supported programs such as the "Female Literacy" program, the Ministry of Education, the Women's Union, as well as several international organizations.[132]

At Institutional and Strategic Levels

- The increase in the percentage of those not enrolled in compulsory primary education requires the Syrian government's urgent attention to eradicate illiteracy, provide necessary tools and skills for all citizens, and eliminate the underlying causes that lead to school drop-out. These governmental efforts must start with curriculum reform and teaching methods, enhance them in practice, and take all necessary legal measures regarding implementation.

- Address the needs of children with disabilities and help children who are obliged to pursue their studies in foreign languages.

- Adopt policies to protect the local environments of rural schools, enhance education in rural contexts, and provide schools with necessary technical and technological tools.

- Liberate students from methods of indoctrination and memorization, training them instead to conduct research.

- Provide guidelines to the curriculum, develop students' cognitive and intellectual skills by teaching methods of analysis, synthesis, interpretation, observation, hypothesis and self-discovery.

- Maintain teacher qualifications, enhancing knowledge of teaching material and developing ability to communicate using active learning methodologies. Require the weekly distribution of lessons, considering differences in teachers' capacities and ages.

- Provide basic and continuous training in classroom management and in the use of information systems and technologies.

- Conduct regular inspections to identify necessary repairs to school buildings, and to introduce new and modern engineering and architectural models for schools.

- Clarify and enhance the role of psychologists and social workers in schools. Also, expand training programs to include all schools, and develop serious studies to investigate the causes of failure and dropouts in schools.

- Construct school buildings in each province to accommodate as many students as necessary in the different grade levels to allow students to remain in their area of residence, thus relieving pressures on distant schools.

- Ensure a healthy educational and learning environment by reducing the number of students per class to 25 (maximum) to avoid difficulties for both teachers and students due to overcrowding.

Community Development

- Analyse and address the correlation between poverty and education. Support families in education-related expenses, thus enabling them to pursue educational plans. This would help alleviate the causes of early child labor. On the other hand, study teachers' wages seriously and work to raise salaries to reflect the importance of education to society and progress.

- Develop realistic contingency plans in cooperation with parents, students and community members, and offer training to implement these plans on a regular basis.

- Implement awareness programs for parents on the importance and necessity of access to education for girls, and on how to communicate with children to promote family dialogue.

- Carry out comparative studies between different regions in Syria to identify social and family problems, and to develop recommendations in cooperation with various governmental and non-governmental bodies.

- Expand engagement in creative skills and abilities and encourage students to contribute by providing opportunities for training through volunteer work and the expansion of educational opportunities in different regions and towns.

- Sustain dialogue and discussion with various civic groups on the benefits of education and its importance in disseminating the knowledge required to shape future policies, and to evaluate these policies from a political, social and economic perspectives.

- Enhance the relationship between schools, associations, governmental and non-governmental institutions by holding joint programs and activities, and by working with neighbourhood committees.

- End "political teaching" in any form or framework, especially in primary school, at the very least.

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