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# The Teaching of History in the Algerian Educational System: Between University Historical Studies and Pedagogical Approaches

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## Abstract:

This article addresses the teaching of history within the Algerian educational system and its relationship with historical studies at Algerian universities. Since independence, and even before, the latter has been a specialized academic field, notably part of the curriculum at the University of Algiers since its founding in 1909. These historical studies have been present in content, methodologies, and research across various historical eras (ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary). Conversely, history has been a component of various educational programs within the Algerian educational system since independence, as the independent Algerian state prioritized it as part of cultural liberation, complementing political independence. However, this raised a critical question of prioritization, with its inherent dilemma. While university studies primarily focus on historical inquiry as a fundamental objective and *raison d'être*, educational programs and pedagogical methods approach the subject differently. In the educational system, history is not an end in itself but a means to achieve pedagogical goals and objectives—general and specific. Consequently, history as a subject has found itself situated between academic imperatives, as a vast field of scientific research in time and space, and pedagogical requirements, as an emotional domain for human development through selected historical content limited by time and place to serve this purpose. To address this situation, both the pedagogical legislator and the historical researcher have attempted to align "academia" and "education." As a result, the historical programs in the Algerian educational system have included numerous specialized contents, while many university courses in undergraduate and master's programs have incorporated didactic content related to teaching history and its educational methodology. Yet, to what extent has this phenomenon been addressed, and has this alignment between historical study requirements and pedagogical necessity been achieved?

## 1. Introduction

Since Algeria's independence in 1962, historical studies have occupied a significant structural role in the various educational programs, becoming a core subject in learning and teaching. No educational document, containing the diverse didactic content designed for the different educational stages, has been without these studies. They have taken various educational forms and names, such as History, Social Sciences, and National History. Additionally, the content has varied depending on the knowledge material taught across the educational stages. Despite this, they remain unified in purpose—embedding these studies within reference educational documents to assume a role that aligns with their objective of building national identity. This was part of the revival project that Algeria embarked on post-independence across all fields, prominently reflected in an educational project primarily aimed at achieving educational sovereignty, or, as termed, the establishment of the "Algerian school."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Concept of School History and Its Relationship with Memory

Some researchers consider "school history" a subject directly related to constructing and harmonizing national memory, viewed as a shared intangible national heritage. This relationship fosters efforts in historical studies, selecting elements that achieve unity within the community. The relationship between memory and history is therefore intertwined: while memory serves as a fundamental source for history, memory itself fundamentally forms from history.<sup>2</sup>

Simultaneously, it is essential to question the nature of "school history" and its relationship with "academic history" or "official history," as some refer to it. According to these researchers, this official history involves "the use of the national past by political elites to serve a political agenda."<sup>3</sup>

As such, it is a search for the legitimacy of the present through the past, and school history cannot entirely escape this influence, often becoming a primary target of this process. However, others consider it a necessity, driven by broad social development requirements and a historical need.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, some researchers refer to the content presented in school programs and curricula as "institutional history," which seeks to legitimize the current political policy and the intellectual system of the existing political regime. As the dominant force on the political map, this regime aims to consolidate its control, making school history the history of the victor. Consequently, national symbolism (sacred) also becomes situational and partial, associated with one side over another, potentially leading to modifications in school history content based on shifts in political control, regardless of the mechanisms underpinning this control.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. The Relationship Between School History and Academic History

By following the historical trajectory of this educational phenomenon in Algeria, we observe a series of changes and influences in its relationship with historical (academic) studies in Algerian universities, ranging from an absence of this relationship in certain historical phases to its relative presence in others. This variation was influenced by the broader context surrounding the recovery of national sovereignty and its impact on Algerian universities, which underwent a series of profound transformations that manifested in several ways, notably in the debate over Arabization of the humanities. Even the university institution post-independence was experiencing its own cultural and ideological shifts, closely tied to the national project that emerged immediately after independence. This regime, with its comprehensive view of society, shaped national memory as both a political and historical imperative. "Pedagogical history" was not immune to this ideological direction, often referred to as the "ideological hammer." This regime considered school history a tool for transmitting national memory to the post-revolution generation, meaning that historical pedagogical content could not contradict this project; rather, it had to support and serve as one of its mobilizing tools.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, the post-independence national regime viewed school history as a means to secure its revolutionary and political legitimacy, utilizing historical content taught at various levels of the educational system, content that was largely removed from the influence of academic historical studies. In other words, these academic studies could not enter the educational sphere for several reasons, chief among them the cultural issue in its linguistic aspect, which had not yet been resolved at the university level. At that time, the university was heavily influenced, both in thought and language, by the Francophone system.<sup>7</sup>

