

# **THE USE OF HISTORICAL MATERIAL IN STUDIES OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS BY FOREIGN CREDENTIAL ANALYSTS**

by Alan Margolis

Most works on foreign educational systems written for credential analysts include a "social science" section—information on the history, politics, sociology and demography of the countries under discussion. Generally, these volumes contain data, discussions or tables on population, area, and major historical and political events. Authors have ritualized the inclusion of this material: a work of this sort **must** contain this information. No doubt the material, as presented, has some general interest to some readers who may react as does the author by accepting its ritual appearance, reading it as a matter of duty, or they may skip over the section with a hasty glance. In fact, as executed, it becomes incidental to the purpose of the volumes, and the authors treat it as such.

Is this important material? As presented, it is of limited utility; offered so that we can relate these data and events directly to education, yes. The key is the direct relationship between the historical fact or event being discussed and the educational system. For example, the United Kingdom has a population of 58,000,000, less than 25% of that of the United States. Two facts have been presented here: the total population of the UK and its relationship to that of the US. Is it valuable to know that there are 58,000,000 people living in the UK? Is this an idea that the reader can truly comprehend? If we cannot grasp the notion of 58,000,000, then of what value is it to compare it with the population of the US? If we are to understand the prob-

lem, we must recognize that the extreme generality of this statement renders it useless. What one needs to know about changes in UK population is its growth—or the lack of it—in the school age population. This specific information, of course, plays a major role in educational planning both at the local and national levels. Are patterns of growth uniform through the UK? After all, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are very different demographic areas. Is the UK an ageing country? If so, what changes in public support for education are there among the elderly? Would they be willing to pay more taxes for education when their income purchases less each year?

How valuable is this expanded information? Will it help a credential analyst evaluate a specific academic document better? Probably not. Would it not take up a great deal of space in the reference works used by practitioners, perhaps at the expense of other material of more practical value? Possibly. So, should we eliminate the social science section if its length interferes with the inclusion of other material?

A major goal of information for credential analysts should be to make them intellectually independent, reducing their reliance on ossified printed material. Knowledge of the forces behind the dynamics of educational systems will help them understand the impact of social and political changes on education as these occur, or even anticipate educational developments as social conditions change. This would result in a reduction in reliance on publications dealing with results rather than causes. Beyond knowing what the

system looks like, credential analysts need to have an understanding of what an educational system is and how it functions, develops and changes. Relational information linking the social sciences with education will lead us to this understanding.

## **WHAT THE ISSUES ARE**

In reviewing the social science sections in several full volumes and shorter works, the following appear as problematic areas:

**Historical imbalance/Value judgments:** These exist where more than one possible interpretation of historical events is possible and where the text does not deal equally with all of them. This leads the author to offer opinions that they do not ground in fact.

**Incomplete discussion:** This occurs when the author mentions a topic and does not deal with it in sufficient detail to provide clear relationships to the educational system.

**Missing analysis/discussion:** This represents the absence of analysis of data or discussions that appear in the text. Included is when one does not allude to key historical events, or mentions them only in passing with no context established.

The *post hoc ergo propter hoc* syndrome—that is, the often inadvertent assumption that there is a necessary causality between events because one directly follows another.

Frequently, texts often combine these problematic areas in the same paragraph. The reader should cast a critical eye at this sort of material.

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## THE WEST BANK AND GAZA STRIP: A CASE STUDY

The "social science" information available about this part of the world needs to be dealt with very carefully. For areas where extensive turmoil exists and where partisan forces, native to the area, have reacted violently to each other—Bosnia and South Africa also come to mind—objectivity often suffers. The researcher, without knowing it, may have taken sides in the conflict, perhaps subliminally due to local public opinion. Where this exists it becomes difficult to keep the bias out of the text. Source material also may represent partisan views; without a deeper knowledge of the social science background, it is difficult for a researcher, even an objective one, to know what is fact and what is interpretation. An otherwise excellent publication can be damaged because it contains material of questionable veracity, incompleteness and a faulty presentation of causality.

For example, a discussion of Jewish immigration quotas into Palestine during the British Mandate has been described as follows: Immigration quotas were allocated on the basis of labor certificates—only Jewish labor was used on all lands settled by the Jews. Eventually, the Jews boycotted all Arab agricultural products. First, the causal relationship between the two clauses in the first sentence is not inevitable, although it appears so from the wording.

Also, the second event may be an outgrowth of the policies discussed in the first sentence; however, as presented the relationship appears tenuous. Very important is the fact that there is no context for the material: that immigration from Nazi-threatened eastern Europe was limited to those with work permits, a fact that may be considered a humanitarian initiative. This discussion is meant to highlight the antecedents of Arab-Israeli conflict that play a role in the shape of education in the West Bank and Gaza. However, the relationship of the discussion to its ultimate goal of greater clarity about educational history both is obscure and

less than relevant as it is presented in a way that renders it moot.

Often, historical discussions continue along the lines noted above: battles, atrocities, inequities, social and political cataclysms are paraded in chronological order. Even if not subject to the potential for inadvertent misrepresentation discussed above, of what value is this to the understanding of the current educational circumstances? Unless authors can create models that clarify the relationship between social upheaval and the form taken by an educational system, any attempt to define the educational system in terms of its dramatic historical antecedents must be seen as suspect.

Too frequently, works on foreign educational systems do not relate the social science material with the main purpose of the presentation: the understanding of the educational system itself. What appears is two separate articles attached by the thinnest unravelling thread.

In looking at information on education in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the following outline of benchmark historical periods may be offered. Authors list the highlights; yet, the material either is incomplete or misleading.

