

Reforms for Another Planet: The Global Learning Crisis, Political Drivers and Expert Views on Egypt's Edu 2.0

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Abstract

Why do some countries undertake meaningful learning reforms while others do not? This paper engages with the literature on the political drivers of the adoption of learning reforms in developing countries, parsing out the role of regime type and democracy, coalitions for reform, ideas about equity and international dimensions relating to debt and aid. In so doing, it questions the distinction between politically 'easy' (access) and 'difficult' (learning) reforms, and underlines the necessity of greater differentiation in the characterization of the causes and responses to the global learning crisis. Applying these insights to the case of Egypt, the paper addresses the political drivers of education policy-making over the previous two decades, provides novel analysis of the learning crisis in the country and surveys expert views on the recently adopted education reforms (Edu 2.0). Interviews with leading experts and practitioners of Egyptian education from a range of local and international institutions, including the World Bank and USAID, are used to add texture and depth to the analysis of the learning crisis and to assess the extent of consensus around the goals of the reforms. As such, the paper addresses a recent incidence of the adoption of the current global learning agenda in terms of alignment, privatization, digitalization and deskilling. It underlines the weak potential for such reforms to create substantial improvements in learning (except for the most privileged segments of students) or to create consensus among sector leaders, in the context of inattention to equitable learning and under conditions of heightened austerity.

Keywords: Education reform, political settlements, equity, austerity, Egypt

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Introduction

While most countries in the world declare a commitment to improving educational quality, few have adopted and implemented the required reforms. Poor learning and poor literacy have become endemic in developing countries, including in the Arab region and in Egypt. Despite being a regional center for learning throughout most of the 20th century, the quality of education in Egypt has been in continuous decline over the previous decades. While access to education has been steadily improving to accommodate over 24 million students, learning and equity levels remain poor. By 2016, Egypt ranked second to last in the world in student reading abilities in the international PIRLS assessment. In 2018, the Egyptian Ministry of Education (henceforth, MOE)¹ embarked on a new reform program, Edu 2.0, which aims to reverse this decline and improve the quality of learning. The current study brings insights from the Egyptian case to debates around the political variables that inform the adoption of learning reforms. It brings to the fore views of leading experts and practitioners of Egyptian education regarding MOE's reform agenda across the two major reform initiatives of the past two decades in 2007 and 2018 (also known as Education 2.0 or Edu 2.0). In connecting the adoption of learning reforms with political variables, the study engages with the main tenants of the political settlement literature and other approaches to the politics of adopting learning reforms in lower income countries, especially those with non-democratic settings. The study also references the new global learning agenda where alignment, digital learning, assessment, and private sector involvement play a prominent role.

Apart from the analysis of key quantitative data and policy documents, the study relies on in-depth interviews with key experts. I conducted interviews with 17 key education experts in 2021, including former senior education officials, prominent scholars, development partner agencies, NGOs leaders, experts on different aspects of education reform, such as curriculum development, the economics of education, private school curriculum implementation and school construction, as well as members of parliament focusing on education issues.² In terms of organizational affiliation, respondents led programs in prominent NGOs working with MOE on the implementation of reforms, led research in prominent local think tanks, consulted MOE on training and curriculum development, worked in regional and international development partner agencies' local offices including the World Bank, USAID and the Cairo Embassies of key partner countries and served as consultants for private schools. The scholars interviewed were affiliated with the American University in Cairo, the University of Alexandria, the (MOE-affiliated) National Centre for Educational Research as well as universities outside Egypt, and the Egyptian Parliament (Lower House).

This study examines views in this small circle of leaders and experts to 1) contextualize the analysis of political settlements and the learning crisis and 2) develop a closer understanding of the most recent reforms and their potential impact on learning and 3) to gauge the extent and potential for consensus and coalitions over a learning agenda which could exert influence over policy-making (especially in future moments of transformation or shifts in the structural constraints of international debt). It is worth underlining that the focus of the study is mainly on policy *adoption*, as opposed to implementation or impact, whose assessment would require

¹ The name of the Ministry of Education has been recently changed to Ministry of Education and Technical Education/ MOETE. The change of name explicitly highlights technical education, but does not imply structural changes, as technical education has always been under the purview of MOE. This study uses MOE for simplicity and consistency with previous reports and literature.

² The study was housed at the American University in Cairo and was conducted in accordance with the university's Institutional Review Board guidelines. Interviews were conducted in person in Cairo and Alexandria as well as online, based on COVID-19 conditions and the preferences of respondents. While some respondents noted that they have clearance from their organizations to take part in the study: World Bank and USAID, and others did not mind being mentioned by name, due to the political context, the identity of all respondents is concealed in the text.

a longer time horizon and different tools. I asked experts about how they saw the learning crisis, how they understood MOE's theory of improving learning, how progress on learning is measured, and how they viewed the place of teachers, information technology, equity and international actors in the recent reforms. I gave attention to learning measurement and teacher career paths as two key policy areas that could serve as proxies for the will to prioritize learning (Gershberg 2020). The focus on ideas and international variables emerges from the literature on the political drivers of learning reforms and the analysis reflects debates around alignment, deskilling and digitalization that are prominent in Edu 2.0 and in the global learning agenda.

The rest of this paper is divided into four parts. The first engages with the literature on the relationship between political settlements and educational quality, the distinction between easy and difficult education policies and alternative approaches to the politics of adopting learning reforms. The second part focuses on how political changes affected the key parameters of education policy in Egypt over the past few decades. The third part brings together the most relevant recent data on Egyptian education to situate the key dimensions of the learning crisis (summarized in Fig. 4). The fourth part centres the views of interviewed experts on the learning agenda, equity, new curricula, assessment reforms, digitalization and the place of teachers.

Part 1: The Political Drivers of Educational Change

Understanding how educational change happens requires a political economy approach that describes the motivations and behaviors of governments and policymakers (Pritchett 2018). Frameworks centered on political settlements have gained increasing prominence in examining the links between political economy and education policy in developing countries. According to one of the key proponents of this approach, political settlements are shaped by 'the relative holding power of different groups and organizations contesting the distribution of resources', with holding power 'partly based on income and wealth but also on historically rooted capacities of different groups to organize' (Khan 2010, 1). Furthermore, the historical moments at which political settlements become established, or experience rupture, can create the conditions for significant shifts in policy approach, including within the domain of education (Hossain and Hickey 2019).

An emerging body of research has taken up different angles for addressing the link between political settlements and education in developing countries, and in particular in relation to learning reforms. Levy et al (2018) argue that a great deal of insight can be garnered about education policy from delving into three key variables: 1) the extent of inclusion (or exclusion) by dominant elites, or the degree of cohesiveness among elites about the nature of the political settlement, 2) the characteristics of the configuration of power in terms of polarity, hierarchy and political competition, and 3) the norms and dynamics governing institutions (personalized, corrupt, rule-based, meritocratic). In this sense, identifying the type of regime and the key features of the bureaucracy goes a long way in determining the parameters of successful policy *adoption* and *implementation*. Similarly, scholars like Hossain and Hickey (2019) use a political settlement framework to explain *political commitment* and *capacity* to learning reforms that reflects the incentives and ideas that predominate amongst political elites, which in turn are shaped by the underlying character of politics and power in specific contexts. In addition, scholars have addressed the impact of democracy on the likelihood of adopting and successfully implementing learning reforms, the role of coalitions for reform, regime power base, as well as underlining the role of ideas and international factors. Much of this literature assumes a clear difference between promoting access to education, which has grown uniformly across various types of regimes over the previous decades, and the promotion of the quality of education or learning outcomes, where progress has been far more limited and differentiated.

Political Settlements and the adoption of learning reforms

In his most recent work, Levy (2022) synthesizes the findings of recent country studies to explore the influence of politics and power on education sector policymaking and implementation. He finds that in dominant contexts, where power is centered around a political leader and a hierarchical governance structure, top-down leadership can potentially provide a robust platform for improving learning outcomes. However, as the case studies of Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nigeria and Tanzania illustrate, all-too-often dominant leaders' goals vis-à-vis the education sector can veer in other directions. In impersonal competitive contexts, a combination of strong formal institutions and effective processes of resolving disagreements can, on occasion, result in a shared commitment among powerful interests to improve learning outcomes – but in none of the case studies is this outcome evident. Personalized competitive contexts (Bangladesh, Ghana and Kenya for example) lack the seeming strengths of either their dominant or their impersonal competitive contexts; there are multiple politically-influential groups, but no credible framework of rules to bring coherence either to political competition or to the education bureaucracy. In sum, it is difficult to link the combination of dominance, competition and rule of law (impersonalized bureaucracy) to the adoption or implementation of learning reforms.

It is worth highlighting the place of democracy in these debates. In the Arab world, as in many other regions, authoritarianism is often identified as being at the root of educational problems, from the lack of critical thinking skills to the avoidance of deeper educational reforms. A host of studies have indeed emphasized the role of authoritarian politics and 'limited access orders' in shaping the architecture of national governance in the region (see Alaoui and Springborg 2021). Unfortunately, existing studies underline that democracy cannot be thought of as a prerequisite to better educational outcomes. As Pritchett (2018) puts it, neither the economist's naïve "normative as positive" (*that governments did things because it was the normatively optimal action, in the sense of maximizing some measure of human well-being*), nor "response to political pressure" (*that governments did things because democratic pressures demanded it*) hold any promise as general models. Assumptions that a mixture of electoral competition, decentralization, and stronger downward accountability would do the trick, in part by countering the oft-cited malign influence of teacher unions in blocking reforms that might damage their interests, have rarely been grounded in comparative evidence of how the politics of education reforms has played out in practice (Hickey, Hossain and Jackman 2019).

This contention is buttressed by evidence that the statistical outperformers in education league tables have tended to be led by countries (including Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam) which would all have been described as 'dominant' during the period of their most significant advances on this front (Hickey, Hossain and Jackman 2019). A number of in-depth case studies also indicate that political dominance, rather than competition, can better enable productive coalitions to emerge at the school and sub-district level (Hossain and Hickey 2019). As Pritchett (2019) summarizes, the available data on achievements in learning illustrate that " 'democracy' is neither necessary (Vietnam counter-example) nor sufficient (South Africa counter-example) for high learning achievement in schools".

Kosack (2012) argues that none of the three most common political-economic explanations (relating to regime type, education cultures, and governmental commitment to economic performance) predict the realities of education policies. In his analysis of Taiwan, Ghana, and Brazil, he concludes that answers to two questions can explain patterns of education investment: Whose support does a government need to stay in power? What sort of education do those citizens want? He underlines that governments that expanded education for the poor were more often autocratic than democratic, but were always clearly associated with political entrepreneurs, who mobilize and depend on maintaining poor citizens' support with pro-poor policies (Kosack 2014). These arguments cohere with the historical trajectory in Egypt where the system is seen to have delivered decent quality education under the authoritarian regime

of Nasser (1952-1970). In fact, the twinning of authoritarianism and expanded social provision has been long theorized in the Middle East and beyond, in terms of an ‘authoritarian bargain’ or a social contract where social inclusion compensates for political exclusion (Sobhy 2021).

Ideas, equity and international dimensions

Other research has emphasized the need to extend the boundaries of political settlement analysis beyond a focus on incentives at the national level, to incorporate a stronger focus on *ideas* and *transnational factors*. Dominant ideas around state legitimacy and development have played an important role in shaping governance and development, and this has often involved a role for the shifting sets of transnational actors on which the regime relies to maintain its power (Golooba-Mutebi and Hicket 2013). A focus on improving learning would mean a fundamental ideational change. To put it in simple terms, students who perform poorly on a PIRLS exam and bring down a nation’s total score are likely from more disadvantaged backgrounds. A commitment to learning would require diverting initiatives and resources to such students who fail to accumulate foundational skills, and not to the most privileged students. Improving learning is therefore premised on a clear commitment to equity, an assumption that remains too implicit in many analyses of learning. Investment in improving learning is also premised on long standing views around the division between public and private responsibility for the provision of education. Research has shown how partisanship matters for education, particularly in terms of increased spending in developed as well as developing countries (Ansell 2010, Ha 2016). The absence of programmatic education agendas in developing countries may also be related to the general absence of programmatic class-based parties; the political history of education in developed countries indicates that parties and coalitions on the left and center are more likely to promote wider access to education, and are associated with higher public spending on education (Busemeyer 2014). Ideological variables are highlighted in Gershberg’s (2020) emphasis on market-oriented reforms as an element that fundamentally shape policy choices relating to the adoption of learning agendas. Ideas around education, the social role it plays, and the ways in which education delivery should be governed, all play important roles in shaping the extent to which higher-quality learning has been prioritized and achieved in developing countries (Hickey and Hossain 2019).