Reviewing the curriculum for history reveals that a key focus of this content was to affirm the post-independence national regime's political thesis, which sought to highlight the transformative shift across all fields following national independence. This approach emphasized the suffering endured by Algeria—its people and nation—during the colonial period on all levels and the nature of the change brought by the restoration of national sovereignty, even if such change was not yet tangibly visible. At the same time, Algerian society needed this pedagogical history to seek the sources of its emerging national identity after more than a century of settler occupation. This was, indeed, one of the primary tasks of school history. At that time, academic historical studies had not yet fully developed or aligned with the national state project, making it difficult for these studies to bridge any kind of meaningful connection with the Algerian educational system, especially in the area of historical content.<sup>8</sup>

This realization, combined with the nature of the national project as declared in the Tripoli Program document issued in June 1962, led educational legislators at the time to import didactic historical content from the Arab East, particularly Egypt. They believed that achieving sovereignty within the Algerian school system would necessarily be achieved through this process, which, in their view, would fulfill two objectives:

- **First:** Eliminating colonial historical content that was based on negating Algerian society and history.
- **Second:** Changing the linguistic medium for teaching school history.

This approach aimed to achieve the principle of national sovereignty in its educational aspect. Consequently, this process of "intellectual import" also extended to human resources, with the presence of "Mashreqi collaborators" who were brought in to teach across Algerian schools, from primary to secondary levels.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, school history content began to include numerous topics traditionally taught in the Arab East. In fact, it can be asserted that some historical content was transferred implicitly and even verbatim into Algerian schools.<sup>10</sup> This process led to an almost complete exclusion of university-level historical studies from the Algerian school system, which itself was undergoing cultural transformations. Moreover, several historical concepts from the Mashreq (Arab East) were transferred to Algerian schools despite differing historical contexts between the Mashreq and Maghreb regions. The subject of the Ottoman Empire, as a historical and intellectual content, is a prime example of this transfer. Eastern scholars brought with them the perspective of the Ottomans as invaders, occupiers, and a foreign element that needed to be resisted, categorizing any anti-Ottoman movement as liberation from "foreign colonization." Regardless of the historical legitimacy of this view, its context is historically inaccurate for Algeria, where the relationship with the Ottoman state was fundamentally different from that of the East.

This disparity placed many secondary history teachers, in particular, in a pedagogical and historical dilemma: how to present this historical material accurately, at least from a historical standpoint. For them, how could they reconcile Algeria's position as a naval power in the Mediterranean beginning in the sixteenth century—an outcome of its affiliation with the Ottoman Empire—with the narrative found in various pedagogical reference documents, which portrayed the Ottomans as invaders and colonizers? Meanwhile, Algerian students were initially taught that Algeria had called upon the Ottomans to expel the real invaders: the Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>11</sup>

This contradiction highlights one of the main issues resulting from the exclusion of academic historical studies from the educational project. While political decisions sought to shape national memory through education, they inadvertently introduced a historical dilemma tied to the issue of national identity. This identity was also one of the foundational justifications for the political regime's control over the historical content across all levels of the Algerian school system. As a consequence of this overlap, Algerian students tended to neglect this historical content, which also added a psychological burden due to the often verbatim, retrograde approach in which this content was presented.

#### 4. School History: From "Curriculum" to "Program"

In the early 1980s, school history content in Algeria underwent a significant transformation as the educational system transitioned from a "curriculum" approach to a "program" approach. This shift aimed to develop historical content from mere snippets of knowledge covering various historical periods and geographical dimensions into a comprehensive school subject, complete in vision and structure. New pedagogical frameworks were introduced to structure historical knowledge, with the preamble to this foundational educational reform document stating that the teaching of history was essential due to social, civilizational, and scientific developments. According to this document, historical knowledge was no longer seen as separate from other school subjects but rather as a cumulative result of experiences and expertise, holding a critical place in societal culture. Moreover, it described history as the backbone of this culture, providing inspiration and civilizational direction to the nation. Thus, these documents positioned school history as a fundamental pillar of cultural and social creativity, embodying genuine human practice. To achieve such an ambitious transformation, it was acknowledged that this shift could not happen outside the university institution, which remains the sole source of historical knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

While this document introduced a broader perspective on teaching history, it did not abandon the ideological framing of school history content by linking it to the objectives of the Algerian revolution. It highlighted a strong alignment between the November 1954 Revolution's project—to form a patriotic Algerian individual—and the educational, guiding, and scientific nature of these contents, indicating that the goals of the revolution were fully in line with the overarching objective of school history.<sup>13</sup>

This qualitative shift in school history content suggested a new conceptualization, placing it within a national and humanistic context. Historical knowledge was no longer an end in itself but rather a constructive tool for society. This implicit change could be viewed as a response to the academic necessity of historical studies. The reference documents for pedagogical history refuted the notion of historical study as stagnant, presenting history not merely as an account of the past but as a tool for drawing lessons from past experiences, utilizing its positive aspects as a powerful instrument for building the nation's future.<sup>14</sup>