Education under the:

**Ottoman Empire:** number of years of elementary education; language of instruction (Turkish); as Muslims and Christians did not want to study in Turkish (were they able to?), they developed their own private schools that were successful (what are the criteria for success?).

**British Mandate:** education is free but not compulsory; Muslim schools (which the Turks had nationalized near the end of their rule) became government schools (what is the importance of being a government school?); increase in number of government schools; percentage of students who received some schooling (what does "some" mean?).

**Post-Mandate/Independent Israel period:** establishment of UNRWA that, besides other things, provided education to displaced Palestinians ("displaced" defined; however, education

is not); steps taken by Jordan to make schools under its jurisdiction uniform (no definition of what the Jordanian system was and the curriculums and examinations are not described).

**Post-1967 period:** Israeli system imposed (no definition either of the system or of what the imposition consisted), which they abandoned (why?); Egyptian and Jordanian policies were reintroduced (no definition); control by the Civil Administration (no definition).

We can see this as an attempt to discuss the antecedents of the current system. If one were to accomplish this, the following should have to have been presented:

The factors that define an educational system, overall, and these, in particular;

Parallel information for each historic period;

A discussion of the dynamics of change;

Comparative data on education in each period;

A picture of the current system.

Usually, only the last is presented. The true test of whether a presentation delivers on its promise is to look at the current system and determine whether one can trace educational development backwards.

## OUR OPTIONS

As presented currently, "the social science section" does not serve the reader well as incomplete or unclear material is often included. The complexities involved in relating historical, political and social events to education should not be underestimated, and most authors of the type of publications with which we are dealing are not social scientists or experts in comparative education.

Nevertheless, we need to make changes. Either we eliminate the material completely or we change the way it is presented.

If we eliminate it, the work seems incomplete, somehow less valid intellectually. We can overcome this by giving the reader an annotated bibliography that would tap the resources from which the authors have gathered

their information. Readers interested in learning about the history of education and the impact of historical events upon education can find the appropriate citations and pursue their interests. Those concerned with solving immediate evaluation problems will not notice its absence. Probably, this latter group would skip over this section anyway.

To many people, this approach may be too radical. So, if we are to include social science information, we must seek a methodology that would help in reducing the anomalies discussed above. It has been my experience both writing and editing these works that the authors write the social science section first, then go on to a discussion of the educational system, the order in which they usually appear in the text.

We make assumptions about the applicability of this material that are not tested by reference to the main body of research. The results, therefore, appear as two distinct sections that do not fit together well.

What would happen if we reversed the order of our research? If we wrote the discussion of the educational system and then went back and asked ourselves what more do we need to know? This would tie the social science section directly to the primary sections so that we would include only those social science phenomena that made education more comprehensible.

### TESTING THE WATERS

By using the West Bank and Gaza Strip example, let us look at what we might include in a relational social science section. We may produce a more coherent whole by examining the presentation on the educational system and by reflecting on what other information might make it easier to understand the material.

A "normal" description of the system might contain the following:

- Financing of Education
- Primary and Secondary Education
- Vocational Education
- Higher Education

### Teacher Training

#### Financing Education

Topics Covered: Budgeted amount for both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by Israel and by UNRWA; per student and other educational expenditures; how private schools are financed; university funding including student fees and donations; estimates of how much it would cost to create a "competent" educational system.

Relational Topics: A comparative study of the cost of education covering public/private and primary/secondary/higher for each of several historical periods. The rationale for using these periods must be presented; the role education played in each of these historical periods with an emphasis on how education was a factor in economic development; education as a political weapon: the current systems compared fiscally with the Israeli system and with other Arab systems

#### Primary and Secondary Education

Topics Covered: Enrolment figures for both areas; condition of facilities; years of compulsory education; language of instruction; total number of years for each level—primary, middle, higher secondary; subjects taught; UNRWA education based on Egyptian and Jordanian models.

Relational Topics: Development of operating educational philosophies, including historical perspective for the historical periods defined above; expected learning outcomes; comparison of West Bank and Gaza Strip structure and curriculums with those in Israel, Egypt and Jordan, with subject matter analysis; discussion of decision making process, again with historical perspective.

#### Vocational Education

Topics Covered: Reputation of vocational education; Israeli initiatives and restrictions.

Relational Topics: Discussion of the economies of both areas; the level of training required to meet needs of society; how work force is being trained; historic reasons why vocational education is not valued; what is being

done to change perceptions about vocational education and to provide training at a higher vocational level.

#### Higher Education

Topics Covered: Governing body; types of institutions and their numbers; admission standards; a brief profile of universities; statements about resources;

Relational Topics: The role of the University in Arab society; politics of funding and resource allocation; guiding philosophies of higher education; how these differ from or are similar to universities in other Arab states; the role of the universities in promoting political activism, with a discussion of this in other Arab areas.

#### Teacher Training

Topics Covered: Length of program; Jordanian standards for West Bank teachers; statistics on number of teachers; teachers as activists; need for more teachers.

Relational Topics: relationship between curricular matters and social conditions; teachers' recognition by society, including historic perspective using the historic periods defined above; comparison of teacher training with Israel, Egypt and Jordan.

### CONCLUSION

The integration of this social science and comparative education material into the discussions on the educational system, *in situ*, provides the context and coherence that, presented separately, does not exist. It is true that the reader is not provided a sweeping view of history; yet, the current approach does not accomplish this either. It would be far better to offer the reader the annotated bibliography along with social science information that is germane to the specific discussion. This way, we ensure the applicability of this information to the topics being addressed. The author profits by not having to produce a separate social science section and the reader benefits by having the relevant information integrated into the text.