A focus on equity and lack of tracking in the system can be seen as good predictors of learning. Analysis of performance on the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicates that “successful PISA countries also invest something else in their education systems: high expectations for all of their students... Regardless of a country’s or economy’s wealth, school systems that commit themselves, both in resources and in policies, to ensuring that all students succeed perform better in PISA than systems that tend to separate out poor performers or students with behavioral problems or special needs” (OECD 2012). Forms of tracking may also undermine coalitions and political commitment for reform. For example, in the presence of technical and general education tracks, governments may opt to only reform the middle class track, as in the case of Egypt. In contexts where there are two linguistic tracks, like some parts of North Africa (French and Arabic instruction), there is less pressure and incentive for elites in the more privileged track to upgrade the other track or the system as a whole, which continues to run “in two speeds” (see Boutieri 2012).

The level of privatization within the system is also relevant for understanding commitment to equity and the (non)emergence of coalitions for reform. Existing literature acknowledges that middle class parents leaving the system for private schools undermines such coalitions (Hickey, Hossain and Jackman 2019). Once a significant proportion of middle class parents abandon the public system, this can represent a turning point in relation to the learning inside

schools, as well as prospects for the adoption of system-wise learning agendas. Bottom-up, organic, and more organized pressure by such parents works to maintain accountability and strengthen resources in the system. Leaving the public system may also be more partial, gradual and informal when it takes the form of private tutoring. Shadow education has been growing across the globe in the previous decades (Bray 2017). Informal privatization in the form of private tutoring serves a more sinister role in undermining learning inside classrooms, as well as the desire and coalitions for reform. In contexts where parallel schooling becomes more dominant, it radically transforms incentives, risks and opportunities for families and teachers alike (Sobhy 2023). There are also distinct implications for different modalities of private tutoring: 1) competitive systems where students pursue advanced learning and tutors operate outside the formal system (as in many parts of Asia), 2) contexts of low teacher pay and under-resourced classes, where private tutoring by classroom teachers functions in formats that involve corruption, coercion and promote cheating and minimal learning, or 3) divided systems that include variations on both kinds of competitive and extractive tutoring, like the case of Egypt. Middle class parents may therefore stay in the public system, while providing targeted assistance to their children via the informal tutoring market, leaving little time, energy or hope to push for improvements in public schools. In fact, the most recent trend in the Egyptian case, which includes both kinds of tutoring, is that middle class parents have started demanding oversight and accountability over tutoring centres, not schools, signaling the complete divorce from the school.

International alliances and the related ideological orientations also influence social policy. Pritchett (2018) has argued that “global isomorphism” remains a causal force in both expansion and modality of education and, perversely perhaps, isomorphism facilitates the persistence of low learning quality. International aid, debt and strategic alliances also shape policy orientations. In the case of Egypt, an alliance with the Soviet Union’s state socialist ideology and a support base focused on the growing urban and rural middle classes expanded social provision in the 1950s after independence. From the 1970s onwards, the alliance with the U.S. and a changing support base has produced policy directions more focused on economic liberalization, privatization and reduced social spending. Developing countries suffering from debt and receiving loans from international organizations are under immense pressure to reduce their spending in general and their wage bill in particular (directly affecting teacher wages and additional hiring). Austerity measures related to IMF loans have affected the majority of the population of the world and are expected to intensify in the post-pandemic context, increasing poverty and inequality (Oxfam 2021). Existing studies suggest that IMF loan conditions lead to decreasing educational spending (Stubbs et al. 2020) and children’s chances of completing school (Daoud 2021). Governments are effectively expected to improve learning while decreasing their budgets. It is no wonder if they fail to do so. In countries where resources are strapped and international aid is an important source of policy setting and financing in relation to education reform, the international aspect has even greater prominence. Research suggests that aid is effective in improving quality of life when combined with democracy, and remains ineffective (and possibly harmful) in autocracies (Kosack 2014). Ideational and international dimensions must therefore be integrated into a more comprehensive understanding of the political drivers of learning reforms, regardless of whether these reforms are considered easy or difficult.

‘Easy’ Access and ‘Difficult’ Learning

There is consensus in the literature that promoting learning is more difficult than promoting access to education (see Grindle 2019). It is more politically popular and less taxing of often weak state capacities to expand school provision than to improve learning outcomes (Hossain and Hickey 2019). As Pritchett (2013) explains, it is easier to design and implement top-down command-and-control responses to build more schools and recruit more teachers and children than to devise workable solutions to the ‘craft’ challenge of the interpersonal,

transactional nature of effective teaching and learning. What we know about quality reforms is that they are inherently more difficult to design and to ‘sell’ to the public: there is less certainty about ‘what works’ and results are harder to measure (Nelson 2007). The assumption is that learning reforms often relate to increasing accountability and might face resistance from teachers and their unions.

Another key distinction is that learning reforms are considered long horizon reforms with less immediate impact, and undertaking them arguably requires greater hold on power by ruling elites. In this regard, Khan (2010) argues that if the ruling coalition considers itself vulnerable to threats from excluded factions with significant holding power, it is more likely to be driven by short-term calculations than to undertake institutional reforms and distribute resources with a longer-term vision of national interest in mind. Conversely, where there is a credible threat to the ruling coalition from powerful excluded groups, who may be able to wrest power away from them (e.g. through elections), and where lower-level factions are strong enough to make multiple demands on the center, then the prospects for developmental governance are diminished. Within this ‘competitive clientelist’ type of political settlement, elite incentives are loaded towards the use of public institutions for securing short-term political gains (Khan 2010). However, such perception of the need for quick results might not be exclusive to competitive political systems. Authoritarian governments may fear protest and unrest and may pursue short-term goals to bolster their popularity, especially in contexts of economic crisis, recent upheavals, regional instability or a perceived deficit of legitimacy.

Furthermore, using the World Bank’s characterization of the global learning crisis, I argue that the political factors that supposedly drive the ease or difficulty of reforms cannot be considered to be equally relevant for all elements of learning reforms or all contexts. There are four determinants of the learning crisis according to the 2018 World Development Report (WDR): (1) children do not arrive ready to learn; (2) teachers often lack the needed skills and motivation to teach effectively; (3) school management skills are low; and (4) school inputs have failed to keep pace with expansion (World Bank 2018). The fourth point relates to inputs, underlining how poor resources have been a key driver of the learning crisis. Low- and middle-income countries typically spend too little on education: only 41 of 150 countries for which data is available spend the recommended 6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education, and 25 countries spend less than half that, while globally, the average proportion of public spending on education is only 15 per cent (against a recommended 20 per cent) (UNESCO 2014). Key areas that might fall under inputs not keeping pace with expansion, such as high classroom densities and teacher shortages, would also undermine the distinction between easy and difficult reforms, as the obvious solutions of building schools and hiring teachers would not encounter the political obstacles arguably faced by accountability and alignment reforms. Indeed, WDR 2018 highlights data on classroom to student and teacher to student ratios rising dramatically over time to demonstrate how inputs are not keeping up (World Bank 2018, 83).

In fact, the first point in WDR 2018 implies expanding access to high quality early childhood education. Such a focus on expanding access to pre-primary education also disrupts the strong distinction between learning and access, while underlining the importance of devoting greater resources to set up early childhood education infrastructure and hire qualified teachers, facilitators and staff. Expanding access to early childhood education should not be more difficult because of unions or short termism. It might however be less politically desirable because it does not benefit the middle classes, whose children might already be enrolled in early childhood education, and towards whom education spending is often skewed in developing countries. It requires a developmental politics that is more aligned with the interests of larger sectors of society beyond the more privileged middle classes.

The second and third points in the WDR 2018 characterization of the learning crisis relate to the skills of teachers and school management. This is the area where reforms may indeed be difficult, but this is not necessarily because of political reasons discussed in the literature. Rather, raising the performance of already hired staff—regardless of preparation, recruitment and compensation structures—is far from straightforward. Structured pedagogical programmes that provide teachers with teaching material and continuous coaching support have been found to be hugely successful in multiple contexts (Piper et al. 2018, Celliers et al. 2020a, Eble et al. 2021). However, as one study put it, the bad news is that these programmes are usually too expensive for governments to implement, and even small changes in their design can reduce their effectiveness (Kerwin and Thornton 2018). Similar evidence might have led to a shift away from the focus on professional development and teacher accountability in the global learning agenda.

New directions in World Bank policy relate to disruption, digitalization and de-skilling, as teachers are considered overpaid and underperforming, and solutions focus on replacing them with cheaper labor or even capital, in the form of “ed-tech”, implying a shift away from the World Bank providing aid to governments in favor of facilitating commercial deals with the goal of replacing public delivery with private involvement in “health, education, water, other services” (Sandefur 2018). On the other hand, “for all the hype around disruption and automation, the current evidence is equally consistent with the idea that investing significantly *more* money to train, recruit, and retain the highest quality teachers in public education systems is even better value for money” (Sandefur 2018).

Learning reforms are therefore not necessarily very different from expanding access, as argued in the literature. Where education systems have been starved of inputs, learning oriented reforms include ‘easier’ measures with ‘tangible benefits’, like teacher hiring to reduce classroom-pupil ratios in primary classes or widening access to early childhood education. This observation underlines the interconnections between access, quality and equity. No education system had set out to provide access without quality or had conceived that enrollment was a sufficient goal regardless of learning or equity. In many contexts, like in the case of Egypt, the quality of learning was relatively high and began to deteriorate as the system expanded massively, inputs did not keep up and tracking and privatization expanded. Finally, the factors that distinguish between easy and hard reforms, like blockage by powerful unions and the search for short-term electoral gains, might be more relevant for more democratic settings (see Bruns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019).

The 2018 WDR concludes that, technically and politically, reformers can use three sets of tools to shift the system towards learning: 1) **Information and metrics:** can catalyze reforms and serve as indicators of whether reforms are working to improve learning with equity 2) **Coalitions and incentives:** forming coalitions is needed to advocate for broad-based learning and skills and to rebalance the political incentives, and 3) **Innovation and agility:** societies have achieved high levels of equitable learning in a variety of ways and figuring out what approaches will work in a given context requires innovation and adaptation using evidence and metrics. It is worth noting that equity and equitable learning are referenced in the first and last of these three points, but resources are not. According to another recent synthesis, a learning agenda might focus on committing to universal early foundational learning; regularly measuring learning; aligning systems around learning commitments; supporting teachers; and adapting while implementing (Pritchett, Newman and Silberstein 2022). Here resources are also not explicitly referenced in the key recommendations. However, expanding early childhood education and regular measurement of learning are emphasized, along with alignment and flexible implementation. The lack of emphasis on resources is partly guided by studies underlining that differences in spending among higher income countries do not account for learning differences, for example beyond a threshold of annual spending of about

USD 35,000 per student (OECD 2012). Recent work on developing countries has also suggested that increasing teacher pay alone might yield very little impact on learning (de Ree et al. 2017). The returns to expenditure on education in terms of improved learning arguably vary considerably in each context according to the type of expenditure, e.g. on expanding early childhood education, on testing, professional development, school meals, direct assistance for families, teacher hiring or school construction and its targeting in terms of regions or educational stages and equity considerations. However, there is too little research that rigorously and comprehensively addresses these issues. Overall however, the literature on learning reforms often acknowledges that under-resourced and poorly managed systems lead to persistently poor quality basic education, but nonetheless stresses that more finance is not necessarily the answer (Hossain and Hickey 2019).