While the "program" introduced a noteworthy change in the pedagogical approach to historical content, it did not fundamentally alter the relationship between this content and academic historical studies. On the contrary, the new reference documents maintained a political perspective that viewed school history as a means of solidifying the post-independence national regime's legitimacy, continuing to see it as a mechanism for embedding the national project within Algerian society. Thus, the pedagogical documents from this period were not substantially different from those immediately following independence. The stated goals of teaching history contained several clauses linking the legitimacy of the post-independence national regime to various issues directly relevant to society, continuing the effort to connect national collective memory to the national regime's project. For example, the stated objectives included fostering national sentiment, strengthening societal unity and cohesion through history, reinforcing the core elements of national identity, deepening national political awareness, instilling the revolutionary and liberatory spirit of the Algerian Revolution, preparing the independence generation for future responsibilities, and creating a unified vision on national and humanitarian issues.<sup>15</sup>

The historical interpretation of these objectives reveals a crucial conclusion about the relationship between academic historical studies and school history content: the latter remained within the primary framework for consolidating revolutionary legitimacy within Algerian society. The documents explicitly rejected any alternative vision of society beyond what was outlined in these documents (e.g., "creating a unified vision..."). This perpetuated the revolutionary legitimacy that sought to impose a view on school history that aligned with the political objectives of the revolutionary/national state. Consequently, while the pedagogical approach appeared innovative, the academic connection between school history programs and historical studies was never achieved, with academic studies providing no support to Algerian schools in the realm of school history. The authority to interpret school history, both in form and content, remained under political control, making this qualitative shift at best a pedagogical attempt. The academic and knowledge-related gap between historical studies and pedagogical history persisted, leaving Algerian school history devoid of the benefits of substantial advancements in the "Algerian school of history." One result of this imposed or perhaps necessary separation for political authority was the persistence of many historical misconceptions within Algerian schools.<sup>16</sup>

School history could have greatly benefited from academic historical studies, whether through the qualitative historical knowledge inherent to such studies, which deepened specialized historical understanding, or by correcting many national and global historical concepts that continued to circulate in Algerian schools, even concerning certain aspects of national history that the political regime was keen to frame pedagogically. This also applies to the human resources trained in Algerian universities, who acquired extensive historical and methodological knowledge and could have provided significant academic and methodological adjustments to school history content without necessarily conflicting with political requirements.<sup>17</sup>

#### 5. School History: From "Program" to "Curriculum"

At the start of the 2000s, the Algerian educational system underwent profound transformations affecting all aspects, from structure to content. Educational stages were revised, reverting to the traditional system (primary, middle, secondary), and the April 1976 ordinance, which had established basic education, was permanently abolished. This fundamental change significantly impacted the pedagogical content of various subjects, necessitating structural and qualitative training operations by the Ministry of National Education to integrate staff into these reforms, which had been set by a national committee formed by the highest authorities in Algeria.<sup>18</sup>

These extensive reforms led to a reevaluation of the pedagogy used across educational stages. "Competency-based approach" replaced "pedagogical objectives" as the new pedagogical framework, marking a shift away from the "behaviorist school" towards the "constructivist school." As a result, there was a qualitative evolution in the school's reference documents, with the "curriculum" taking the place of the "program" across all subjects, including school history. The reform

documents stated that this shift from program to curriculum was necessitated by educational developments, as the curriculum encompasses all formative activities directed at the student under the school's responsibility during the learning period, along with all factors enriching the learner's experience over that period.<sup>19</sup>

As a result of this implicit and formal change in the Algerian educational system, competencies became the educational goals in the historical school approach, replacing objectives at all levels. To justify this shift, reform literature provided various points, posing a series of questions to guide the transformation in school history teaching strategy. The questions considered what behaviors, abilities, and competencies students should acquire in historical knowledge, sought to design learning situations that were more meaningful and effective for acquiring these historical competencies behaviorally, examined methods and resources to apply these gains in social practices, and finally raised assessment issues to confirm control over historical school content.<sup>20</sup>

The educational reforms led to a significant qualitative advancement in school historical knowledge in terms of specialization and goals. For the first time since independence, the academic historical sequence was respected as a fundamental reference across all educational levels (primary, middle, secondary). Additionally, horizontal and vertical structuring of this subject was considered, respecting both the cognitive levels of learners and the interrelation and overlap with other subjects. For the first time, the pedagogical reference documents for historical content were aligned with the broader educational framework.

These reforms brought a substantial shift in the nature of school history in terms of content and methodology across educational stages. For the first time, a connection emerged between school history content and university historical studies, though this relationship did not take a clear academic form and was still largely dominated by pedagogical priorities over academic ones. This limited academic influence was largely due to the human resources trained at Algerian universities, but it is noteworthy that a thematic connection between school historical content and historical studies emerged for the first time.

