Research Notes

Secularization and Tradition In Four Arab Countries: A Comparative Content Analysis of Reading Textbooks

by Hasan A. Yahya

I. Introduction

The educational process is a combination of three important elements: teacher, student, and communication. This study focused on the third element in examining second grade reading textbooks in four Arab countries: Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Textbooks are not the only important element in the communication dimension nor do texts provide the only message students learn or the only influence in the educational process. Textbooks have the advantage, however, of being subject to content analysis and represent symbolic interaction as an effective means to translate the cultural heritage of any nation.

Each country has its own books, and has its own methods to educate youngsters consistent with broad goals and national needs. Religious education in many Middle Eastern countries is a gradual and continuing process which begins early in the educational life of the individual. Such education is complete, comprehensive, and is intended even at the elementary level to develop understanding of religious and social behavior.

Most of the content of books in Arab countries is prepared to reflect the separated worlds of males and females, displaying the supreme societal, religious, psychological, and physical power of men over women. Educational leaders and decision makers, at least in the Middle East, seem to be effective advocates of traditional values and are concerned with the positive impact of the educational process. The primary aims of the educational system in

Hasan A. Yahya is in the Department of Sociology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

the countries considered in this study, and in many other countries, is to transmit the culture's essential information and values. The schools are an important arena for students to learn such values, and textbooks tend to reflect cultural traditions.

II. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the content of second grade textbooks in Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Libya in relation to cultural values. Careful study of textbook content designed to propagate Islamic culture is needed during this period of rapid change towards modernization. The differences and similarities in the books were studied as well as the degree to which they reflected environmental and societal factors in education. The following issues were considered: How did the texts display the world to second graders? What are the patterns of content? Are the content selections valid, adequate, and coherent? Do they serve the intellectuals of our modern age, and what values or goals do they represent? It was impossible to treat all facits of these issues comprehensively in one study, so emphasis was placed on examining the factors of religion, gender, and nature.

III. Methodology

Content analysis was used to classify the situations presented in the textbooks. Little if any research has been conducted on Arab textbooks utilizing content analysis. Content analysis is seldom used in the field of sociology. Most scientific, content-analysis studies have been conducted by communication specialists and were confined to studies of the media.[1] Since the printed page is a cogent variable in the learning process, content analysis should provide a valid method for sociologists studying educational processes. But Berelson and Budd, maintain that a scientific content analysis must be objective, systematic, and quantitative.[2] To satisfy these criteria a study must have well

---

[1] H.D. Lasswell and N. Leites, *Language of Politics* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1949); and B. Berelson, *Content Analysis in Communication Research* (N.Y.: The Free Press of Glenco, 1952); and W. Danielson, "Content Analysis in Communication Research," in R.O. Nofziger and D.M. White, eds., *Introduction to Mass Communications Research* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 1963).

[2] B. Berelson, *op. cit*; and R.W. Budd, Thorp, and Donohue, *Content Analysis of Communication (Canada: The Macmillan Company, 1967). See also T.F. Carney, Content Analysis: A Technique for Systematic Inference from Communication* (Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 1972); and Ithia Sol DePool, *Trends in Content Analysis* (Vurbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1959); and O.R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Philippines: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969).

delineated categories, a measure of reliability, clearly formulated data gathering procedures, and research hypotheses.

Categories were developed to classify environmental and cultural ideas covered in general by the content of the four textbooks. A sample of second grade textbooks issued in the four countries under study were examined in order to develop appropriate categories. At the time of the study, Syria and Jordan had a cooperative educational program and used the same reading book, which consisted of two parts with 37 lessons and was authored by seven educators. Two second grade Saudi Arabian textbooks were included: one for second grade males and one for second grade females. Both the Libyan and the Saudi textbooks were written in 1978 while the Jordan-Syrian textbook was issued in 1981.