Coalitions, Stakeholders and Circles of Leaders

The second point in the WDR 2018 recommendations relates to political elements in terms of incentives as well as coalitions that can advocate for reform. The role of coalitions and inclusionary decision-making has also been highlighted in work on the Arab region where the greater, more institutionalized stakeholder involvement is (including within authoritarian regimes), the stronger the state's capacity is to implement resulting policies (Kohstall 2021).³ More generally, it has been argued that developing countries might lack the kinds of organized groups that might constitute a coalition in favor of a better-trained citizenry and labor force (e.g. middle-class parents, organized capitalists) (Hossain and Hickey 2019). Developing countries lack a critical mass of capitalists with sufficient 'holding power' to pressure governments into producing more highly skilled workers through educational 'upgrading' (Doner and Schneider 2016; Kosack 2012). As Khan (2010) has argued, the predominance of informal institutions in developing countries is underpinned by the nature of their political economy whereby relatively small formal sectors are outweighed by the much larger informal economy so that governments lack the tax base required to allocate resources to powerful groups, other than through informal, off-budgetary processes, and rent-seeking and clientelist distribution of public resources and positions. These are systemic features of such political economies that directly undermine the quality of the public bureaucracy and of service provision in domains such as education. This means that most developing countries lack organized social groups with the capacity to accumulate wealth other than through their relationship with political elites, on whom they rely for various rent-seeking opportunities (involving subsidies, contracts, procurement opportunities, and so on). Doner and Schneider (2016, 635) note that informality, inequality, and a reliance on foreign direct investment can fragment business and labor, and 'undercut the potential demand for upgrading institutions.' Forms of corruption and informality provide rewards to selected segments of society in ways that make reduced state provision, including of education, more sustainable (Sobhy 2021). In more authoritarian contexts, restrictions on association and expression present clear limitations on the emergence of organized pressure groups. Pressure for educational change may therefore remain diffuse and less organized in collective forms that may constitute coalitions for reform.

This does not mean that leaders in developing countries, even non-democratic ones, are insulated from popular pressure or that the views of stakeholders do not matter. In his most recent synthesis on political settlement and learning reforms, Levy (2022) argues that "the case studies point to the possibility that 'soft governance' entry points might open up some

³ In the current study, I did not ask experts about advocacy or coalitions for reform given the restrictive political environment and the recent limitations on independent research centers, parent advocacy groups, NGOs and teacher unions (see AbdelRahman 2017 and Sobhy 2017, for analysis on civil society actors in Egyptian education).

context-aligned opportunities for improving learning outcomes. For example, in dominant contexts, the focus might usefully be on trying to influence the goals and strategies of top-level leadership (Levy 2022). A number of other prominent approaches understand educational policy making as narrowly influenced and construed, either by key stakeholders or by a small circle of leaders. Stakeholder analysis emphasizes the role of a range of actors in the political, civic, bureaucratic and legal domains of contestation impacting education reform and encompasses stakeholders that are operators, suppliers and users (Schiefelbein and McGinn 2017).⁴ The interaction of these actors in different domains is what shapes educational visions, dominant conceptions of quality and the relevant policies adopted (see Ball 1990). Other studies go a step further and assert that “effective leadership and collective action of a relatively small number of leaders and elites, across the public and private sectors, are essential for building effective states” (Leftwich and Hogg 2007). This smaller circle of leaders and experts is more directly responsible for the adoption of particular approaches and policies. Furthermore, even in authoritarian settings, such circles of reformers can gain voice in transformational and transitional moments in ways that enable them to guide and sustain policy adoption. The focus on stakeholders or leaders does not assume that they operate in a political or social void or that their views and actions are separate from power arrangements, cultural considerations or ideological commitments. International and ideational elements remain critical as these leaders are in constant negotiation with global imperatives and local ideologies (Ozga and Lingard 2007, Tan 2012). Similarly, the views of experts in the Egyptian case are not separate from the broader politics of education over the past decades.

Part 2: Political Settlements and Education in Egypt

How did this myriad of political variables play out in the Egyptian case? The political settlement in Egypt since the postcolonial era can be characterized as a dominant system with very limited competition for power despite key moments of rupture. After independence from the British in the 1950s, the Nasser regime (1952- 1970) understood state schools to be central to establishing and maintaining the new post-independence political order. It consolidated the role of schools both through massively expanding access to education as well as by attaching considerable importance to school curricula as the primary means to disseminate the values, symbols and goals of the July 1952 Revolution in terms of state socialism and Arab nationalism. Education was viewed as a means to transform the social order along more equitable lines and to lead the country and region to a position of economic and political strength (Ibrahim 2010). Reliance on support of the poor and growing middle classes in the Nasser era entailed a social policy investment and direction focused on the expansion of free public services. The state-socialist and developmental ideologies of the 1950s and 1960s dictated public investment in decent quality social services. The Sadat era (1970-81) brought about three key developments in Egyptian educational discourse: the focus on “science and faith” as the basis of Egypt’s progress and desired identity, the beginning of the involvement of international agencies in educational policy- making, and the initiation of privatization measures (Adli 2007). Educational goals in the Sadat era also began to emphasize adjustment to market liberalization and the expansion of technical education to absorb 60% of secondary students (Adli 2001, Brand 2012). USAID and the World Bank, along with several other international organizations, began to support the Egyptian government financially (Ibrahim 2010). By 1980, Egypt became one of the primary

⁴ This includes parent associations, business organizations, teacher unions, private school owners, decision makers and bureaucrats at different levels, relevant think tanks, research institutes and NGOs, political parties, textbook publishers, construction firms, furniture providers, computer and ICT (Information and Communications Technologies) providers, curriculum designers and international lending agencies.

beneficiaries of US development aid programmes (Cochran 1986) and, more generally, the donor community and aid agencies started to play an important role in Egyptian policymaking, including in the education sector.

Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) initiated ‘structural adjustment’ policies and economic liberalization, which had their roots in Sadat’s Infitah policies of the 1970s. Social expenditure lagged far behind rapid population growth, declining from 34% of GDP in 1982 to an average of 17% in the 2000s (El-Meehy 2009, 14). The relationship with the forces of political Islam is at the core of political settlement and the dynamics in the education sector. Mubarak’s relationship with Islamist forces changed over his rule and the movement between selective repression and selective toleration and promotion was reflected in the education sector (Brand 2014, Sobhy 2015, 2023). The international donor community played an increasingly significant role in disseminating and incorporating global discourses into Egyptian education. Chief among those have been discourses in relation to decentralizing the system and promoting civil society participation in education (Ginsburg et al. 2010), enhancing teachers’ use of active-learning pedagogies (Ginsburg and Megahed 2008), integrating technology into teaching and learning (Warschauer 2003, 2004), and expanding private provision of basic education (Sayed 2005, 2006). The key policy support teams in the Ministry received training, scholarships and study abroad programs from key international agencies including UNESCO, UNICEF and USAID.

By 2020, Egypt remained the third highest recipient of US aid after Israel and Jordan, with 2% of assistance directed to education and social services (AmCham 2020). Despite decades of support from the international community and the increasing influence of global educational discourses, Egypt’s educational reforms have met little, if any, success and have left the Egyptian education system with its current shortcomings: traditional methods of teaching and learning, rigid centralization, and high-stakes exams (Ibrahim 2010). Recent research has shown how reforms championed by international agencies, like decentralization, community schools, public-private partnerships and school-based management, remained central to education reform in Egypt over the period 1990–2016 (Allam 2021). The training and investment in MOE cadres is continuously drained by the flight of highly qualified personnel into the partner agencies themselves, where salaries and working conditions are far superior. Highly trained staffs have also been reshuffled within the ministry away from decision-making positions with changes in the leadership of the Ministry.

From 2002 onwards, under the leadership of Mubarak’s son Gamal, official papers of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) began to claim that the state’s provision of basic services had led to deterioration in their quality, and that the solution was to open education and health to private investment. The so-called ‘New Thought’ of the party involved finding ways to divest the state from its ‘burdens’ on those fronts. At that stage, with the removal of long serving minister Hussein Kamel Bahaa EIDin, MOE also lost its ‘old guard,’ ending the influence of figures linked to the secular left on key cultural spheres like education. A new wave of pro-business liberalization and privatization began around 2003/2004 with the appointment of the Nazif government—which was removed in the January 2011 uprising.

The 2011 uprising is a watershed event in contemporary Egyptian history. The ‘25 January Revolution,’ as it is known in Egypt, denotes the peaceful mass demonstrations and the eighteen-day sit-in in Tahrir Square that led to Mubarak’s removal. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, formally assumed power from the removal of Mubarak in February 2011 until June 2012, when the Muslim Brotherhood candidate was elected as President, until he was removed by the military one year later following mass protests against his rule. Not only in terms of free elections, but freedom of expression and association flourished after the uprising, and significant concessions were made with regard to select socioeconomic demands including two waves of salary increases for teachers. However, the neoliberal direction of austerity, subsidy reduction and privatization returned very quickly to the agenda and is articulated as the only way to access international credit and prevent bankruptcy. Many of the positive changes in the socioeconomic sphere after the Revolution were reversed. For

example, by 2018 the effects of the introduction of a minimum wage in 2012 and teacher salary increases were wiped out in real terms by inflation unleashed by the currency devaluation that came with a new IMF loan in 2016 (Sobhy 2023). A 2019 increase in the public-sector minimum wage barely restored workers to their pre-devaluation living standards (Hussein 2020b). Teachers were, however, excluded from the 2019 increase on the grounds that because of their large numbers the state budget could not sustain teacher salary increases at that point. Until 2021, the so-called new public sector ‘minimum wage’ had not been applied to teachers, although they received regular small annual increases.

In sum, the decline in investment in quality and equity in Egyptian education is driven by ideological shifts and international factors that dictated a change in the power base of the regime, greater austerity and privatization, very strong influence of international actors, aid and debt and decades of experimentation with global learning agendas. The result has been a full-blown learning crisis.

Part 3: The Learning Crisis in Egypt: Drivers and Indicators

The pre-university education system in Egypt is very large. By 2019/20, the number of students had reached 23.5 million students in over 56,500 schools with over 1.85 million employees and close to one million public school teachers (MOETE 2020c). The system consists of a primary, preparatory and secondary stage. The Basic Education stage, encompassing six years of Primary Education and three years of Preparatory Education, has been free and compulsory for all children aged 6-14. The 2014 Constitution made the three years of secondary education compulsory as well. Secondary education comprises the two main ‘general’ and ‘technical’ tracks. Students who score below a certain annually determined cut-off score in the Basic Education completion exam can only continue in the technical secondary track focusing on vocational skills. A religious education (Azhar) track, not administered by the Ministry of Education, enrolls about 10% of students across the different stages.

Students	21,054,000
Schools	48,000
School staff	1,552,000
Teachers	923,000
Practicing Teachers	609,180

Figure 1: Size of the Public School System in 2020⁵

Access has expanded, but quality and equity have deteriorated

As measured by the Human Opportunity Index, access to basic services, although unequal, had improved in the decade before the uprisings (Ersado and Aran 2014). However, the nominal increase in access was accompanied by deterioration of quality and informal privatization. Egypt has clearly achieved higher enrollment in basic education as well as greater access to university education (UIS Online). Enrollment in early childhood/ pre-primary education remains accessible to only one quarter of children, while about one third of youth attend university. Figure 2 provides an image of enrollment in different stages of

⁵ These figures refer to public schools only and do not include staff working at the central MOE offices and educational districts (Mudirriya, Idara and Diwan al-Wizara). Data obtained from MOETE 2020c. The overall ratio of practicing to non-practicing teachers for public schools in 2020 was 1.93 (MOE 2020c).

education and levels of enrollment in private education in MOE supervised schools. The nominal expansion in access is structured by the decline in quality and equity, as well as diminished returns to education.⁶ In the 2007 TIMSS international ranking, 53% of Egyptian 8th grade students (often chosen from the best schools) did not meet the low international benchmark in Mathematics (Mullis et al. 2007) and 45% were also below the lower benchmark in Science (UNICEF 2015, 39). This was already 5% lower than Egypt's 2003 rank (MOE 2007, 46 and MOE 2014). According to the results of national standardized assessment released in 2010, average scores were less than 50% in Arabic, Science and Mathematics (MOE 2014, MOE 2010). Egyptian students scored second to last in the world in the 2016 PIRLS international reading assessment (Mullis et al 2017). Based on the learning poverty indicator, about 70% of age 10 children in Egypt cannot read a short age-appropriate text with comprehension, which is 14.5 percentage points worse than the average for lower middle-income countries (World Bank 2019). The learning crisis does not of course impact students equally across the highly stratified system. Disaggregated data on literacy shows how poor reading and writing is more pronounced in rural and disadvantaged schools (Egypt, USAID EdData II). In one assessment for example, 41% of rural students could not answer any reading comprehension question correctly (zero scores), while 27% of urban students had zero scores (Egypt, USAID EdData II).

High and unequal levels of household expenditures in private tutoring and tracking into vocational and general secondary schools that depend on high stakes examination substantially contribute to unequal learning outcomes (Ersado and Gignoux 2014, World Bank 2012). Official achievement data in Egypt show this polarization as based on financial ability (UNDP 2010, 44). Furthermore, inequities in learning opportunities among Egyptian youth are high compared to other countries in absolute levels and learning gaps appear in the early grades (Ersado and Gignoux 2014). In 2020, Egypt scored 0.49 on the HCI Human Capital Index, indicating that “a child born in Egypt today will be only 49% as productive when he/she reaches the age of 18 as she could be if she enjoyed quality education and full health” (Kazem 2020, World Bank 2020).

