

## **“No Politics Zone”: Critical Approaches to Education Research in the Arab Gulf States**

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This special issue emerged from a virtual panel hosted by the Centre for Culture, Identity, and Education at the University of British Columbia 2021. The focus of the panel came about through discussions the three editors had in relation to their area of study – education policy in three different Arab Gulf states – Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. While International Development Organizations (IDOs) have marketed policy reform as a way for “developing countries” to “catch up” with the developed world, often, these policies ignore the political context in which they unfold. This special issue argues that even amid all the reforms adopted across the Arab Gulf States (AGS), there have been things impossible to change, red lines impossible to cross, and also exceptional cases of change in what is deemed impossible contexts. This issue seeks to expose what remains undiscussed in this drive for reform in these postcolonial contexts and the inherited political and social structures that the policies overlook. Hence, this issue attempts to capture the contextual changes and continuities in each context where “injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” continues manifesting in our educational spaces (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p.1).

Within each context addressed by the authors in this issue, different factors mitigate the possibility for meaningful change, but also, in these different contexts, the red lines are revealed. The acceptance or resistance to change is mitigated by a) actors involved in the process of designing reform plans, b) actors that try to implement the reform plans, and c) societies that both sets of actors try sometimes to challenge and many other times adapt to. Depending on who is developing the policy, who is implementing it, and when and where this is taking place, the outcomes are drastically different, emphasizing once again how social structures, geographical locations, and political encounters play a significant role in our lived experiences and are grounds of our social and political struggles.

Overall, articles in this issue offer comparative and international case studies that critically pinpoint “the broader societal dynamics in which the local is inextricably enmeshed” (Mazawi & Sultana, 2010, p. 5). To do that, the articles draw on various methods, including ethnography, qualitative comparative approach, genealogy, case-study method, and critical discourse analysis.

Focusing on 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bahrain, Musaifer traces the gendered historical production of the modern school. Reading multi-source archival writings relationally, her analysis demonstrates how the modern school becomes a productive site from which to interrogate nationalist origin myths. Al-Muftah similarly ‘looks back,’ using the institutional archives of Qatar

University, to examine what the postcolonial connections of the past could mean for the future of internationalization on the campus. Alhouti, using a comparative lens, questions the sociopolitical and economic impact of instability in the K-12 education system in the region amid the constant drive to reform. Specifically, he argues that successful reform in the region requires a paradigm shift in the reform approach and breaking free from dependency on foreign consultants reminiscent of colonial advisors in the region. Making a similar observation, AlKhateeb examines how consent is manufactured among higher-education faculty in AGS. Her analysis scrutinizes how faculties are subject to various types of propaganda that manufacture consent for political, economic, and social agendas at both the local and global levels. Overall, it is evident from the contributions in this issue that there is a need to understand AGS schools and universities as historical institutions entangled within a transnational web of social, political, and economic forces. The issue includes a review of one of the recent books that discussed education in the Arab world from a political economy angle. With her long experience and close work in the education field in the region, Almoaibed managed to provide an insightful review of “The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World,” edited by Hicham Alaoui and Robert Springborg.

Bringing the issue together, the studies presented reflect on what can be done to ensure educational reform in the region moves in the direction of social justice, enabling the design of reforms from “less-privileged epistemic zones of being” that pay

attention to the “‘geometries of power’ that enact and constitute the Arab region” (Shahjahan & Morgan 2015, p. 95; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010, p. 10)

This special issue offers a nuanced analysis of educational reform in the AGS, where emerging scholars from the region write about their first-hand experiences, frustrations, and hopes for educational reforms being implemented in the AGS. The issue provides a new angle for analyzing and studying the Gulf region's education reform. The insights offered here are essential to researchers, academics, policy-makers, and practitioners working in the education and development arena in the region. While the cases presented are context-specific, they collectively echo a common concern that the politics of education policy should be discussed more in the literature. Hence, this issue is part of a broader conversation that we – as researchers and academics – should have in the Global South as we attempt to ground our educational reforms in our lived experiences, our ever-forming and transforming sociopolitical contexts, and our dreams for more just futures for peoples residing in the region.

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## References:

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