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A top-performing school in Sfax, a governorate renowned for consistently achieving the highest scores in the country. | Photo by Hania Sobhy

We Don’t Have Diversity here, but Inequality, That’s in the Design of the Education System: Tunisian Teachers, Diversification and the Defunding of Education

Series | Diversifying Global Education
February 27, 2025 | Volume 16 | Issue 1
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Is diversity an asset or a challenge in education? Does it make managing a classroom easier or more difficult? With increasing awareness of different needs and experiences of children from different ethnic, religious and migration backgrounds, attention has increased to issues of diversity in education. But how do people in different parts of the world react to the invocation of diversity? Is diversity another way to talk about inequality or is it a way to mask it and avoid difficult discussions about it? How can insights from contexts in the global South contribute to our understanding of diversity in education in the context of a global learning crisis? In my research on education in Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia, I ask teachers how diversity, inequality and migration shape their experiences of the classroom. I focus here on Tunisia, the intersections of diversity and inequality in teacher narratives and how they can texture our understanding of both diversity and educational transformations in the global South. I draw on fieldwork I conducted across the country from September 2022 to June 2023, where I interviewed over 60 Tunisian teachers, in addition to union leaders, experts, researchers, former ministers and other stakeholders.



A school in the rural outskirts of the coastal privileged governorate of Monastir | Photo by Hania Sobhy

When I asked teachers about forms of diversity (tanawu') in the classroom and its impact on their work, most teachers either stated that they have no diversity in the classroom or had to ask clarification questions as to what was meant by diversity. However, when asked about disparities or inequalities in the classroom, most teachers could comment on their central place in the student body and their experience as teachers. While diversity might be an increasingly legible trope in many contexts, the lens of disparities and inequality can be far more legible and productive registers in others. It may not be surprising that teachers in a country like Tunisia would initially consider diversity irrelevant to their classrooms. Tunisia can be considered among the most ethnically homogenous societies in the world. In Tunisia, populations that are classified as ethnically Berber are small in number and

often do not speak Berber. Over 99% of the population are Muslim and Sunni. While migration-driven diversification (Vertovec 2022) is prominent in the region, is not as relevant to contexts like Tunisia.

Inequality in Tunisian Classrooms- Income and Regional Inequalities

‘We don’t have diversity here, ’ one teacher told me, but ‘inequality, that’s in the design of the education system,’ another explained. While many Tunisian teachers could not immediately relate to the notion of diversity as applicable to their classrooms, they could easily underline the forms of inequality that increasingly permeate the education system. Tunisia is often narrated as an education success story in the region due to its high enrollment and literacy rates, especially among women and girls. Nonetheless, scholars find substantial socioeconomic inequalities based on regional location (Benstead 2021; Trabelsi, 2013).



A school in the Kairaouan governorate, which scores lowest on national exams. | Photo by Hania Sobhy

Tunisian teachers have unique exposure to realities in different parts of the country in ways that importantly influence their views on regional inequalities. A large proportion of teachers take up their first assignments in remote, underprivileged regions and make their way- over many years- across regions and urban and rural locations based on their competencies and years of experience. However, this 'meritocratic mobility' also systematically diverts talents and experience away from disadvantaged areas towards coastal and urban locations alike. When gender was raised as an aspect of diversity, teachers often remarked on the difficulties they faced in motivating male students, in particular, to learn, especially in disadvantaged contexts where rampant unemployment and very low wages make irregular migration a much more desirable route for upward mobility than formal learning. Regional inequalities also shape the growing forms of protest and popular discontent that may have been critical in increasing support for populist leaders in recent years (Meddeb 2020).

Defunding, Privatization, and Tracking

When asked about their own classrooms, teachers saw an increase in disparities in terms of learning outcomes among their students, exacerbated by the COVID-19 closures, especially in the earlier grades. These disparities amounted to having children who are two grades behind the intended level of a classroom. Not only is Tunisian education not designed for multi-grade learning, teachers are not trained for such instruction and they are not equipped with additional resources to tackle it in the absence of effective remedial classes. Teachers linked these disparities in learning to temporary teacher hiring, regional funding inequalities, new forms of tracking, and the (formal and informal) privatization of education.

Tunisia has been experiencing declining achievement for decades (World Bank 2016). While public spending on education in Tunisia has historically been very high and arguably the highest in the SWANA region, it has seen a rapid decline over the past decade. Because wages constitute such a large proportion of education expenditures, the defunding of education can be vividly seen in the decline in real teacher wages as well as in the increasing resort to temporary hiring, both of which have caused waves of protest among teachers (Sobhy 2024). Temporary teachers (nuwwab), representing 10% of teachers, are poorly paid, precariously employed, and are usually deployed in disadvantaged areas (Sobhy 2024). Precarious hiring is a response to budgetary constraints, including agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reduce the public wage bill as part of debt repayment

arrangements. Tunisia is, unfortunately, not unique in this regard. Poor learning and poor literacy have become endemic in low and middle-income countries, where 6 out of 10 children do not learn to read by age 10, and has been projected to worsen significantly due to COVID-19 closures (World Bank 2022).



A classroom and students in Siliana, which is a coastal but rural governorate | Photo by Hania Sobhy

Privatization had also been rapidly accelerating over the past decade. Enrolment in private schools is highest in the primary stage and has quadrupled from 2% in 2010 to 8% in 2021 (UIS 2022). Many teachers viewed this rapid privatization as drawing up the best teachers and students across the country, further undermining the quality of education in the public sector. This formal privatization in the top income tiers is accompanied by ‘informal privatization’ that affects 70% of students and takes the form of private tutoring, on which Tunisian families spend more than the entire state budget for education (PGLD 2015). In the context of divergent competencies in the classroom, teachers can also be highly rewarded for teaching the highest performing students who have a chance of joining competitive ‘Model Institutes’ (ma’ahid namuthajiya) and whose families are more likely to invest in expensive private tutoring, often with those same teachers. In my interviews, these model institutes were highly contested among teachers. Many teachers lamented, and some vehemently opposed this form of tracking in the system, whereby students with higher competencies were selected into these elite public schools, reducing the diversity of abilities in regular public schools and lowering their overall performance. Finally, in commenting on diversity, teachers noted the increased number of students with learning difficulties and neurodiversity in their classrooms. This inclusion of differently abled children remains negatively viewed by teachers, as it is almost never accompanied by the additional resources, training, and support that are promised to schools in order to implement it.



Teacher and students in a popular/disadvantaged neighborhood in the Tunisian capital, Tunis. | Photo by Hania Sobhy

Diversity, Resources and Opportunities

Diversity was not always negatively constructed by teachers, however. In the narratives of many stakeholders and teachers, diversity in terms of social class and regional origin was portrayed as a prized and shining aspect of education in the early postcolonial era under President Habib Bourgiba. Generously paid teachers, warm meals, and plenty of cultural and sports activities in a long school day or a secondary boarding school are part of the story of equality and upward mobility that is associated with postcolonial education in Tunisia. As such, attitudes toward diversity cannot be separated from questions about resources and opportunities. Framing our inquiry in terms of “diversity” may not be a fruitful entry point for inviting teachers to reflect on the forms of differentiation and processes of diversification that impact the learning of their students and their experience in the classroom. Defunding-driven diversification and diversification in the context of

defunding are important lenses for understanding the realities of education, attitudes toward diversity, the challenges facing teachers, and the crisis of formal learning.

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