⁶ Education has been substantially devalued in the face of a rapidly increasing supply of educated individuals and limited expansion in demand for educated labor (Salehi-Isfahani, Tunali, & Assaad, 2009). As Assaad and Krafft show, the struggle of youth with a secondary education or higher to make a successful modern transition is a relatively new phenomenon in Egypt (2014, 11).

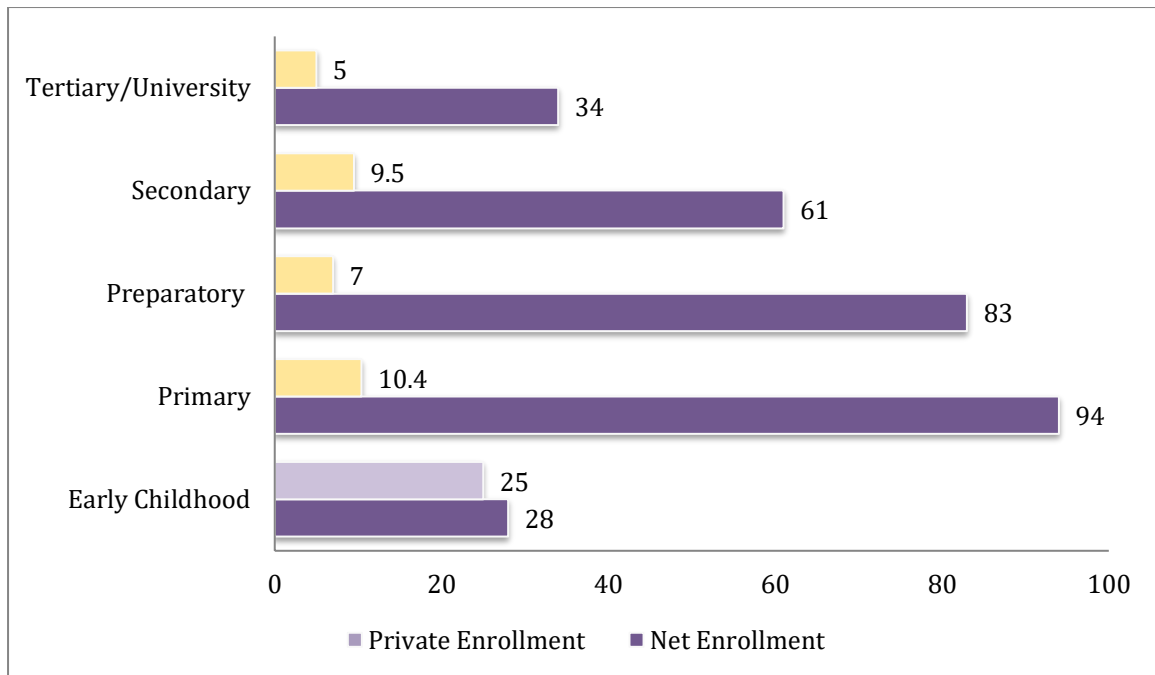


Figure 2. Net and private enrollment in Egypt 2016/2017⁷

To appreciate the forms of differentiation and tracking in the system, it is worth considering the secondary stage, where the more privileged general track, enrolling about 8% of all students, is particularly impacted by the digitalization and assessment reforms.⁸ General secondary education is a three-year track from which successful students can go on to study at the university level. Technical education is considered a very low-quality track with very limited contribution to learning, as official sources have long admitted (MOE 2007). Figure 3 shows the distribution of the secondary stage age cohort where 37% enroll in technical secondary, 29% in general secondary and 8% in religious Azhar schools (not supervised by MOE). Over one fifth of youth in the age cohort drop out before reaching the secondary stage, which as a whole remains a disproportionately urban phenomenon.⁹

⁷ Net and private enrollment rates are obtained from official MOE data for the year 2016/2017 (MOE 2017). Figures for the religious track, which are not included in MOE stats, indicate that Azhar students represent 8% of secondary students, 9% of preparatory and 8.5% of primary for the academic year 2016/2017 (CAPMAS, 2018). Net enrollment in higher education is obtained from the UNESCO online Database (UIS) for the year 2016. Private enrollment in university is based on the 2016/2017 census figures, where about 1.9 million students are registered in public universities, while about 144,000 students are enrolled in private universities (CAPMAS, 2018, p.157-158).

⁸ Enrolled general secondary students (public and private schools) represent 8% of all enrolled students in 2019/2020 (MOE 2020).

⁹ The transfer rate from preparatory to technical education is 72% in urban areas and 22% in rural areas; and from preparatory to general secondary is about 57% in urban areas, including Cairo, and 23.5% in rural areas (MOE 2020c).

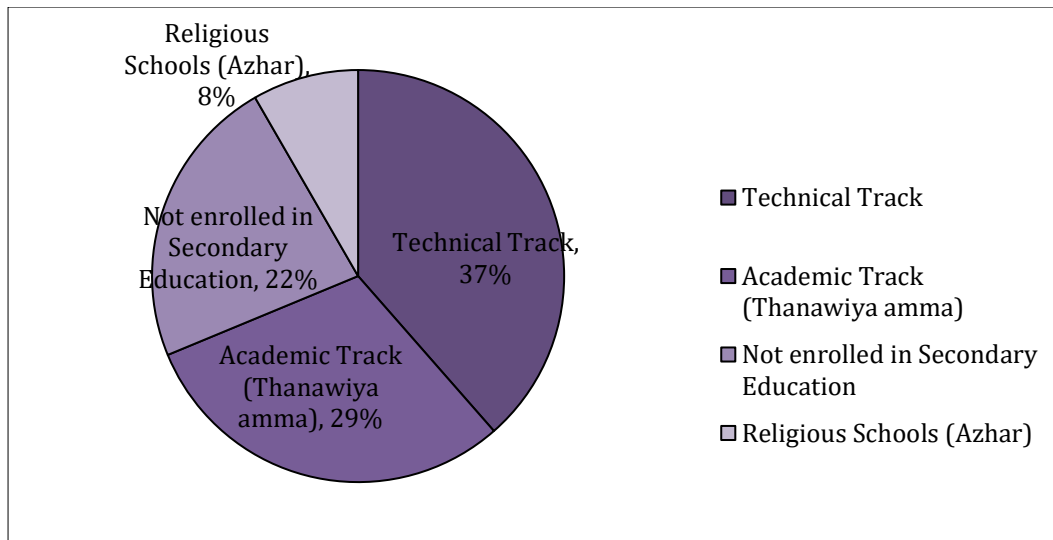


Figure 3. Gross Enrolment in the secondary stage in 2016/2017¹⁰

Public spending is low and inequitably distributed

Since the early 2000s, this situation of deteriorating quality and the inefficiency of the system has been expressed as a result of a long-term shortage of financial resources in the Egyptian education system (El-Baradei and El-Baradei 2004). Real budgetary allocations (i.e. in constant prices) have witnessed a steady decrease between 1981 and 1990 and this entailed a decrease in real public spending per student during the same period (El-Baradei and El-Baradei 2004). Public spending on education in Egypt is low by international and regional standards and has been declining since 2000 (UNESCO, 2009, OECD, 2015). Average spending represented only 2.6% of GDP from 2009 to 2014, about half of the average OECD rate (OECD, 2015, 174). In 2019, Egypt spent 2.3% of its GDP in government education spending, which is lower than both the regional average (4.4%) and the average for its income group (4.5%) (World Bank 2020). The numbers look worse when we take into account spending on pre-university (non/tertiary) education alone, which accounts for only 1.7% of GDP, whereas the OECD average is 3.5% (see Figure 4). Most spending on pre-university education is allocated to salaries—94% and approximately 5% goes to purchases of goods and services (World Bank 2018). However, much of this salary expenditure does not go to teachers, especially those working in classrooms. The non-teaching staff rates have been historically high (0.78:1 as compared to 0.58: 1 in OECD countries); and overstaffing increased over the 1990s (El-Baradei and El-Baradei 2004). In 2020, practicing teachers accounted for about two thirds of teachers and 40% of school staff (Figure 1).

It is not just that public investment in education is low; it is also distributed in a way that disadvantages the lower grades, which are critical for developing a learning base, and the poor, especially outside urban centers. A comparison of the governorates' shares of pupils enrolled in education to the governorates' shares of current educational expenditures indicates that the most disadvantaged governorates are in Upper-Egypt (Fayoum, Minya, Assiut, Sohag), as well as rural Lower Egypt governorates, while the most favored governorates are Metropolitan governorates (El-Baradei 2004 and El-Baradei 2004). Since the 2000s, studies have noted that low educational spending in the less-favored governorates leads to low quality of education and hence low earnings for education (El-Baradei 2004 and El-Baradei 2004). The absence of equity consideration in educational spending across governorates and the large disparities in teacher wages have been documented in more recent studies (MOE

¹⁰ Gross enrollment figures in MOE schools are obtained from official MOE data for 2016/2017 (MOE 2017). Enrollment in the religious (Azhar) secondary schools in 2016/2017 is obtained from the national census (CAPMAS 2018).

2010, OECD 2015). Spending is also skewed towards university education at the expense of pre-primary and basic education and very poorly targeted at quality improvement (for detailed discussions, see Assaad 2010, AFA 2014, MOE 2014, World Bank 2013, OECD 2015, MOE 2007, IBRD and World Bank 2005). The ratio of spending per student in higher education relative to pre-university education averaged 3.2 in Egypt, as compared to only 1.1 in OECD countries (Assaad 2010, 3).¹¹ Policy recommendations since the 2000s have therefore emphasized increasing investment expenditures, the reallocation of resources in favor of basic education and away from higher education and reallocating resources towards rural areas (El-Baradei 2004 and El-Baradei 2004). This is not the reform route successive governments have adopted. In fact, instead of increased spending to match the new plans of Edu 2.0, public spending on pre-university education had declined as a percentage of GDP and of public expenditures (Sobhy 2023).

The condition of schools has suffered greatly from this low spending. Existing analysis has argued that since the 2000s, the quantitative and qualitative shortage of schools is the Egyptian education system's most acute problem (El-Baradei and El-Baradei 2004). Decades later, the situation of schools has only become more alarming. Recent official estimates point to the need to construct over 250,000 new classrooms (Abdelbaset 2018). Egyptian schools suffer from systematic deficiencies that affect student learning, attendance, health and dignity, including massive shortages leading to high densities, overcrowding and multiple shift schools, very poor maintenance and a mismatch between needs and actual construction projects (Sobhy 2019). Egypt's average classroom density of 44 students/classroom in the primary stage is higher than the average in populous countries like India and China; more than 75% of Egyptian students are in classrooms that have over 40 students and 12.7 million children (of whom 7 million are in the primary stage) are enrolled in shift schools that have over-capacity classrooms, a smaller time window for learning and are deprived of supposedly 'less essential' classes like arts, music and physical education (Sobhy 2019). While part of the problem can only be solved addressing issues around regulations and land allocation (Sobhy 2019), the question of large classrooms being served by two or more teachers in the early grades has hardly been discussed. Instead, teacher shortages have mushroomed over the past decades.

Teacher pay is very low and teacher shortages are very high

Teacher pay is a divisive issue in the Egyptian public discourse. While many cannot help but acknowledge that teacher pay is very low, the behavior of some teachers (absenteeism, shirking) and the profits some teachers (in affluent urban neighborhoods and the competitive general secondary) make through private tutoring are often cited to discredit demands for better pay. To add to the complexity, accurately assessing teacher salaries in Egypt, as well as their evolution over time, is very difficult in the absence of official data. Like other government employees, teachers' salaries have fallen substantially in real terms since the 1980s.¹² In 2010, the average monthly salary of teachers was EGP 1500 (MOE 2010). This average was equivalent to USD 270 and, when adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) for better international comparison, amounted to 1022 \$PPP (Sobhy 2023). Salaries increased considerably in 2012 and 2014, but these changes were depleted in real terms by waves of inflation, especially following the currency devaluation of 2016. By 2021, the average

¹¹ Per student spending on higher education amounted to 46% of per capita GDP in Egypt on average between 2005 and 2008, as compared to an average of 27% in low-middle income countries and 19% in OECD countries (Assaad 2010, 3). An analysis of the incidence of public expenditures carried out by the World Bank shows that 45% of public expenditure on higher education goes to the top quintile of households and that 68% go to the top two quintiles, while the bottom quintile benefits from no more than 3% of these public resources (World Bank 2002).

