

When Ideological Intervention Backfires: The Case of the Iranian Clerical System's Intervention in the Pandemic-Era Elementary Education

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Abstract : This study sheds light on the challenges and difficulties caused by the Iranian clerical system's intervention in the country's school education during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools remained closed for almost two years. The pandemic brought Iranian elementary school education to a standstill for almost 6 months before the country developed a nationwide learning platform – a customized television network. While the initiative seemed to have been welcomed by the majority of Iranian parents, it resented some of the more traditional strata of the society, including the influential Friday Prayer Leaders who found the televised version of the elementary education 'less spiritual' and 'more 'material' or science-based. That prompted the Iranian Channel of Education, the specialized television network that had been chosen to serve as a nationally televised school during the pandemic, to try to redefine much of its online elementary school educational content within the religious ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a result, young clergies appeared on the television screen as preachers of Islamic morality, religious themes and even sociology, history, and arts. The present research delves into the consequences of such an intervention, how it might have impacted the infrastructure of Iranian elementary education and whether or not the new ideology-infused curricula would withstand the opposition of students and mainstream teachers. The main methodology used in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis with a cognitive approach. It systematically finds and analyzes the alternative ideological structures of discourse in the Iranian Channel of Education from September 2021 to July 2022, when the clergy 'teachers' replaced 'regular' history and arts teachers on the television screen for the first time. It has aimed to assess how the various uses of the alternative ideological discourse in elementary school content have influenced the processes of learning: the acquisition of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, abilities, and other cognitive and emotional changes, which are the goals of institutional education. This study has been an effort aimed at understanding and perhaps clarifying the relationships between the traditional textual structures and processing on the one hand and socio-cultural contexts created by the clergy teachers on the other. This analysis shows how the clerical portion of elementary education on the Channel of Education that seemed to have dominated the entire televised teaching and learning process faded away as the pandemic was contained and mainstream classes were restored. It nevertheless reflects the deep ideological rifts between the clerical approach to school education and the mainstream teaching process in Iranian schools. The semantic macrostructures of social content in the current Iranian elementary school education, this study suggests, have remained intact despite the temporary ideological intervention of the ruling clerical elite in their formulation and presentation. Finally, using thematic and schematic frameworks, the essay suggests that the 'clerical' social content taught on the Channel of Education during the pandemic cannot have been accepted cognitively by the channel's target audience, including students and mainstream teachers.

Keywords : televised elementary school learning, Covid 19, critical discourse analysis, Iranian clerical ideology

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