

Cultural and Religious Perspectives on Education of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

In this composition, the intricacies of the relationship between culture and education in Saudi Arabia are analyzed and its implications for students from early education to higher learning are evaluated. The examination delves into the manner in which Islam and the country's customary gender roles shape the syllabus and educational customs. The inculcation of Qur'anic teachings and Hadith, as well as the propagation of Wahhabi principles, are integral facets of religion's influence on the nation's educational structure. The segregation of academic institutions by gender, stringent dress codes, and strict observance of behavioral codes are exemplars of the impact of religion on education. Additionally, the cultural and religious emphasis on gender roles is pronounced through the stringent separation of schools and the reinforcement of cultural and religious norms in society. The religious curriculum and instructional materials are rigorously scrutinized to guarantee their conformity to the government's interpretation of Islam. The report accentuates both the difficulties and prospects that the cultural and educational landscape presents for students, educators, and education professionals in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Culture; Religious; Education; Saudi Arabia

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■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia, the interplay between culture and education is a multifaceted and nuanced dynamic that shapes the experiences and opportunities of students from early childhood through to higher education. It is a relationship that is defined by the country's rich and diverse cultural heritage, rooted deeply in history, religion and social customs and enriched by the civilizations that have inhabited the region over the course of its storied past, as well as its evolving place in the global community. But how does Islam influence the curriculum and school customs in Saudi Arabia? And what impact do traditional gender roles have on educational expectations? With the increasing globalization of the country and the introduction of more international curricula and teaching methods, the cultural landscape of education in Saudi Arabia is consistently evolving and changing, but how do these cultural influences intersect and coexist in the modern educational landscape of Saudi Arabia? In this essay, we will delve into these and other questions as we explore the complex and often contradictory ways in which culture impacts education in Saudi Arabia, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities that it presents for students, teachers, and education professionals.

■ 2.0 DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION: A TIME LAPSE

Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone significant development since its inception. King Abdulaziz Al Saud initiated the progress, and it grew alongside the Kingdom's advancements in economic, political, and urban domains. The first stage of education was confined to traditional teaching in mosques, where the focus was on reading, writing, calligraphy, arithmetic, and the memorization of the Holy Qur'an. Later, education transitioned from mosques to formal education systems, modeled after the Ottoman Empire's education system, which prioritized the Turkish language.

After the discovery of oil and subsequent social and economic transformations, education progressed rapidly, with King Abdul Aziz establishing the Directorate of Knowledge to develop the education system for boys. The General Presidency for the education of girls was later created by King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz. The Ministry of Higher Education became an authority responsible for organizing academic education and establishing its rules. The College of Sharia in Makkah Al-Mukarramah became the first university educational

institution in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Kingdom's current focus is on the development of higher education and aligning it with the latest education systems globally. King Saud University was the first university in the Kingdom. The state has taken significant measures to enhance the education system by improving teachers' selection, development, and financial income, and the enrollment rate in primary education has reached 99%. Illiteracy rates have decreased significantly among both genders, with a rate of less than 5% presently.

The Vision 2030 initiative in the Kingdom has provided the education sector with great attention and made many commitments towards its development. These commitments include developing an education system that bridges the gap between graduates of higher education and labor market requirements, achieving a high ranking in global education indicators, and developing educational curricula. The initiative also focuses on building students' skills and creative spirit in a stimulating and attractive environment for education.

■ 3.0 ROLE OF RELIGION IN SHAPING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND CURRICULUM

According to Durkheim, “culture is the outward expression of religion” (1915) and self-evidently enough, culture and religion are inextricably intertwined, with one often influencing and shaping the other. Similarly, Smith (1982) also notes that culture and religion are mutually constitutive, with one often informing the other and hence, discovering the impact culture will be futile and inappropriate without bringing its religious domain into consideration.

Though the role of religion in education has sparked debate and controversy, with some elements arguing that it limits the freedom of students and teachers to think critically and express their own beliefs, Islam being the almost unanimous religion in the land, takes a significant part in molding the way education is imparted and interpreted; visualized and valued in Saudi Arabia.

First and foremost, religion impacts education in Saudi Arabia by making obligatory the study of the Qur'an and the Hadith – the ultimate constitution, the absolute authorities in Islamic jurisprudence (the Shariah). These sacred Muslim texts are not only taught mandatorily but the study thereof is also accorded great significance in the curriculum, by all, the teachers, the parents and the educational authorities. Sunnah is also an integral part of the curriculum and so is the study of history of Islam, its laws (the modern Shariah) and theology. The incorporation of these teachings and values into other subjects in the curriculum helps to ensure that they are integrated into the daily lives of students and become a part of their worldview. Similarly, the books being in Arabic, increase the need for learning the language, augmenting its already conspicuous significance in Saudi Arabia.

Secondly, integration of Islamic principles in the curriculum has a profound effect on the academic and institutional principles, with the religious teachings serving as a guide for student conduct and decision-making. The students are expected to abide by principles such as modesty and respect for authority as prescribed by Islamic doctrines. Schools and universities in the country are separated for male and female students, owing to the belief that segregation is necessary to preserve modesty and avoid temptation. This separation is also used to reinforce cultural and religious principles of gender roles in the society. Similarly, the dress code in most Saudi Arabian schools and universities is strictly enforced, with students mandated to wear traditional Islamic clothing which includes the abaya, a long, loose-fitting garment for female students, and the thobe, a long, loose-fitting shirt for male students. This stringent dress code assures that students are fully and suitably attired as per the cultural and religious traditions of the country. This religious reflection into attire and behavior is meant to ensure that students are not only academically equipped, but also morally and ethically grounded in the cultural and religious traditions of the country.