¹² Low wages are at the core of Egypt's economic and social problems and public sector wages have been declining in real terms for decades (Abdelhamid & Baradei, 2010).

monthly salary could be estimated at around EGP 3500.¹³ This is likely a considerable overestimate of the national average for *net* salaries after deductions, but it is used here as it is based on the latest available official statement.¹⁴ This amount corresponds to about USD 220 and 820 \$PPP suggesting a considerable decline in real salaries relative to 2010 (amounting to 20% of the PPP value).

Average salaries in this range are also very low in comparison to other middle and low income countries, as compared in \$PPP and as a percentage of GDP per capita. A monthly salary of 820 \$PPP represents one fifth of average OECD salaries and one third to three quarters of salaries in countries like Turkey, Mexico and Brazil.¹⁵ Using another metric, this average salary represents a strikingly low 75% of GDP per capita.¹⁶ In most middle and low-income countries on the other hand, teacher salaries represent 200-700% of GDP per capita (Sandefur 2018). Furthermore, there is little recent information about variations across governorates as salaries in a handful of governorates, including the capital, can amount to *more than double* the national average (see MOE 2010; OECD 2015, 184). More detailed and disaggregated data is obviously necessary to better understand teacher salaries, disparities within them and their implications for shortages and student learning.

A freeze on hiring has led to an accumulation of teacher shortages over the previous decades. In October 2019, the Ministry of Education admitted to a massive shortage of 300,000 teachers; more recent estimates indicate shortages of over 350,000 teachers. The hiring freeze is also leading to an aging of the teacher profession. It is compounded by serious problems of poor distribution of qualified teachers in ways that especially disadvantage the lower grades (see MOE 2014). Again, more disaggregated and detailed data is needed to understand the distribution of shortages across regions and educational stages and their intersections with learning and inequality. In 2021, MOE announced initiatives like inviting citizens to work voluntarily or for meager sums like EGP 20 /class (1.25 USD) without any contractual rights, although in the beginning of 2022, a new hiring initiative of 30,000 teachers/year for the following 5 years had been announced.¹⁷ Finally, there is little data on teacher absenteeism or shirking (teachers entering classes but not really teaching the material, which is partly driven by the prevalence of tutoring, as well as poor school resources and a poor learning base among students that prevents teachers from effectively teaching the assigned material). Qualitative research has found that as much as half of classes in less privileged secondary schools end up without teachers, in addition to widespread forms of shirking when teachers do enter classrooms (Sobhy 2023).

¹³ The Minister of Education declared in a statement to the press in December 2021 that every 36 thousand teachers cost the ministry one billion pounds (Minister of Education 2021). This suggests a monthly salary of EGP 2300/ USD 150 or 550 \$PPP. Assuming that the reference is to starting salaries for hiring new teachers to meet shortages and that the average salary towards the middle of the pay scale has been around 1.5 times of the starting salary historically, this leads to the estimate of EGP 3500/month.

¹⁴ For example, net pay as per actual salary slips for September 2021 in the Giza governorate point to an average salary close to 3300 EGP, but salaries in Giza have been *more than double the national average* as noted in earlier studies (see OECD 2015, 184 and MOE 2010).

¹⁵ Salaries in \$PPP are obtained from OECD sources (OECD 2018, 2020).

¹⁶ I use the latest available GDP per capita for 2020 compared to average annual salaries.

¹⁷ The hiring decision was announced in various media, including Al-Ahram Newspaper on 21 January 2022.

Privatization is pervasive and informal

To compensate for low wages, teachers have resorted to supplementing their income through private tutoring over the previous decades, which has amounted to a de-facto privatization of education, especially at the secondary level (Sobhy 2012). Although tutoring is more prevalent in urban centers like Cairo, the nationwide prevalence of tutoring has been increasing over time across all levels (Elbadawy 2014). As of 2012, tutoring enrollment has been estimated at 43% in the primary stage, 61% in the preparatory stage, 73% in general secondary, 33% in technical secondary, and 22% in university (Elbadawy 2014).¹⁸ In 2016, an official study found that 69% of Egyptian students in public schools have attended private tutoring or official in-school group tutoring (Kabadaya 2020). Tutoring here does not refer to a few revision lessons or support in specific subjects but functions as a parallel system that replaces school instruction. Students who enroll in tutoring do so in four to five subjects in the preparatory and secondary stages (Sieverding, Krafft, and Elbadawy 2019), while 70% of those who enroll in tutoring do so over the entire school year (Elbadawy 2014).¹⁹ Furthermore, a recent nationwide survey has shown that almost 70% of students enroll in private tutoring with their own classroom teachers (Assad & Krafft 2013). This points to the explicit and implicit forms of coercion that students endure to enroll in tutoring with their own schoolteachers who shirk their duties in the classroom (Sobhy 2012, 2023). Private tutoring also skews student exposure to only those subjects that warrant tutoring and leads to a devaluation of subjects (and the teachers of subjects) like art, music, sports and civics, perpetuating the weakness of various school activities.

Privatization in education in Egypt therefore has to be understood by looking at private tutoring in addition to enrollment in private schools. Private schooling has been growing in its own right since the 1980s. Between 2001 and 2006 alone, the proportions of private classrooms at primary level increased by 31% (MOE 2007, Annexes, 48). However, by 2020, private schools still only enrolled 10% of students, while more privileged private schools that provide instruction in foreign languages enrolled about 4% of students (MOETE 2020b). Private schools therefore remain a small part of the system, but their importance lies in schooling the intellectual, economic and political elite, especially in language schools and international schools (the latter enrolling about 0.5% of students), whose concerns disproportionately influence educational policy making. Paradoxically, private school students in Egypt also significantly enroll in parallel private tutoring, almost universally abandoning their schools in the general secondary stage (see Sobhy 2023). A recent report by the national statistical agency shows that household expenditure on education as a proportion of household income is higher in urban areas and for more affluent families and has been rising on average since 2010 (CAPMAS 2020). The very high levels of private spending inform the dissatisfaction of more privileged families with assessment and the costs of double privatization, driving various measures by consecutive ministers of education to address private tutoring and reform the general secondary stage school leaving exams. Spending on private tutoring has been estimated at EGP 47 billion in 2019, representing 38% of household expenditure on education.²⁰ Given that public spending on pre-university

¹⁸ It is not clear if there are gender differences in tutoring expenditures. Interestingly, Ersado and Gignoux (2014) found that families spent almost double the amount on tutoring for girls than for boys. A study published around the same time, however, found no gender differences in spending on tutoring (Sayed and Langsten 2014).

¹⁹ According to one survey, 35% of preparatory students and 68% of general secondary students reported taking private lessons at the national level at some point, but in Cairo 59% and 77% did so respectively (Sieverding, Krafft, and Elbadawy 2019).

²⁰ These figures were cited in the official Al-Ahram Newspaper on 14 October 2019 <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2292669.aspx> referencing a recent CAPMAS study. Another media report in 2021 quoted the Minister of Education's reference to spending on tutoring and supplementary

education in 2018/2019 was EGP 75 billion (CAPMAS 2021), these estimates indicate that spending on tutoring alone amounts to *more than 60%* of public spending, whereas total private spending on pre-university education (including private school fees and other expenses) is around *1.6 times or 160%* of public spending. For reference, average private expenditure on non-tertiary education in OECD countries is 10% (OECD 2020).

Tutoring has created a system that is both very inequitable and very expensive, a fact that has long been realized, including by key international organizations (World Bank 1996, Annex 2). Private tutoring perpetuates and exacerbates social stratification (Bray 2006, Akkari 2010) and the marketization of education worsens learning disparities (Alcott and Rose 2016). Moreover, the inequality applies to teachers themselves and the conditions of informal tutoring particularly disadvantage female teachers (Sobhy 2023). In a survey of primary and preparatory stage teachers, 1% stated that they make EGP 10,000 to 15,000 per month from tutoring income, 3.7% stated EGP 5,000 to 10,000, while the vast majority, around 96.2 % make less than EGP 5,000 (CAPMAS 2014).²¹ However, such figures undermine the commonly voiced argument that any realistic increase in official wages would not compensate teachers for their incomes from tutoring (e.g., World Bank 1996). It is true that an adequate pay raise would not compensate the highest echelons of tutors (like those catering to private school students or the general secondary track) for the profits they make on the informal (and largely untaxed) market. However, this does not apply to the majority of teachers. Finally, the pervasive reliance on formal and informal privatization to compensate for the disinvestment in education has not prevented the steep decline in quality over the past decades. Public disinvestment and privatization have only been accompanied by poor learning.

Assessment is outdated and does not promote higher order skills

Pedagogical elements, including skills development and assessment, are also critical for learning. The deterioration of learning in Egyptian education has been linked to an exam driven system that does a poor job at promoting and assessing skills development. As reflected in numerous reports, teaching in Egyptian schools is characterized by teacher-centered instruction, rote memorization, little or no emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills, a tendency to overemphasize esoteric details and unimportant distinctions, insufficient attention to core concepts and ideas, and little connection of learning to real life and contemporary circumstances (see, for example, OECD 2015). Another—often ignored—concern that has been voiced by experts, teachers and parents is the volume of material in Egyptian curricula relative to a very short school year of about 120 days. The focus on memorization and exam performance is not, however, merely a pedagogical choice that can be reformed by educational authorities. It is reinforced by poor resources, the accumulation of poor learning in earlier grades, weak teacher preparation and low trust in the system. For a great proportion of rural and marginalized schools, where teachers are not trained to teach a certain subject, and where students have hardly been able to learn the basics of the subject, memorization is the only way to pass students from one grade to the next (Sobhy 2023). For example, where workshops in technical schools have no functioning equipment, the only option that exists might be to memorize a few points for the exam.

Rote learning is what happens in the best of classes when the teacher actually enters the classroom and teaches the material. This is not the case in many schools in the disadvantaged bulk of the system. In turn, exam questions and exam preparation guides are geared to these skills and reward memorization, not higher order thinking skills, participation or

textbooks reaching EGP 48 billion according to a recent study.

<https://ww1.modrsbook.com/2021/10/teacher.html>.

²¹ This survey relates to primary and lower secondary, whereas earnings in the general secondary track are much higher and greater disaggregation would be critical in understanding the variation among 96% of teachers.

communication skills. Furthermore, when the class teacher organizes private tutoring that guarantees their own students good grades, investment in learning could be reduced to the extent of providing only enough instruction to pass the exam. On the other hand, in the privileged sectors of the system, issues of assessment take a different shape and are not linked in the same way to poor literacy and lack of equipment. The school-leaving exam for the general secondary track has received particular criticism as a flawed assessment tool. The general secondary/ *thanawiya amma* exam is used to decide the academic and productive lives of millions of Egyptians despite its flaws, and it has had a markedly negative influence on the educational system as a whole, leading to increasingly arbitrary university admissions and placement policies and magnifying an already existing culture of teaching and tutoring to the exam (OECD 2015, 164). The issues with the current assessment in Egypt also include mismatch between learning outcomes and test content, assessment literacy of teachers, teachers' beliefs about assessment, use of assessment results and work conditions in schools (Gebril 2021).

The Learning crisis in numbers

In sum, both quality and equity have suffered greatly across the system, even if access has expanded. Good data on quality and equity in Egyptian education is scarce, scattered and difficult to access and verify, but Figure. 4 puts together the available data that reflects the keys facets, drivers and manifestations of the learning crisis. Any future change in the situation of learning and equity should be reflected in changes in these numbers.

