

Chapter I: Syria's Education System

Syria has a very large and rapidly expanding population of school age children due to an annual growth rate of 3,2%. The estimated population of Syria in 1999 was 17,200,000 inhabitants (1), of which more than 7,000,000 were of school age (5-17 years old).

When the Ba'ath took control of Syria in the Sixties, education became a priority as a means of both ensuring progress and indoctrinating and controlling the masses. Article 21 of the 1973 Constitution states that the objectives of education are "to bring up a national Arab generation, which is socialist and scientific in its manner of thinking, attached to its history and land, proud of its patrimony, and satiated with the struggling spirit".

All Syrian schools, including those in the private sector and those administered by UNRWA, are under the close supervision of the Ministry of Education, which is directly in charge of their curricula and textbooks.

During the seventies and the eighties there was a steady increase in the government's budget for education: from 6.80% in 1975 to a peak of 14.0% in 1987 (2). In 1998-1999, it dropped to 12% (3). This decrease seems to have been even more pronounced in GNP terms: less than 2% of the GNP in 1998 (4), compared with 3.9% in 1975, 6.1% in 1985, and 4.7% in 1987. (5)

This reduction reflects both Syria's economic stagnation in the nineties as well as its difficulty in coping with a rapidly growing population of school age children and the need to provide them with "basic" education.

An Elusive Compulsory "Basic" Education

Article 37 of the Syrian 1973 Constitution defines education as a right guaranteed by the State, "free of charge at all its levels and compulsory at the primary level". The same Article also emphasizes that the State "shall endeavor to make the other levels compulsory".

The Syrian government appears to have encountered serious obstacles in attaining the full materialization of compulsory education at the primary level. The fourth Five Year Development Plan (1976-1980) set a target of full enrolment of boys of primary school age by 1980 which was not achieved. In 1981 it was necessary to promulgate Law # 35 on "Compulsory Education " for all Syrian and "similar" children aged between 6 and 12 years. (6)

This law not only identified the public and private factors responsible for carrying out its provisions, it also detailed the sanctions to be imposed both on parents and on persons hiring a child of primary education age. A widespread campaign was developed to encourage parents to enroll all children of primary school age and a new Department for Compulsory Education was created in the Ministry for monitoring and evaluating school attendance".(7)

The campaign seems to have been successful. Ten years later, at the beginning of the 1990s, it was claimed that enrolment in primary education was close to 100% for boys and 95% for girls.

Since then, however, enrolment seems to have regressed slightly to 94% in 1998-1999 (8), and there are still differences among various regions and between the sexes. Nomadism, poverty, lack of facilities in remote areas and the lack of coordination between those in charge of the compulsory law, are the main factors impeding complete enrolment.

Since the 1970s there have been several plans to enlarge the scope of primary education, convert it into a "basic cycle" covering Grade 1 to Grade 9 and place it under the umbrella of the compulsory law. This has not yet been achieved, largely due to financial reasons. Officially, other factors are invoked to explain this failure, such as the fact that "Many young girls aged 12 to 15 get married, especially in rural areas" and "Some children between 12 and 15 work with their parents in the fields and start highly paid jobs." (9)

A Four Level Schooling System

The Syrian education system consists of four levels: pre-primary education, primary education, lower secondary (also called preparatory or intermediate), and upper secondary education. (For a general overview of the Syrian education system by level, see Table 1).

Pre-primary (Age 3-5)

The 3-year pre-primary level is not compulsory and operates on a fee-paying basis. Some kindergartens are attached to public primary schools, others to the General Union of Syrian Arab Women and to the Teachers Union, but most of them are run by private institutions which embrace more than 60% of children. In government institutions tuition is symbolic and the pupils are mainly the children of employees.

In 1989-1990 84,800 children between the ages of 3 and 5, representing about 5% of the age group, were enrolled in 793 kindergartens with 2,711 teachers (10). Ten years later, 108,319 children were enrolled in pre-primary education, that is 7.75% of the age group. (11)

Pre-primary education was neglected in the 60s and the 70s. This is no longer the case. Although not included in the national educational plans which focused on the other levels, the State now supports the extension of Early Childhood Education Programs, taking into consideration the increase in the number of working women. It has facilitated the opening of kindergartens, in accordance with the provisions of the Private Education Law. (12)

Primary Education (Age 6--12)

Primary education is compulsory and free of charge. It runs for six years, from Grade 1 to Grade 6 and begins at the age of 6. The primary school day lasts 5 hours, and the school year continues for 200 days.

The curriculum includes Arabic, mathematics, religious instruction, elements of science and health education, social and national education, art, music and physical education. In some rural areas primary schools provide 4 hours/week of rural education for grades 4, 5 and 6.