The titles of lessons, the illustrative pictures in lessons, and the lesson content were examined. Seven categories were developed: (1) male oriented, (2) female oriented, (3) group, male and female, (4) religion oriented, (5) animal oriented, (6) nature oriented, and (7) other oriented. Content was also divided into categories across lessons depending upon whether they were located inside or located outside the home. The occupations of major figures were also examined. To facilitate coding consistency, one individual was responsible for all coding in the study.

Frequency distributions of the findings are presented in the following section. Chi Square analysis was undertaken to determine if significant relationships across countries or variables existed. While the sample is relatively small (four texts with multiple lessons), the findings of this study should provide a beginning basis for researchers interested in studying similar phenomena in similar countries or in the countries under study.

IV. Results

In this study selected content differences across countries and by gender were examined. Titles, pictures, and lessons were considered in the content analysis. The lessons were examined to determine if the activities took place predominantly inside or outside of the home.

Male-oriented content formed the largest category for titles in the Jordan/Syrian and Saudi male texts; it formed the second largest category in the Libyan text and the fourth largest category in the Saudi Female text (see Table 1). Female content in titles was the largest category in the Saudi Female text. Content concerning animals was more stressed in the Saudi titles than in the Jordan/Syrian and Libyan titles. Religious issues were more stressed in the Saudi female titles than for any other group. Group (male and female together) content was well represented in the Jordan/Syrian and Libyan titles but not in either the Saudi male or female texts.

Table 1

The Content of Titles Presented in Four Arab Country Second Grade Texts

	Jordan/Syria		Libya		Saudi Male		Saudi Female	
Concentration	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	17	46%	7	25%	23	33%	9	12%
Female	3	8%	5	18%	4	6%	20	27%
Group M/F	9	24%	8	29%	5	7%	3	4%
Religious	–	–	3	11%	6	9%	17	23%
Animals	2	5%	3	11%	15	21%	17	23%
Nature	3	8%	2	7%	8	11%	3	4%
Other	3	8%	–	–	9	13%	4	6%

Male oriented content of pictures formed the largest category in the Libyan text, the second largest category in the Jordan/Syrian text, the second largest category in the Saudi Male text, and tied for the second largest category in the Saudi Female text (see Table 2). Group (male and female) formed the largest category in the Jordan/Syrian pictures and the second largest category in the Libyan pictures but was poorly represented in either male or female Saudi pictures. Animals formed the number one category in the Saudi male and female pictures but were seldom represented in the Jordan/Syrian or Libyan pictures.

Table 2

The Content of Pictures in Four Arab Country Second Grade Texts

	Jordan/Syria		Libya		Saudi Male		Saudi Female	
Concentration	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	10	27%	8	28%	19	27%	10	14%
Female	2	5%	5	18%	3	4%	9	12%
Group M/F	20	54%	7	25%	5	7%	3	4%
Religious	–	–	2	7%	7	10%	8	11%
Animals	3	8%	3	11%	20	29%	15	21%
Nature	2	5%	3	11%	6	9%	9	12%
Other	–	–	2	7%	10	14%	19	14%

The majority of the lessons represented situations outside of the home in the Jordan/Syrian, Libyan, and Saudi Male texts. More than half of the lessons represented inside home situations in the Saudi Female text (see Table 3).

Table 3

The Location of Activities in Situations Presented in the First 28 lessons of Four Arab Country Second Grade Texts

	Jordan/Syria		Libya		Saudi Male		Saudi Female	
Concentration								
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Inside Home	5	18%	10	36%	6	21%	15	54%
Outside Home	23	82%	18	64%	22	79%	13	46%

Chi square analysis indicated that there was a significant relationship in the amount of Male and Female content presented in the texts of the four countries. Both titles (see Table 4) and Pictures (see Table 5) contained more male oriented content than female oriented content. Sixty-four percent (64.4%) of the gender content of the titles was male oriented and 71.2% of the gender content of the pictures was male oriented.