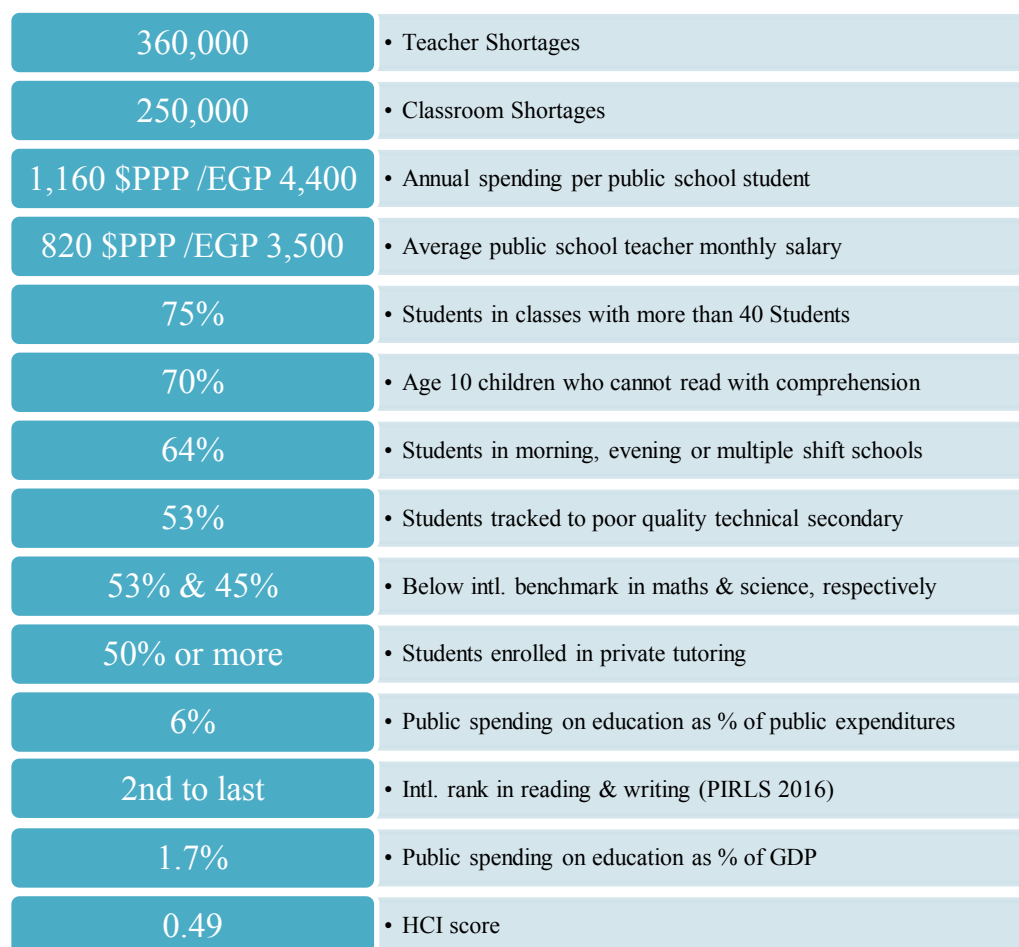


Figure 4. In Numbers: Quality and Equity in Egyptian Pre-University Education²²

²² The percentage of students in high-density classrooms and classroom shortages are based on official sources (Sobhy 2019). The percentage of students who cannot read with comprehension is based on the

Part 4: Expert Views on the Learning Reforms

This deteriorating state led to the development of a major reform plan in 2006 that promised a paradigm shift to tackle key issues in the system (MOE 2007). The plan focused on curriculum reform, school accreditation, teacher professional development, decentralization and technology development, but it is perceived to have missed many of its intended goals. Another major reform was launched in 2018 with the promise of a new and completely overhauled education system to respond to the marked deterioration of quality and the poor results in international assessments. The 2018 reforms, officially referred to as Education 2.0 or Edu. 2.0, are not codified into their own document. Their key elements are reflected in the 2014 Strategic Plan (MOE 2014) and the Egypt 2030 vision, as well as in the relevant World Bank loan agreement (World Bank 2018). The plan's long-term effects, beyond the significant disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, will only become clear in the coming years. Tracked over the major reform plans of 2007 and 2018, there are clear continuities in the drive to reform curricula and instruction towards student-centered approaches, enhancing the use of ICT and introducing assessment reform especially for general secondary students, with the dual aims of promoting higher order skills and reducing the reliance on private tutoring.

The recent 2018 reforms, or Education 2.0, clearly go further in instituting announced plans. Curriculum, assessment and digitalization reforms are under way. To date, new curricula adapted from the International Baccalaureate (IB) model have been introduced from KG 1 to Grade 3 with the aim of enhancing critical thinking and life-long learning through a student-centered approach. Furthermore, the use of technology has been enhanced through the creation of the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) and the distribution of tablet computers to general secondary/Thanawiya Amma students, where they can study their material and take their exams. Finally, Education 2.0 seeks to cancel all summative tests until grade 3 and transform the high stakes tests of Thanawiya Amma into the aggregate of grades 10 to 12 through the calculation of a Grade Point Average (GPA). The following sections bring together the views of respondents in six domains: the learning crisis itself, equity curriculum reform as the most significant change under Edu 2.0, teaching quality, assessment and digitalization.

The learning crisis is widely recognized

Most experts characterized the learning crisis in ways that are not directly tackled by the reforms. Across the interviews, the crisis of literacy in the system was widely referenced as the biggest manifestation of poor quality. As one USAID program leader put it, “*what I see is children struggling to read and write and a large proportion are illiterate.*” According to an

Learning Poverty indicator (World Bank 2019). Data on students in shift schools and the percentage of students in the technical track is obtained from the 2016/7 MOE Statistical Book. Enrolment in (informal) private tutoring is difficult to estimate and differs greatly across educational stages and tracks, but for the bulk of students in primary and lower secondary, enrolment has been estimated in 2012 at 43% and 61%, respectively (Elbadawy 2014). The literacy rank is from [PIRLS 2016](#) and Mathematics and Science scores are from TIMSS 2007, the last years in which Egypt took part in this assessment. The HCI score of 0.486 for 2017 is obtained from the World Bank indicators online database, where Egypt's low score is especially driven by education, according to the World Bank expert interviewed for this study. In the absence of detailed official data, current average salaries and teacher shortages are estimated based on an official statement by the Minister of Education in 2021 (Minister of Education 2021), see previous notes. Spending per *public* school student, the pre-university education budget as a percentage of GDP and as a percentage of public expenditures are calculated by the author based on national budget data for 2018 and refer only to non-tertiary education (see Sobhy 2023 for details and change over time).

NGO program leader, the most meaningful manifestation of poor quality is the literacy and numeracy skills: *“If they cannot write and read, this says it all.”* The issue of poor literacy has been publicized in recent years when the ministry admitted to studies that detailed (arguably underestimated) the extent of poor reading and writing skills among students, where at least one third of lower secondary students remain illiterate (MOE 2014, 63). As evidenced in the 2007 plans, but more so in recent official statements, educational leadership has grown more open to admitting the shortcomings in the system. As one respondent put it, *“we are beyond proving there is a problem... we have a minister who comes out and says the system is a failure.”* A remedial program (*al-Qira’iyya*) had been introduced to address the low literacy levels, but was abandoned by the ministry in the latest reform effort. According to one expert, the program had produced results and had received positive evaluations, but was discontinued because it no longer provided revenue for key entities. An MOE expert noted, however, that elements of the program inform the new curricula introduced under Edu 2.0. Others rejected the basic premise of using remedial programs to solve structural problems. As an ex-MOE advisor put it, *“for such institutional failures, the solution is strong teachers, good principles and greater discipline, not a new phonetics curriculum for teaching Arabic.”* Several respondents referred to the level of skills of university graduates when they enter the job market, even if those entering university actually represent the better educated and more privileged one third of youth (see Figure 2). A member of parliament noted that the final product of the education system is weak, lacks the basics, is not internationally competitive and is far removed from labor market demands.

Experts differed in how they characterized the causes and remedies of the learning crisis. Many respondents focused on poor resources, especially in terms of high classroom densities, high teacher shortages and low pay. As one scholar put it, you cannot talk about learning when you have 70 students in a class. Another leading scholar linked the poverty of learning to the poverty of Egyptian teachers, the fact that 350,000 classrooms are left without teachers and that public spending is less than half of its constitutionally mandated level. A World Bank program leader highlighted the low enrollment in early childhood education as key to the learning crisis. Egypt’s gross pre-primary enrollment of 29% is lower than both the average for its region (46%) and the average for its income group (49%) (World Bank 2020). In reference to the critical question of whether learning is actually measured in order to understand progress, most respondents pointed to the lack of reliable measurement and tracking of learning historically and in current practices. National assessment exams were conducted following the 2007 reforms (see MOE 2010), but not periodically repeated. In Edu 2.0, the plan is to introduce a sample-based Grade 4 national assessment and a reformed examination in Grade 9 for transition and student placement in upper secondary education (World Bank 2018). Standardizing these tests on the national level will allow MOE and researchers to measure the improvement of learning across the country and hence be able to pinpoint the problems (World Bank 2018).

Equity is ‘not on the map’

Equity is a major concern in a system with such a learning landscape, this scale of school and teacher shortages, and the growth of formal and informal privatization. However, the general sense amongst respondents was that *“equity is out of the map, at least today.”* According to one scholar, the MOE had a tracking for equity in the previous reforms, but now the attitude seems to be ‘who cares?’. According to one respondent, MOE doesn’t measure equity in its reports, and it isn’t included as a main value to preserve. A budget expert explained that equity considerations are missing from the budget distribution among various sections, departments and governorates and the central ministry (*diwan*) whose budget is almost equal to the budget for schools for the (very large/populous) Cairo governorate, and that the spending on governorates is not compatible with the poverty map that the government produces. An NGO official noted that she does not see equity concerns as part of the reforms, noting that *“in tackling a huge reform, you have to prioritize”* and *“I don’t think equity was*

selected.” According to the private school consultant, the MOE “*has given up on free education.*” Echoing this impression, several respondents referenced the growth in different categories of fee-charging MOE schools from the Japanese Schools and the Nile Schools to the most recent trend of MOE establishing private International schools. Another scholar explained the lack of interest in equity with reference to the lack of attention to (poor quality) technical education in the reform effort, although it represents the larger track of secondary students. Previous ministers had been keen on eradicating it completely, on grounds that it only deepened social disparities and it serves mainly to lower the aspirations of the poor but does not perform any function in terms of preparation for the labor market. The World Bank official interviewed for this study explained that equity is considered in terms of system-wide performance, although certain deliverables include an equity dimension in access to digital resources such as the percentage of schools in poorest 5 governorates reached through EKB portal or a TV educational channel.

Positive curriculum reforms impaired by resource constraints

Since the 2007 reforms, MOE documents have reiterated that the curriculum was weak and focused on lower order skills. In 2007, the challenges in the area of curriculum were summarized as follows: a) the focus of the curriculum, and therefore learning, is currently on a narrow definition of knowledge and memorization only, with little or no assessment of high level cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; b) there is a lack of participation of teachers in critical discussions about the curriculum and skills needed; and c) there is an over-emphasis on test-taking skills at the expense of learning how to apply knowledge (MOE 2007, 43). The 2007 reforms included 12 goals on top of which was “Comprehensive Curriculum and Instructional Technology Reform” detailed along six comprehensive objectives including developing a new curriculum framework, integrating ICT, encouraging critical thinking in partnership with private sector and restructuring the Curriculum Center for Instructional Materials Development /CCIMD (MOE 2007, 99-100). The concern with memorization has been voiced for decades by experts and ministry reports without notable progress and continues to be voiced in the latest reform.

In Edu 2.0, curriculum change was deemed crucial, especially as required by a changing global economy. According to the 2014 National Strategic Plan, “The response to this transition to a knowledge-based economy requires the Egyptian education system to be a source of high skills, which are needed for the workforce, in addition to strengthening the principle of lifelong learning, through the provision of high-quality education and training systems that are based on ICT. It also requires revisiting the various educational materials, areas of study, as well as reviewing the curriculum to instill problem-solving skills, developing technical education, and achieving a better match between the outputs of educational institutions and the requirements of the labor market at all levels” (MOE 2014, 6-7). By 2021, new curricula had been introduced up to grade 3.

The change in curricula has not been a topic of public debate and there is very limited awareness of what it entails even among experts. Many respondents were not familiar with the nature of change in the new curriculum. In fact, it was not easy to find experts who were familiar with what actually changed in the curricula, apart from those working directly with MOE on aspects of implementation. This might be related to the fact that curriculum change did not reach the general secondary stage that is at the heart of public discourse on education in Egypt. However, without being familiar with the extent, timing or nature of the actual change, some experts were aware of the key goals that the reform was meant to reflect in terms of interdisciplinarity, the focus on critical thinking and lifelong learning.