Most primary schools are run by the government. Less than 3% of them are private, and 2% are run by UNRWA. Both the private sector and UNRWA follow the curriculum set by the Ministry of Education.

Enrolment is around 95%. However in remote rural areas it is frequently far below the national average. For instance, in the villages of the Dayr az Zawar Province, only 8% of the girls attended primary school. This compares unfavorably even with Damascus where only 49% of the girls completed 6 years of primary school.
(13)

A notable effort to ensure and maintain full enrolment at the primary level was clearly visible through a substantial increase in the number of teachers, from 101,325 in 1990 to 122,249 in 1999.

An effort to improve the training of teachers has also been proposed. Until now, primary school teachers were trained in specialized institutes for two years after completing secondary level. In the future, they will be trained for a period of four years in recently established faculties of education.

Lower Secondary Education (12 to 14 years old)

The lower secondary level, also called intermediate or preparatory level, continues for 3 years, from Grade 7 to Grade 9. It is free but not compulsory.

In the past, there was an entrance examination for Grade 7 but this was abolished in 1970. Today, all pupils who have completed primary level can automatically enter the preparatory one. In fact, 75% of primary level graduates join the intermediate level.(14) The curriculum includes all the subjects taught at primary level with the addition of English, French and "female education". At the end of Grade 9, there is an examination for the Intermediate Level Diploma.

In the nineties there were approximately 2000 intermediate schools, most of them run by the government. Of these, less than 4% were private and 2% belonged to UNRWA. Again, both the private sector and UNRWA use the curriculum set by the Ministry of Education.

In 1990 the enrolment rate for Grade 7 was close to 80%. Enrolment at intermediate level totaled 631,000 pupils (15). There is no data available for any of the following years. One can, however, infer from data showing a substantial decrease in the total enrolment for both the lower and the upper secondary levels (from 48% for the year 1990 to 42 % for the year 1996), that there was probably also a substantial decrease in enrolment in the lower secondary level. (16)

As acknowledged in an official Syrian document released in March 2000, "No major changes were recorded at this level, contrary to primary education level that witnessed crucial transformations".(17) The only notable change was the updating of teaching methods and books for the study of the English and French languages.

Upper Secondary Education

The upper secondary level also continues for 3 years, from Grade 10 to Grade 12. It is free of charge. Entry is selective and based on the Intermediate Diploma examination at the end of Grade 9.

There are two types of upper secondary schooling: "general" and "technical/vocational". Pupils who are 15 years old are free to choose either general or technical schools, but those beyond this age must enter the technical schools.

In the eighties, the "general" school was the most popular and accounted for 78% of the total secondary enrolment (18). A notable shift seems to have occurred in the nineties (1998-1999) as 70% of the graduates of the intermediate level preferred technical and vocational education. (19)

Technical and vocational secondary schools include industrial (51%), commercial (22%) agricultural (7%) as well as "female" specialization of home economics and nursing (20%) in 1989-1990. Two-thirds of the courses were oriented towards scientific and practical training. Upon completion, the students take the "Technical Baccalaureate"; opportunities in further education for holders of the technical baccalaureate are limited. (20)

In the general secondary schools, the first year is an introductory one. The last two years are divided into literary and scientific streams. About three quarters of the pupils opt for the scientific stream. (21) Upon completion, the students sit for the Secondary Diploma (Baccalaureate), which is the sole qualification to grant automatic entrance to universities and other institutions of higher education.

In the Nineties, the subject of "Population Education" was introduced into the secondary schools.

About 90% of general secondary schools are funded by the government and 10% are private.

Reforming Curricula and Textbooks

The Ministry of Education only defines policy guidelines, implements the major programs, allocates resources between the main sectors and govern orates (regions), and also designs the curricula and the textbooks.

The curriculum which is uniform and nationwide, is developed by the Department of Curriculum and Research at the Ministry of Education. This department is in charge of the development of courses, learning materials, teaching methods and is responsible for testing the learning material at all pre-university levels.

Moreover, through its "Establishment for School Books" department the Ministry of Education is also responsible for the printing of textbooks and for their distribution to all schools. The textbooks are free at primary level only.

At the end of the 80s there were initial attempts at reforming the curricula of primary and secondary schools as well as teachers training institutes, with the aim of introducing practical aspects related to productive work, nutrition, environmental and population studies.

Today the efforts to reform the curriculum which was "traditional and theoretical, emphasizing humanities and factual data" (22) are oriented towards the introduction of scientific and innovative concepts, attitudes, skills, and values. The Ministry of Education has assigned the responsibility for establishing and supervising procedures for changing the curricula and writing new textbooks to a Supreme Committee chaired by the Minister of Education. This committee is composed of several assistants of the Minister, directors of the central administration, instructors, members of Parliament and university professors. (23)

The setting of the new curriculum for each course was assigned to expanded and specialized committees formed by "field workers, university professors and researchers". The new curricula are presented to provincial subcommittees for comment before their final approval by the Supreme Committee.