Table 4

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship between Male and Female Content in the Titles of Four Arab country Texts

	Male	Female
Observed	58	32
Expected	45	45

Chi Square = 7.5*
Probability = .006
* Significant at the alpha = .05 level

Table 5

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship between Male and Female Content in the Pictures of Four Arab Country Texts

	Male	Female
Observed	47	19
Expected	33	33

Chi Square = 11.9*
Probability = .0005
* significant at the alpha = .05 level

The religious content of the Saudi texts was compared with the religious content of the non-Saudi texts. Saudi texts had a significantly higher incidence of religous content in both titles and pictures than did the other countries (see Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship Between Religious Content of Titles for Saudi Araba and Three Other Arab Countries

	Saudi	Other **	Total
Religious	23	3	26
Non Religious	120	62	182
Total	143	65	208

Chi Square = 5.33*
Probability = .02
* Significant at the alpha = .05 level

** Jordan/Syria and Libya

Table 7

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship Between Religious Content of Pictures for Saudi Araba and Three Other Arab Countries

	Saudi	Other **	Total
Religious	15	2	17
Non Religious	126	67	193
Total	141	69	210

Chi Square = 3.76*
Probability = .05
* Significant at the alpha = .05 level

** Jordan/Syria and Libya

The Saudi and the Libyan texts were compared with the Jordan/Syrian text in relation to whether the lesson setting was located inside or outside of the home. No significant relationship was found at an alpha = .05 level (see Table 8).

The Saudi male text and the Saudi female text were compared in relation to male and female oriented content. The titles and pictures in the male text were more likely to contain male oriented content while the female text was more likely to contain female oriented content (see Tables 9 and 10).

Table 8

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship Between Location (inside home or outside home) for Jordan/Syria and Saudi Arabia/Libya

	Saudi/Libya	Jordan/Syria	Total
Inside Home	31	5	36
Outside Home	53	23	76
Total	84	28	112

Chi Square = 3.49
Probability = .06

Table 9

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship between Gender Content and Male or Female Text in the Titles to Saudi Arabia Second Grade Texts

	Male Text	Female Text	Total
Male Content	23	9	32
Female Content	4	20	24
Total	27	29	56

Chi Square = 16.9
Probability = .0004
*Significant at the alpha = .05 level

Table 10

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship between Gender Content and Male or Female Text in the Pictures of Saudi Arabia Second Grade Texts

	Male Text	Female Text	Total
Male Content	19	10	29
Female Content	3	9	12
Total	22	19	41

Chi Square = 5.47
Probability = .02
*Significant at the alpha = .05 level

The Saudi texts were examined for relationship between gender and religious oriented content in the titles and the pictures. The female titles were significantly more likely to contain religious content while the male titles were more likely to contain non-religious content (see Table 11). There was no relationship between religious content and gender in the pictures associated with lessons (see Table 12).

Table 11

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship between Religious Content and Male or Female Text in the Titles of Saudi Arabi Second Grade Texts

	Male Text	Female Text	Total
Religious	6	17	23
Non-Religious	64	56	120
Total	70	73	143

Chi Square = 5.82
Probability = .02
*Significant at the alpha = .05 level

Table 12

Chi Square Analysis of the Relationship between Religious Content and Male or Female Text in the Pictures of Saudi Arabia Second Grade Texts

Chi Square = .0268
Probability = .8699

8%

V. Discussion

Instead of fostering basic equality between males and females, the content covered in a sample of four textbooks in four Arab countries stresses the role of the male and sanctions the dominance of the male. The content promotes the division of sex roles. Religious content is more stressed in Saudi Arabian texts than in Jordanian/Syrian or Libyan texts. While such division promote traditional cultural values, they are unlikely to help nations achieve goals of successfully moving into the modern technological age. As conditions change, societies must often change in order to survive and prosper. Further research on the extent to which education promotes traditional values in Arab countries without providing a means of adaptation to changing conditions is needed.