■ 4.0 THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

Gender roles, as a formidable part of any culture, play a paramount role in shaping the characteristics of any society the world over, and they do the same thing when it comes to the education system of Saudi Arabia. As described earlier, the Saudi culture expects the two genders to be segregated in academic institutions, in order to preserve and uphold modesty, and to avoid temptation that may result otherwise. Consequently, boys and girls in Saudi Arabia are typically educated in separate institutions, with only limited opportunities for co-educational learning, and this segregation impedes the opportunities for students to interact and engage with members of the opposite sex, thereby hindering the development of certain social skills. Males often tend to develop the notion that the opposite gender is not meant to be with, or to work with them and the notion is carried on, into their professional lives. Similarly, the same culture provides disparate curricula for boys and girls, where girls' education is inclined towards domestic and religious subjects, while boys may receive more instruction in technical and vocational subjects. This usually perpetuates the cultural expectation of separate career paths for

boys and girls, wherein boys are usually discouraged from pursuing careers in fields traditionally associated with women such as teaching or nursing, and girls are asked to leave certain careers, such as engineering and science, for boys and educate themselves for something “womanlier”. Additionally, due to cultural influence, there generally are limited opportunities for girls in higher education and vocational training, which, along with the restricted access they have to extracurricular activities such as sports, adversely affect their physical, emotional and professional development.

■ 5.0 THE SOCIETAL IMPACT ON TEACHER BEHAVIOR

In Saudi Arabia’s collectivist and conservative society, the cultural dominance not only permeates student life and academics but also sets some expectations for pedagogy – something that has received severe criticism over time. Research into cultural factors and their impact on teachers, particularly those associated with higher education has found that the collectivist element, when employed in education is demotivating for deans and professors. Saudi Arabia, in accordance with Hofstede’s Dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance, is inclined towards creating collective welfare while establishing centralized control, exercised through strict rules, regulations and a power nested in the higher management. Subsequently, the behaviors and the teaching habits of teachers are all determined and governed not by the teachers and professors themselves, but the authorities that oversee and control curriculum – the education ministry. Deans of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia have reported experiencing the cultural pressure, with the dominance of regulations and centralization having a significant impact on their leadership practices and the way they deliver knowledge. The regulations affect implementation of changes by teachers and hence, often are a barrier to change in academic institutions.

■ 6.0 GLOBALIZATION OF EDUCATION

As globalization has intensified, the education system in Saudi Arabia has been inundated with an array of foreign cultures and ideas, which has led to a number of changes and developments in the country’s education system. Evident in the curriculum, there has been an increased focus on global languages and cultures, in addition to the implementation of novel pedagogical techniques and technologies. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by the proliferation of international educational collaborations, with an ever-increasing number of partnerships being established between Saudi universities and foreign educational institutions. These collaborations foster an exchange of knowledge and ideas, thus resulting in a positive augmentation of the quality of education within the country.

Moreover, Saudi students are increasingly availing themselves of the opportunity to study abroad, which provides them with a global outlook and allows them to cultivate intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, this exposure to international education systems and cultures, has enabled them to become more adaptable and versatile. The infusion of foreign cultures and ideas has engendered a shift in the way national identity is construed in Saudi Arabia, with increased open-mindedness towards diverse cultures and ideas, and an enhancement of cultural diversity.

Economic policies in Saudi Arabia are also impacted by globalization, with the education system progressively being directed towards developing the competencies required to succeed in a globalized job market. This is reflected in the focus on STEM education, as well as vocational training to meet the demands of international industries. The education system of Saudi Arabia is also increasingly trying to align with international standards and methodologies, which in turn is improving the country’s position on the international level. With the ascendancy of students studying abroad and the globalization of education, Saudi Arabia is becoming more cosmopolitan and accepting of different cultures and ideas. This can lead to a more inclusive society, and a greater appreciation of diversity within the country. Also, it is enabling the country to be more competitive and dynamic in the globalized world.

■ 6.0 RESPONSE TO E-LEARNING

Saudi culture has exhibited receptivity towards the advent of e-learning in recent years, as it has emerged as a prevalent modality of instruction within the country. E-learning is perceived as an efficient and pliant means of imparting education to students, particularly given the nation’s vast population and the necessity to cater to the diverse learning styles of individual students. Moreover, e-learning is deemed to be an efficacious method of dispensing education in remote or rural regions where access to traditional schools and universities is restricted. Additionally, e-learning affords students the capability to procure education in a safe, congenial

and familiar environment and at a time that is convenient for them.

The Saudi government has also actively fostered e-learning within the country by investing in and promoting the utilization of technology in education. For instance, the Ministry of Education has launched several initiatives to support e-learning, such as the "E-Learning Project" and the "Tatweer Program," which aim to enhance the quality and accessibility of e-learning in the country. Furthermore, numerous universities have adopted e-learning systems, that have enabled students to have access to online courses, digital materials and even online degree programs.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the relationship between culture and education in Saudi Arabia is a complex and multifaceted dynamic that shapes the experiences and opportunities of students from early childhood through to higher education. The country's rich cultural heritage and deep-rooted religious beliefs, combined with the increasing globalization of the country, have led to a complex and ever-evolving cultural landscape within the education system. Culture, through religion plays a significant role in shaping the educational system and curriculum in Saudi Arabia, with the study of Islam, the Quran and Hadith being made mandatory and accorded great significance, together with the integration of Islamic principles into the curriculum. Traditional gender roles and cultural customs have a directly impact the educational expectations and opportunities, particularly for girls and the consequences are further modified by cultural dominance over teaching itself. While these cultural influences present certain challenges, they also offer opportunities for students to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage and identity, and to develop the skills and competencies needed to succeed in a globalized world.

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