The writing of the textbooks was assigned to other committees composed of "field teachers, instructors, university professors and coordinators", starting with primary level textbooks. In addition, the Supreme Committee decided that each new textbook would be tried before its adoption. The actual process for the production of the new textbooks was according to the following schedule:

1996/1997 Adoption of Grade 1 experimental books.

1997/1998 Spreading Grade 1 books and testing Grade 2 books on the same sample. (24)

1998/1999 Finalization of Grade 1 books, spreading Grade 2 books, and experimenting Grade 3 books.

By the end of 1999, these committees had finalized experimental books for Grade 4.

Table 1: Syrian Education System, by Level, for Year 1996-1997

Levels	Number of Institutions	Teachers	Pupils/Students		
			Males	Females	Total
Pre-primary	1,096	4,427	56,627	45,524	98,151
Primary	10,783	114,689	1,433,385	1,256,820	2,690,205
Secondary		64,661	513,927	443,737	957,664
-General	not available	52,182	469,032	396,010	865,042
-Vocational	not available	12,479	44,895	47,727	92,622
Higher(*)					
Universities	not available	4,733	101,819	66,367	167,186
Others	not available	n.a.	25,167	23,381	48,548

Based on UNESCO Statistical Year Book

Table 2: Public, Private and UNRWA Part in Education by Levels

Level	Public	UNRWA	Private
Preprimary	40%		60%
Primary	95%	2%	3%
Intermediate	94%	2%	4%
Secondary	90%		10%

Table 3: School Enrollment in Primary and Secondary Education, 1980-1996

	1980	1984	1990	1996
Preprimary	no data	no data	84,800	98,151
Primary [Grade 1 to Grade 6]	1,556,000	1,818,000	2,452,000	2,690,205
Secondary	604,000	870,000	914,000	957,640
Lower Secondary [Grade 7 to Grade 9]	no data	no data	641,000	no data
Upper Secondary [Grade 10 to 12]	no data	no data	273,000	no data
Total School Population	>2,160,000	>2,688,000	3,450,800	3,745,996

The data used was the most up to date information available from Syrian sources.

Footnotes

- (1) 17,213,871 (July estimation 1999) CIA World Factbook 1999
- (2) SESRTCIC [Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Center for Islamic Countries] <http://www.serstcic.org>.
- (3) The National Report of the Syrian Arab Republic on "Education for All" Year 2000 Evaluation, Part I, page 10 of 24, cf. EFA FORUM (Education for All, UNESCO) efa@unesco.org
- (4) According to the CIA- The World Factbook- Syria, in 1998, the GDP per capita was \$2,500, that is a national GNP of more than \$ 42, 500, 000.00, whereas the Government expenditures were estimated at \$ 4,200,000,00.
- (5) The International Encyclopedia of Education Vol. 10, Second edition, Pergamon, p5892
- (6) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit, Part I, page 9 of 24. "similar" refers to Palestinians, whose education is in fact assumed by UNRWA.
- (7) The International Encyclopedia of Education, on... op. cit, p5889.
- (8) The National Report of the Syrian Republic ... op. cit, Part II, p3 of 6. The following reasons are mentioned: school outcrops, students registered in foreign schools, handicapped students registered in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor) uncounted deaths, since last census goes back to 1994.
- (9) The National Report of the Syrian Republic ... op. cit, Part II, p5 of 6.
- (10) The International Encyclopedia of Education, ...op. cit, p5891
- (11) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit , Part II, page1 of 6.
- (12) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit, Part I, page 9 of 24.
- (13) frd/cstdy: @field(DOCID+sy0054).
- (14) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit, Part I, page 18 of 24.
- (15) The International Encyclopaedia of Education, _op cit.p 5889
- (16) SESRTCIC [Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Center for Islamic Countries] <http://www.serstcic.org> , page 1 of 2. (in terms of % of the population of the age group)
- (17) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit, Part I, page 17 of 24.
- (18) The International Encyclopedia of Education, op. cit, p5890
- (19) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit, Part I, page 18 of 24.
- (20) The International Encyclopedia of Education, op. cit, p 5890.
- (21) Ibidem
- (22) The International Encyclopedia of Education, op. cit, p 5893.
- (23) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit, page 12 of 24.
- (24) The National Report of the Syrian Republic on...., op. cit, page 13 of 24. The experimental samples for Arabic language, mathematics and science schoolbooks were chosen among six provinces, and applied to 6,000 students.