

A History of Education in the United Arab Emirates and Trucial Sheikdoms

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Abstract

This research examined the history of education in the United Arab Emirates. A meta-analysis of existing historical Arabic and English literature on the formulation of education in the region for the past 200 years was conducted. A historical framework was established to examine the four iterations of educational development to include the Mutawa and the Katateeb, Educational Circles, Semi-Organized Education and the Modern Educational System. The study identified the role of Islam in the development of past and present educational structures. The article establishes a cohesive relationship between past and modern educational practices as a means of stabilizing shared social values and norms based on religious belief.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, Education, Mutawa, Katateeb, Educational Circles, Semi-Organized Education, Modern Educational System

An Introduction to the History of Education in the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates was officially established as a nation in 1971 with the alliance of six of seven Emirates. The seventh Emirate, Ras Al Khaimah, officially joined the alliance in 1972 (Smith, 2004). Educational services were available in the UAE prior to

the existence of the country though the system often relied on alternate forms of education. Self-education was deemed as legitimate within this cultural context. The educational system often placed a strong emphasis on religious instruction and the acquisition of knowledge through interaction with others. Apprenticeships were a very common means of transferring skill-based knowledge. Much information was passed down from generation to generation via oral and written contexts. Traditional educational forms such as teacher-student relationships were also evident.

Didactic styles transitioned from these traditional methodologies to more formal pedagogical styles founded on lessons, courses and regulations. The Ministry of Education in the UAE indicates that the region has gone through four iterations of educational development. These are 1) the Mutawa and the Katateeb, 2) Educational Circles, 3) Semi-Organized Education, as well as 4) the Modern Education System (Alnabah, 1996).

The Mutawa and the Katateeb

Mutawa is another name for the Imam of the Masjed (Mosque). In the past, the Mutawa was usually the person who taught young boys and girls how to read the Quran, the Hadith of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be unto him) and his biography. The word, Mutawa, initially referred to a person who initiated himself to do good things by helping others read the writing of the Holy Quran and adhere to the Islamic way. The Mutawa taught moral obligations to ensure that people followed the right path and did not deviate from moral and religious expectations. The Mutawa was usually considered to be the wisest person in the village or area. People sought him out for advice and to be the judge between them in cases of conflict. The Mutawa also have the power to officiate over weddings. The Mutawa was a religious leader of the community. As such, he was highly respected based on his high morality, values, fear of Allah, and religious persona (Alnabah, 1996).

The Mutawa was cared for and supported by the people. As such, he was totally dependent on the populace for his livelihood. Educational instruction regarding the Holy Quran and the basics of Islam, along with writing, reading and mathematics, was usually taught in the Masjed (Mosque) or in his home. Repetition constituted the primary method of instruction. For example, he taught students by making them repeat his words. If children encountered problems learning, the Mutawa would share his concerns directly with the parents. The Mutawa of this age personified the Great Man Theory as espoused by Organ (1996) and operated within the expectations of a servant leader (Russell, 2001). This didactic methodology is still practiced today in many of the less affluent regions of North Africa and the Arab World.

While the Mutawa often taught in his home, more affluent communities would organize a Katateeb. The Katateeb was a physical location, or school, where youth were taught the Holy Quran, Islamic teachings, writing, reading, and basic mathematics. The Katateeb closely paralleled and resembled the modern primary school with teachers and additional resources. Before the establishment of the UAE, the Katateeb was usually found in coastal areas or places with well-established commerce (Alnabah, 1996).

Educational Circles

Educational Circles more closely resembled the traditional teacher/student model in which a teacher would transfer knowledge by lecture to a group of students. Esteemed religious scholars with extensive knowledge of Islam, languages and other relevant subjects conducted Educational Circles. These scholars often came from Saudi Arabia in response to direct invitation from the Sheikh of the area or other wealthy patrons. At times, these scholars would volunteer their services to help educate people in the different areas.

These Educational Circles were usually conducted in the local Masjed (Mosque), the Sheikh's palace, the patron's home or in the scholar's home. The scholar usually taught similar subjects to the Mutawa such as the Holy Quran, Sunnah (the way of life prescribed by Islam), writing, reading, and mathematics. Due to the exceptional knowledge of the scholar, instruction was often much more intense than instruction delivered by the local Mutawa. Julphar, now known as Ras Al Khaimah, was famous for its Educational Circles. Julphar was an international trading hub where merchants from all over the world came to trade. The area was especially famous for its international pearl trade. The British occupation of Julphar in 1819 further extended the renown of the region to include the European world (Alnabah, 1996).