<sup>21</sup>

These changes represent the first academically grounded approach to school history in Algeria, both in terms of program structure, which now (unlike previous experiences) encompassed the widest range of educational levels (from primary to secondary) within the framework of "curricula." This shift impacted two primary areas:

- **First:** In terms of methodology, the approach to historical content has shifted to a constructivist perspective, transforming historical content into pure, procedural, and behavioral knowledge.
- **Second:** In terms of content quality, there is now a strong and direct relationship between school historical content and university-level historical studies. This connection can be attributed to the structural nature of the educational reforms, which integrated universities as participants, both in developing the framework and by involving university-trained personnel actively in the design of historical content in various educational documents (curricula, accompanying documents, textbooks). For the first time since independence, a clear relationship was established between school history and academic historical studies.

However, this academic alignment has also produced some negative outcomes. School history curricula now include numerous unresolved historical issues, some of which remain debated even within the academic field, particularly concerning national history. These complex issues have been transferred into school historical content in ways that have raised questions for learners, who often cannot process this content with the same level of understanding as academic historians. School history, focused primarily on pedagogical and behavioral objectives, struggles to handle such topics. The curriculum for the fourth year of middle school exemplifies this overlap between school and academic history; the associated textbook includes many topics related to national history, particularly during the political struggle phase. These topics often contain contentious issues (e.g., Farhat Abbas's stance on the national question).<sup>22</sup>

While discussing such issues within university-level historical studies is beneficial, their presentation in school history in the same way has raised many questions. The primary role of school history is pedagogical, meaning that historical topics should serve this purpose above all. Consequently, explicit demands have emerged within educational settings to remove or reconsider these controversial topics.<sup>23</sup>

## 6. Conclusion:

The relationship between historical studies and school history has experienced fluctuating phases of separation, convergence, and interaction, shaped by factors related to both the university and educational institutions. The latest reform in the educational system strengthened this relationship, particularly in terms of historical content. However, it remains essential to incorporate a pedagogical dimension to this relationship to safeguard the broader educational goals of developing a national identity rooted in historical depth, which, in turn, reinforces the present and builds the future. Ultimately, the overarching objectives of school history will be achieved within a comprehensive knowledge framework informed by university-level historical studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Khaldi, "The Historical Development of the School Institution in Algeria: Key Stages and Milestones," *New Ages Journal*, Vol. 07, Issue 27, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, translated by Jamal Shahid, Arab Center for Research and Studies, Qatar, 2017, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Khaldi, previously cited source.

<sup>4</sup> Same reference.

<sup>5</sup> Khira Beshikh, "The Historical and Political Sources for Building Political Legitimacy in the Algerian Political System 1962–2000," *Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 01, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Khaldi, previously cited source.

<sup>7</sup> Amal Tebani, "Algerian University Reforms: Between Reality and Aspiration," *Journal of Performance*, Laboratory for Human Capital and Performance, Issue **01**, Algeria, **2020**.

<sup>8</sup> Same reference.

<sup>9</sup> This refers to Algeria's post-independence initiative of bringing in numerous foreign teaching collaborators to support the Algerian school system at all levels. This process continued until the 1980s, concluding as part of the "Algerianization of Education" effort.

<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon appeared in various history curricula across several levels, including middle and secondary education, with reference documents containing content that did not align with Algeria's historical context. Examples include: the Arab Conquest, Ottoman Invasion, Arab Renaissance, and Ottoman Colonization of the Arab World.

<sup>11</sup> History teachers often raised such contradictions in the eighth-grade basic education curriculum and the former second-year secondary curriculum.

<sup>12</sup> *History and Geography Programs*, Directorate of Education, State Secretariat for Secondary and Technical Education, Algeria, May **1984**.

<sup>13</sup> Same reference.

<sup>14</sup> Same reference.

<sup>15</sup> Same reference.

<sup>16</sup> Same reference.

<sup>17</sup> One of the complaints from teachers in Algerian schools was the lack of specialized training, a gap that could have been addressed through academic and formative mechanisms.

<sup>18</sup> This committee, chaired by Algerian university professor Ali Ben Zago, was established by presidential decree and is thus known in the media as the "Ben Zago Committee."

<sup>19</sup> *National Education Ministry Curricula*, National Curriculum Committee, Algeria, **2003**.

<sup>20</sup> Same reference.

<sup>21</sup> Same reference.

<sup>22</sup> *Fourth Year Middle School Textbook*, pp. **68-69**, National Office of School Publications, **2006**.

<sup>23</sup> This emerged in the form of reports submitted by various committees formed by the Ministry of National Education to review school textbooks.