Although respondents familiar with the curriculum reforms raised a host of concerns regarding their implementation and suitability to existing conditions, the change was largely seen as positive, and some respondents were particularly enthusiastic about it. According to an official in an NGO working with MOE, “*Education 2.0 has all that is needed. It is a true*

shift in the mindset from content-based to lifelong learning.” According to this official, the innovation of the new curriculum relies on the fact that it is more “student-centered” and allows students to discover different themes and learn that everything around them is connected. According to an NGO curriculum designer and trainer, the ministry sees curriculum reform as its main tool for improving learning, while simultaneously increasing the amount of digital content so that students will have access to a wide range of learning resources regardless of the existence of the teacher, from online libraries to TV channels broadcasting educational content. As one official in a partner development agency noted, the curriculum is good, but needs trained teachers and resources so the lessons and activities can be carried out.

On the other hand, the implementation of curriculum change was judged as “abrupt”. According to an official in an international agency, the reform was supposed to be implemented “*progressively over 12 years, but the political leadership opted for a faster implementation in only 5 years.*” A consultant in a private school also noted that the new textbooks were received on such short notice that it became very difficult to train teachers on the material. According to this curriculum expert, one of the adapted textbook series (Connect) are too old, and she was informed that it is ‘a 1980s Pearsons publication.’ Furthermore, the key issue of the volume of material relative to the length of school year persists even with the new curriculum. This expert noted that the curriculum would normally be implemented over 180 days and that “*practically I have 120 days... meaning that I have 60 less days. How can I finish the digestive system in one or even two days?.*” She concluded that the content is “*too large for the number of weeks we have.*”

One of the most positive aspects of the new curricula is interdisciplinarity to promote holistic child development, as a USAID program leader put it. This means that schools had to quickly improvise ways to redistribute and retrain teachers who are hired and trained based on subject specialization. Disciplinary divisions are introduced in Grade 4 and schools have to rearrange teachers once more. In addition to issues relating to abrupt introduction, volume of material relative to the length of the school year and the implementation of interdisciplinarity within existing teacher specializations, a major concern relates to the structural conditions in which the new curriculum is introduced in terms of large classrooms with only one teacher, poor school infrastructure and untrained teachers. According to an education scholar, “*schools aren’t equipped to implement the new curriculum.*” The problem is not only that primary classrooms are overcrowded with 50 and sometimes over 90 students, but also that such classrooms have one teacher. Respondents referenced schools in Singapore with 50 students, but they have 3 or 4 teachers working with the children. Even in short- and medium-term conditions of classroom shortages and overcrowding, working effectively with young children, especially in light of the new curriculum, requires hiring more teachers.

Finally, some respondents also critiqued the focus on literacy, math and science and emphasized the importance of art, music, sports and theatre in providing holistic developmental experiences to children. For a number of scholars, as well as ex-MOE advisors, the issue of reviving school activities has been completely ignored in the new reforms. The lack of attention to the hegemony of conservative ideological directions in education was also glaring for some. As one interviewee put it, the focus on critical thinking happens in the absence of clear foundations or intellectual grounding in a context where the education system, from the faculties of education to the school level, is saturated with religious fundamentalist ideas while the ministry leadership argues that it is addressing critical thinking. According to this expert, in the absence of an enlightenment project and an emphasis on a secular social contract, there is little basis for promoting creativity or expecting a secular outcome. He argued that the postmodern foundations of the reforms, in terms of relativism and inclusiveness, would not have the same implications in the local context that lacks clear established norms and values (secular, progressive, egalitarian, human rights, the valorization of scientific inquiry) and would promote an equal playing field where other non-

egalitarian, anti-scientific, fundamentalist values, ideologies ‘and superstitions’ can be propagated and embraced.

Well-trained teachers are more important than reformed curricula

The emphasis on the need for close coaching of teachers for the reform to succeed was unanimous. According to a key scholar, “*you can have a terrible textbook and outstanding teachers and get quality learning... but the reverse is not true.*” An expert from an NGO working with the MOE emphasized that “*even though the new curriculum is great, it is not enough on its own.*” A consultant assisting private schools to implement the new curriculum described the program she had to quickly design and the various steps that she and her team had to take, over three years, in order to translate the curriculum into the classroom. This consultant was largely positive about the new curriculum, if implemented with strong support and infrastructure in an environment of highly qualified and closely coached teachers, as can be found in the (high-end English language) private schools, where she is contracted to lead curriculum implementation. Her view on the curriculum’s impact beyond such privileged private schools was: “*I don’t see it improving education unless they are serious about training teachers, the numbers of teachers in classrooms and resources in schools.*”

On the other hand, other respondents like USAID officials assisting the implementation of the curriculum noted that the issue of large classrooms is accounted for in the design of the curriculum and that two teachers are assigned to teach it in the classroom. It is, however, unclear how many classrooms indeed have two teachers trained to work together and how much of the announced teacher shortages affect the early grades and impede the implementation of the new curriculum. However, as an MOE curriculum expert explained, the teacher guide tells teachers what to do in large classrooms and what happens if there is no space, using their imagination. He added that the teacher does not score every student book and students can apply peer or self-correction according to small specific rubrics. He noted that the space for working groups is not dominated by teachers and teachers can use a game (like dice or cubes) and let students play the game and work alone in pairs or in groups. He also pointed out that in the trainings he supervised, teachers seem to be impressed with the curriculum and with the new style of professional development delivery. An FOE Professor, on the other hand, explained that his graduate students working on the topic found that teachers do not understand the new curriculum. An expert working with a development agency explained that the training was very short for example three days for each subject in a very compressed manner close to the school year. An NGO official explained that the real issue is the gap between strategy and how it is deployed on the ground, adding, “*I can tell you that teachers have no idea what is happening, are doing other things and there is no buy-in or engagement of the school community.*” Respondents expressed the need for continuous coaching during the year and not just using one size fits all training sessions. But experts close to the reform highlighted that the training is envisioned for three years and will continue until Education 2.0 is solid enough. These initial impressions among experts are critical, but the reform remains in its first years of implementation and awaits rigorous assessment. In addition, instruction in public schools has been severely disrupted due to COVID-19 conditions, so it may be years before a comprehensive evaluation is possible.

The flaws of existing teacher professional development were highlighted by all respondents. The same concerns were also echoed in previous reform efforts. The Cadre system put in place in 2007 was aimed at linking promotion with performance and required teachers to pass specific professional tests in order to get licenses (MOE 2007). In 2007, the MOE provisioned the creation of the Professional Academy for Teachers (PAT) with the objective of training teachers. Among its roles, the academy will be responsible for: a) setting up the national plan for teacher training, including pre-service induction training programs; b) ensuring sustainable professional development of teachers; and c) licensing teachers according to the National Standards and linking promotion to their ability to obtain their teaching license (MOE 2007). Again, these professional development reforms were seen as having had little positive impact. According to one respondent, the current MOE leadership opposes PAT and

would like to “cancel it completely.” The new reforms aim to develop a new set of structures to accomplish similar goals. According to an official at USAID, the aim is to “build a system so that there is a portfolio for each teacher to follow progress.” The program Teach for Tomorrow was created by USAID in 2015 order to assist MOE with its most critical needs which is “primary-grade teacher professional development and teacher certification” (USAID 2021). Teach for Tomorrow also helps MOE to “design “blended learning” for teachers that combines in-person as well as digital resources for in-service teacher training” (USAID 2021). Finally, Teach for Tomorrow will provide technical assistance in order to “create and institutionalize a teacher certification system with clear standards and performance-based licensure renewal” (USAID 2021). The aim is to create a “[...] merit-based promotion system and an innovative reward scheme in partnership with the private sector and civil society” (USAID 2021). According to an official at USAID, one of the most important advantages of Teach for Tomorrow is to transform the relationship between the teacher and the supervisor “from an inspector into a coach or a mentor.” However, no evaluation has been conducted yet of the impact of Teach for Tomorrow according to USAID officials so it is hard to measure its efficacy. A number of respondents criticized the lack of evaluation of the outcomes of the recent professional development initiatives like Teachers First on educators and learners. In 2015, the Teachers First program²³ was also launched, financed by the charitable Tahyia Misr Fund in partnership with the British company Imagine Education. Teachers First is a training program for Egyptian teachers that focuses on using innovative techniques that encourage the education process to become student-focused and not teacher or curriculum focused. It includes seminars, videos and more tools that teachers can and should use (Zaalouk 2021). All respondents agreed on the need for continuous professional development and stronger preparation in Faculties of Education.

The Egyptian MOE is by no means inventing the trend towards virtual educational delivery, whether in the classroom or in teacher professional development. The new reform plans are part of a global trend that aims to find solutions for upgrading teaching quality, including virtual delivery of professional development programs. The orientation of the new reforms might suggest that a desire for technology should replace teachers, who are both underperforming and expensive to the state budget. This is sometimes expressed in terms of forward thinking, lifelong learning and student centered approaches. In order to remedy the problems of teaching quality, MOE sought to go past the teacher-centered approach towards a student-centered one by moving away from the “traditional concept of viewing the teacher as the sole source of knowledge and power” (MOE 2014). As an NGO official enthusiastic about the curriculum, put it: “Sometimes I question whether the ministry believes in the role of the teacher. The teacher is crucial. With COVID, it was proven that you cannot do a learning activity without a teacher... They need to lead, be it online or in class.” The general impression is that teachers are considered obstacles to reform mainly because of their greed (involvement in tutoring) and their lack of training. They are also considered to be a heavy burden on the state budget because of their large numbers. Some respondents also highlighted the negative reference made by the current minister about teachers that “half of them are thieves and the other half are inefficient thieves” (Mohamed 2017). A member of parliament explained that “we are currently working short term and saving what can be saved,” but noted that the role of the teacher role is essential and “tablets cannot replace teachers.” Finally, a number of respondents noted the shifting interests of the ministry leadership. This was particularly highlighted for issues relating to teachers. One official in a development partner organization explained how studies relating to teachers were commissioned upon the request of the ministry, but after extensive work was performed, such studies and directions were de-prioritized.

Almost all experts interviewed for the study highlighted the poor conditions of teachers. Most acknowledged the need for higher pay for attracting higher skilled and better-trained teachers

²³ Teachers First official website: <https://teachersfirstegypt.com/>

and incentivizing them to stay in a demanding profession (see also El-Baradei and El-Baradei 2004). It was often noted, however, that pay alone would do nothing to improve teaching. As one respondent put it, *“of course they have a right to increased salaries, but this is not the solution. The solution is a real reform of education.”* Most respondents pointed out that teachers’ salaries need to be increased in parallel with developing a culture of respect and recognition towards their role. According to one respondent, *“after 15 years of service, teachers earn EGP 2500 /month (160 USD), while security guards in New Cairo who are 20 years old earn EGP 5000/month and have private medical insurance for themselves and their families.”* According to another scholar, the Egyptian teacher is one of the lowest paid teachers in the world. The consensus is that teachers in Egypt remain underpaid and unappreciated despite new promising reforms. At least one expert felt that quality could increase without increasing salaries, while increasing salaries cannot automatically lead to better outcomes. As an NGO official put it, we work with teachers and tell them that whether your salary increases or not, it’s your choice whether you make an impact or not. She noted however, that if there are resources, salaries should be increased. While several respondents attributed the funding and orientation of the reforms to the World Bank, the World Bank official interviewed for this study pointed out that it is a home-grown reform and noted with reference to teachers in particular: *“we do not get into personnel management.”*

Digitalization is not a priority

The first wave of introduction of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in the education system in Egypt began in the 1990s. This was followed by a quantitative enhancement of the ICT infrastructure in schools within the 2007 reforms. The introduction of digital learning in the MOE’s newest reforms relies mainly on two instruments: 1) the creation of the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) in December 2014; and 2) equipping general secondary students and teachers with computer tablets starting 2018 to facilitate the move to digital learning. The EKB was launched in 2014 as part of Egypt’s 2030 strategy (EKB 2018)²⁴. EKB is an online portal that includes books, articles and more on different branches of science including school curriculums. The portal is accessible to all “Egyptians from all ages” (EKB 2018). EKB also hosts the teaching material for “students of basic education, university students and postgraduate studies” and has partnered with some of the most prominent journals in the world such as Sage and Cambridge University Press (EKB 2018). A user only needs to register in order to be able to use EKB. As for the tablet computers, they were introduced in 2018 and are manufactured in Egypt with 40% of the components locally produced (Tawfeek 2020).