Semi-Organized Education

Semi-Organized Education roughly spanned the timeframe from 1907 to 1953. This period was spurred into existence as a result of a religious movement known as "Alyaqadha Alarabiya." This phrase called for an Arabic awakening and invited the people to return to the Holy Quran and Sunnah. Central to this idea was upholding the Arabic language and relinquishing those things inconsistent with Islamic belief. One of the effects of this movement related to the importance placed on education as a means of allowing people to embrace the teachings of the Holy Quran. Accordingly, schools were opened throughout the Arabian Peninsula. This movement was eclipsed by the start of the First World War in 1914. After the conclusion of the First World War, emphasis returned to the development of schools in many of the large cities of the region. These schools often brought scholars from neighboring countries to serve as teachers and administrators (Alrawi, 1996).

Among the first of these regional schools was "A'Taimiah Almahmoudiah School" founded in 1907 in Sharjah by Sheikh Ali Almahmoud. Sheikh Ali was very famous in Sharjah and the surrounding countries and was widely recognized as a visionary leader. He valued education from his youth. His relatives were from Najd in Saudi Arabia, famous for its religious scholarship and devotion to the study of the Holy Quran. Sheikh Ali personally financed the "A'Taimiah Almahmoudiah School" and pioneered free educational services for the populace. His intent was to broadly expand the numbers of students and participants as a means of combating illiteracy in his region. He was greatly influenced by the teaching of "Ibn Taimiah" one of his ancestors and widely recognized as a strong proponent of education. Sheikh Ali also personally sponsored the educational growth of many students by sending them to study in Qatar and Egypt (Alrawi, 1996).

Sheikh Ali entrusted the school to Sheikh Abdulkareem Albukry who is originally from Bukeerah in the Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Abdulkareem was famous for his strong faith, love for education and devotion to Islamic teachings. Under his leadership the A'Taimiah

Almahmoudiah School adopted portions of the Egyptian curriculum. He further divided the delivery of education into two segments: (1) a primary school for learning the Quran and Sunnah, writing, reading, math, script, business, and social study and (2) the study of Sharia. The school closed after 16 years (Alrawi, 1996).

The increased emphasis on the importance of education led to the establishment of many schools in the region and surrounding Emirates. These include “Ibn Khalaf” in 1903 in Abu Dhabi, “Alahmadiyah” in 1910 in Dubai, “Aleslah” in 1930 in Sharjah (founded by the son of Ali Almahmoud, Mohammed), “Fat’h” in Ajman, “Abdurrahman Bin Ateeq” in 1942 in Umm Al Qaiwain, and “Alma’areed” in 1934 in Ras Al Khaimah. The other Emirates followed in the footsteps of Sheikh Ali Almahmoudi (Alrawi, 1996).

This movement to open schools increased after the British occupation based on the desire of influential local leaders and merchants as a means of spreading Islam and increasing the literacy of the population. The quality of the schools varied according to the knowledge of the scholars. These scholars were often deeply influenced by teachings originating from Saudi Arabia.

Modern Education System

These developing schools were stepping-stones to the current educational system. The first organized modern school was Alqasimiah School, founded in Sharjah in 1930 by Sheikh Mohammed Almahmoud son of the Sheikh Ali Almahmoud. In 1953, the school adopted the Kuwaiti curriculum and provided students with Kuwaiti books, materials and teachers. The first year under the modern model was 1953-1954. In the following year, the first school for females was opened under the same name. The school for females was later renamed Fatima A’zahra’a. Both schools operated under the Kuwaiti curriculum. Another branch of the school was opened in Ras Al Khaimah in 1955. Dubai followed suit in 1956. These schools were operated under the supervision of the Kuwaiti government. As the initial instructional materials were specific to Kuwait, the local Emirates began the development of instructional materials specific to the region (Alrawi, 1996; Alnabah, 1996).

The Kuwaiti model established three stages for students: (1) primary school, (2) preparatory school and (3) secondary school. Primary school required six years of study. Preparatory school required three years of study. Secondary school required three years of study. Prior to 1967, students completed their secondary school certificates by taking exams in Kuwait. In 1967, the exams were conducted in the Emirates (Alrawi, 1996).

After the United Arab Emirates was formed in 1971, education was developed locally and became free for all Emiratis. Primary education became mandatory for all Emirati boys and girls.

Conclusion

Nearly one century ago, the UAE embraced the importance of public education as means of stabilizing religious and cultural norms. Education in the UAE has undergone at least four iterations of change. However, remnants of each of these four iterations still exist within the culture and are evidenced in modern day society. The UAE was an early adopter of the concept of free public education. Accordingly, education is widely viewed

as a means of maintaining the economic and social independence of the nation and region. Education is seen as the tool by which future generations can guide and transform society. Islam continues to fortify didactic practice throughout the UAE and remains integral to the educational structure.

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