Impressions of the ICT-related measures were relatively homogeneous. The consultant for private schools found it bizarre to embark on a digitization journey when some areas lack the basic resources a school should have. Digitization should be considered as a *“tool and not a solution”* according to a development partner who emphasized that other areas necessitate more investment *“specifically education quality.”* An official at an international organization criticized MOE’s plans to transform all school books into tablets as *“looking at the screen for long periods can strain students’ eyes.”* Other experts pointed out that this abrupt digitization is anything but equitable as it *“destroys the concept of equal opportunities”* since only 20% to 30% of students have opportunities to reliably access the internet. The increase in school fees for public schools and reliance on ICT, where students and schools do not have the needed infrastructure is seen as exclusionary to large segments of the population. An official at an international organization who was very enthusiastic about EKB and the tablets mentioned that there is no measure of the impact these tools have on the actual quality of education apart from the number of users. He was very positive about the equipment of schools with more advanced technologies, but wondered if the teachers had received the proper training in order to be able to use them. As one scholar put it, in a context where *“the Egyptian education system has around a 300,000 shortage in teacher numbers in 2019”* and

²⁴ Official website of EKB: <https://int.ekb.eg/>

is lacking schools and equipment, digitization seems to come after at least a couple of priorities. However, the parliamentarian interviewed for this study underlined that conducting exams on tablets was aimed at solving the problem of cheating and saves the funds spent every year (close to EGP 3 billion) to secure the examinations.

Assessment reforms are positive if supported by additional resources

In the 2007 reform, MOE made it clear that positive results will be obtained only if the assessment system is overhauled (MOE 2007). Hence, MOE privileged comprehensive assessment, which is a form of combined assessment approach where students are assessed during the year and not only through a final exam. The assessment is ongoing through a portfolio, year's work and finally exams (MOE 2007). By embedding assessment within the instructional process, MOE seeks to render exams less important and to make students more interactive with the content (MOE 2007). The National System for Student Assessment was created in order to ensure this comprehensive assessment approach is implemented through four main components: "1. Comprehensive/ongoing assessment; 2. Standardized tests; 3. National end-of-level exams; and 4. International tests" (MOE 2007, 81). Little progress was made, however, and assessment reform returned to the agenda once more in 2014 along very similar lines. The main problems that the ministry faces with regards to assessment include cheating and the lack of basic skills such as writing and reading (MOE 2014). The general goal is to avoid the concentration on high stakes exams where students only perform to pass the exam and not to learn (MOE 2014).

Two sets of changes to assessments were introduced under Edu 2.0: one related to the early grades and the other to the general secondary track. In Edu 2.0, summative evaluation starts from grade 3 before which assessments are formative. According to one expert, in the grades prior to grade 3 where assessment is only "formative", teachers were trained to assess students through cards that "demonstrate in colors the achievement level: meeting exceeding or below expectations." The proposed policy attempts to remove formal exams from classes until Grade 3 and requires teachers to spend more time on learning-oriented informal assessment activities. In addition, the policy introduces assessment tools for literacy and numeracy in Grade 4 and includes some benchmarks for schools. This latter element can be considered a positive step towards tracking progress in primary classes, although it is not clear how the assessment data, resulting from the proposed national Grade 4 test, will be used in classes (Gebriel 2021). This appeared to be a significant change to several respondents and a private school consultant referred to it as a huge novelty. However, automatic transition has already been the norm in public schools for decades in the early grades (students moving to the next grade regardless of exam results) and similar initiatives of eliminating summative assessment since the 1990s have been introduced and reversed, likely because formative assessment might be very challenging to implement in light of teacher shortages, absenteeism, abilities and very large classrooms in addition to low trust and informal privatization in the system (parents not trusting classroom teachers with assessment for fear that they might be unfair to students who do not enroll in tutoring with them). The COVID-19 situation complicated implementation and revealed the widening learning inequalities that will result from the disruption caused by the pandemic. At first students were required to submit one research project in the place of a final exam (without prior training or instruction). The following year, schools and educational districts were required to design one exam for all subjects in order for students to pass for the next year (grades 3 to 8). These measures resulted in reports of parents solving the exam on the street and model answers passed on by teachers and prepared research projects being sold in small bookshops and street stalls, all arguably concealing very poor learning.

There have been various attempts at reforming the school exit exam in the general secondary track, *Thanawiya Amma*, over the decades. This has amounted to tinkering at the margins where the number of years over which the exams are spread out has changed from one to two

to one to two again, with different opportunities for retaking the exams. These changes aimed to alleviate the stress and cost of private tutoring associated with the exams, not their learning outcomes in terms of skills and abilities or assessment methods themselves. The most recent reform since 2018 made the shift to Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) with no essay questions or oral component, reducing the human error/judgment factor in marking. Another key element of assessment reforms is developing a suite of computer-based tests for Grades 10, 11, and 12 that will be administered annually. The suggested periodic exams will be computer-based and developed in collaboration with an international testing company. MOE expects that the new examination system will enhance public confidence, diminish the extent of cheating and other forms of malpractice, and reduce student and teacher absenteeism related to the rise of private tutoring, thereby also reducing the financial burden on parents (World Bank 2018). The new assessment system will consist of the aggregation of a GPA, which will be calculated over the grades 10 to 12. This score will allow graduation from high school and only temporarily serve for the purpose of university admission (World Bank 2018). According to respondents, MOE opted for this form of assessment in an attempt to speed up marking in classrooms where students are more than 80 in number, and also to decrease any unfair marking in cases where tests are taken online through the tablet. The policy change promised a focus on critical thinking skills, research, inquiry, creativity and promoting a love of learning. However, there has been no change to the curricula in this track and there is little assessment of writing, synthesis and communications skills, and limited emphasis on school activities.

Despite the positive aspects of this change, its abruptness and its coupling with exams being completed on the student's own tablets overshadowed its reception. While there is a global movement away from standardized testing (e.g. SAT and GMAT) that contribute to undue stress, perpetuate inequalities and drive private tutoring, expert views overlapped with these critiques in some areas, but also focused on the glaring capacity and implementation issues. A number of respondents pointed out the key problems with relying on standardized test, especially highlighting that there is little assessment of writing and communication skills. The question of meaningful changes to skills and learning outcomes remains unclear, as official preparation guides and sample exams in 2021 in fact show a clear focus on memorization and rudimentary recollection of facts, as evident in the official sample history exams examined by one of the curriculum scholars interviewed for this study. Another expert working with an international agency explained that "*we do not have the expertise in Egypt to develop this kind of assessment*" in terms of sophisticated MSQs and the training received in this regard has not been sufficient. According to one respondent, the changes to general secondary are "*rituals on the margin.*" They do not touch the value of knowledge, the role of schools, the bureaucratic disintegration and corruption.

Other scholars critiqued the focus on assessment as an approach to reform, because its support and remedial role is secondary; they argue that the focus should be on improved learning. Some scholars also criticized the prominent dichotomy between memorization and higher order as they are deeply codependent. A development partner official noted, however, that while the approach of changing curricula from the bottom up and assessment from the top might be unusual, it touches on the critical role of assessment in aligning incentives and tackling rote learning. The coupling of assessment reform with the move to online learning and examination has delayed and complicated its implementation. The COVID-19 crisis also disrupted the implementation of the new system. The changes are too new for any formal evaluation to emerge and most of the social dissatisfaction voiced in various media forums has focused on the technical problems in the move to online exams. The general impression is that there has been little change to the private tutoring cost and stress associated with the exams, as well as patterns of cheating, hacking and misuse of the tablets (see Abdellatif 2021). Overall, respondents questioned the likely impact on tutoring and cheating, while welcoming a potential focus on higher order skills.

Conclusion

The literature on political settlement has attempted to link political variables to the adoption and implementation of learning reforms by examining the concentration of power and the functioning of the bureaucracy in different settings. Unfortunately, existing evidence does not suggest that such typologies can account for either political commitment or actual capacity to successfully carry out learning reforms. The literature also points to political variables that make learning reforms more difficult than ensuring access to education. Again, it is not clear that that distinction is always clear-cut. There are considerable overlaps between access and quality policies and greater differentiation is essential for better characterization of the causes and appropriate responses to the learning crisis in different contexts. Other political variables that have more promise in explaining the adoption of learning reforms include international factors, ideas about equity and the existence of political entrepreneurs who are able to rally the support of the poor.

This study examined these arguments in the case of Egypt, a country which has recently embarked on an overhaul of its education system in an attempt to address its learning crisis. In interviewing leading experts with shorter and longer involvement in the sector, this study highlights the continuities in reform plans and shows how such continuities underline expert skepticism of the expected impact of the reforms. Especially for those with longer involvement in the sector, respondent views underlined the continuity of trends in the reform agenda from fundamental issues around equity, to programs relating to technology, professional development, curriculum change and assessment. In explaining the development and implementation of the new reforms, most respondents remarked on the absence of equity considerations and limited attention to the conditions of more disadvantaged schools at the core of the learning crisis. Beyond serious implementation issues, introducing technology and new curricula to solve problems that are driven by teacher recruitment, compensation and lack of basic infrastructure is not a new trend. Digitalization and deskilling measures that have been promoted as surpassing resource limitations and dependence on teachers were therefore deemed by most experts as doing little to overcome the fundamental resource distribution issues driving the learning crisis. Curricular reforms that are seen as promising in advancing learning are introduced without addressing the fundamental challenges of very high teacher and classroom shortages, particularly affecting less privileged students. Assessment reforms in the early grades, whose basic orientation is welcomed by most experts, also face significant resource limitations. Assessment reforms in the more privileged academic track of the secondary stage towards standardized testing and digital learning were faced with skepticism relating to the kinds of skills they promote, and the expected impact on tutoring and cheating in the system, in addition to debilitating implementation issues.

In sum, and in contrast to directions toward de-skilling, austerity and privatization, most respondents believed that reforms should involve investment in strong teachers and expansion in teacher hiring, especially in the primary and pre-primary stages. Furthermore, in contrast with sporadic remote digital training on the new curricula, most respondents stressed the need for extended and immersed in-person coaching to enable teachers to deliver the new curricula. Despite consensus on some key areas, the study also uncovers differences among leading experts around the adopted reforms. On the one hand, stakeholders working closely with the ministry in the development and implementation of reforms and international development agencies seemed to be cautiously enthusiastic about the new initiatives, despite appreciating the resource constraints that would hamper implementation and impact. Some of them could be thought of as part of a pragmatic camp that understands that only limited changes can be undertaken given the severe resource constraints facing the MOE. On the other hand, experts not working directly with MOE, and those with longer histories of engagement in the field, seemed concerned with the clear continuities with earlier reform programs that have done little to avert the current learning challenges, including inappropriate prioritization and

resource allocation (shortages in teachers and schools in the hundreds of thousands), underpaid teachers, and issues around the cultural and democratic values the school is intended to promote.

Across the experts, a unified agenda for promoting learning seemed to be missing. Some experts found promise in alignment reforms (curriculum and assessment), while others considered them tinkering on the margins. Some experts saw equity as being at the core of advancing learning and others framed it as an area that could have been—but was not—chosen as a priority. Some experts underlined the importance of early childhood and the regular reliable measurement of learning, while others did not mention these aspects. In sum, the importance of early childhood education, of equity considerations and of measuring learning were not equally emphasized by different experts, even if there was more agreement around the centrality of resource constraints and improved teaching quality and the lack of interest in digital reforms. Popular opinions of the reforms were far more negative than many of the expert views, as reflected in the media and recent parliamentary debates (even if parliament has very few opposition voices).

In a heated parliamentary debate in December 2021, a member of parliament charged that the Ministry's reforms plans must be referring to another society, decrying the vast gap between curriculum reform and the state of the education system with classrooms reaching 120 students and severe shortages of chairs, schools and teachers.²⁵ Other parliamentarians referenced the massive shortages of teachers, cleaning staff and schools and the waste of state resources implied in investing in ICT, with serious implementation hurdles and no tangible impact in the educational process. In a subsequent parliamentary discussion, another parliamentarian accused the government of legislating 'for another planet.' By the summer of 2022, the Minister of Education who had championed these reforms was removed.

It is not clear how much of the same programs will continue, although resource constraints are likely to worsen as Egypt negotiates a new IMF loan that promises harsher austerity measures. The member of parliament interviewed for this study explained, however, that MOE is doing its best, that the reforms are a state-sponsored project and not just an MOE project, that it is too soon to evaluate them and that billions are needed for schools and teachers. Such recognition of the massive resources needed to make real improvements in the system might signal some hope for addressing the learning crisis in Egypt. Nonetheless, greater consensus over the means to addressing the crisis is critical for enhancing the commitment, capacity and potential coalitions for adopting and implementing learning reforms in the future.

²⁵ This parliamentary session was covered by various media outlets, see for example (Abdullatif 2021).

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