



Teachers protest Ministry of Education's merit pay exams, August 30, 2008.

HOSSAM EL-HAMALAWY

Investing in Inequality Education Reform in Egypt

Marion Wood Dixon

Beginning in the late summer of 2008 teachers in Egypt have waged a series of public protests against new assessment exams that would determine whether they would receive pay increases or not. In protest teachers argue that the exams are humiliating, questioning their ability to teach regardless of performance or years on the job. They protest that the exams do not assess accurately that ability anyway, as teachers are often tested on subjects that they do not teach. Above all, they protest because the Ministry of Education's assessment exams contravene 2007 legislation issuing a 50 percent salary increase for teachers—a phased-in increase over three years that teachers won after years of protest against their unlivable wages.

Marion Wood Dixon is a doctoral student in sociology at Cornell University.

While teachers demonstrate, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) proudly proclaims the assessment or “proficiency” exams its own accomplishment: 847,000 teachers taking the first round of exams—“a first step in establishing national standards for the Egyptian teaching profession.”¹ But the problems with the education system go far beyond teacher qualifications. The system is plagued by insufficient funds, overcrowding and a pedagogy based on rote memorization. Common complaints among Egyptian students, parents and teachers are that little is taught in classrooms, with too many students, too many classes and too little time. Humiliation and physical punishment are common, as is cheating. Violence and theft among students are also prevalent in schools.

Despite education reforms implemented alongside neoliberal economic reforms over the past decade, the

Egyptian education system is deteriorating. Low salaries and inadequate funding for schools have led to a growth in private tutoring by teachers employed by the state, creating an informal education market to compensate for the shortcomings of the public sector. The troubles of teachers in the wake of Egypt's economic reform agenda are similar to that of other civil servants and industrial workers who have waged protests over the past five years over an eroding public sector and declining living standards.

The Perpetual Reform Agenda

Education and education reform have been on the agenda of USAID and other international development agencies for the past two decades. By the end of the Cold War international development efforts turned increasingly toward human development concerns, education being one key human development indicator. With spiraling debts and structural adjustments, recipient governments were increasingly subject to international pressure in determining their national development policies.

One of the key moments in cementing education's role in development and the universal education reform agenda was the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's World Conference on Education For All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990. At the EFA major international organizations, donors and governments unanimously pledged to achieve universal primary education and reduce illiteracy before the year 2000. When the Egyptian government signed on to the international pledge in Jomtien and declared the 1990s its "education decade," it faced a slew of International Monetary Fund-imposed structural adjustments and a package of education reforms pushed mostly by the World Bank and USAID to decentralize, standardize, privatize and equalize.

Efforts to decentralize and standardize education have been somewhat contradictory. For instance, attempts to provide schools rather than education ministries with more control over schooling have been accompanied by the establishment of national standards for teaching staff and management, such as the contentious USAID-sponsored teacher assessment exams.

A gamut of policy incentives have been created to attract private investment in education and to put an end to distortions in the labor market. The World Bank, economic think tanks and others call for more private schools and generally for more private investment in education in Egypt. Additionally, they propose public-private partnerships for technical training programs. The private sector is supposed to relieve the state by providing educational services the state is already failing to provide. To tackle labor market distortions, the government has repeatedly been pushed to completely close the door on employment guarantees for university graduates, a guarantee issued in 1962 but significantly phased out since the 1980s.

Reforms have ostensibly aimed to make access to quality education equitable by providing schooling in underserved

areas and focusing more educational resources on primary education. In repeated development reports the World Bank has called on the Egyptian government to change its policy bias favoring university education to the detriment of lower levels—a policy the Bank says privileges the middle and upper classes who are more likely to go on to university. Likewise, a turn away from higher education reforms would mean more technical training at the secondary level.

Initially, the universal education reform agenda was presented as an issue of human development; later, it became part of the Millennium Development Goals established in 2000. In the last couple of years, international development agencies have related the significance of education reform to human security—the idea that freedom from want and freedom from fear are necessary to achieve national and global security. The content of most reforms has not changed, however. Reforms have squarely been of a neoliberal variety, based on the belief that economic liberalization, and in particular privatization, will bring about social progress.

A Paradox of Neoliberal Reforms

Since the Egyptian government signed the EFA pledge and declared the 1990s its "education decade," huge strides were made toward universal basic education: The net enrollment ratio in primary school was at 94 percent in 2005, a near 10 percent increase from 1990.² The literacy rate of the 15–24 age group jumped more than 10 percent to nearly 87 percent during the same period. Despite these advancements, the education system has been deteriorating under the pressure of growing student-teacher ratios, worsening school building standards and a much weakened teaching profession. Even the UN Development Program-compiled education index for Egypt, which grew from 1996 to 2006, ostensibly indicating the success of education reforms, reveals low overall enrollments and high dropout rates.

This paradox may be explained in part by the fact that under structural adjustment public expenditures on education were steady but limited to around 5 percent of GDP, while civil servants' salaries were suppressed. As of 2002 teachers made up the largest sector of civil servants in Egypt and received among the lowest salaries. By lowering the status of teachers, low salaries fuel absenteeism, minimal classroom initiative and informalization of classroom teaching through private tutoring—all factors that contribute to poor-quality education.

Indeed, widespread deterioration of public education in the developing world is often attributed to lack of funds. At the Dakar Forum in April 2000, the follow-up to the EFA, it was reported that education had received much less than the EFA target from states and international development agencies. Faced with mounting protests and public discontent, states are stuck in a quagmire. While pledging to meet international development standards, they struggle to maintain legitimacy as the public sector deteriorates. In Egypt, faced with a



A technical school in Cairo.

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record budget deficit (in the fiscal year 2009–2010), Egyptian policymakers are in another scramble to find the funds for public provisions. Although assurances have been made that, as with the military and security, education funding will not be touched, public doubts remain that the teacher pay increase mandated in 2006–2007 will be fully realized. The budget crunch and the USAID-sponsored standardization plan denying a raise to teachers who do not pass the assessment exam weigh against this reform initiative.

Subsidizing the Private Sector

This neoliberal paradox is not merely explained by pressure to curb public spending under structural adjustment policies. Suppression of public spending is part and parcel of policies that are redirecting public wealth into fewer private hands.

After signing onto the international human development agenda, Egypt followed structural adjustment policies

with vigor. By the end of the 1990s the African Development Bank Group was praising Egypt for meeting expectations under the 1991 Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program. Egypt then continued not only to sell off public assets (a process that began in the 1990s) but also to take on more comprehensive “business reforms”—a series of tax, regulatory and other incentives to streamline private-sector investment. In this decade of business reforms, Egypt has topped the World Bank’s list of global reformers, making the “Top 10” list in three of the last four years and ranking number one in 2008.

While the government was forging ahead with the basic education agenda, a large formal, legal space for private education was being hastily carved out. Law 306 of 1993 paved the way for a private school system—distinct from the non-public, religious schools that existed previously. The private schools were to assist in primary, general secondary and technical secondary levels, as well as in teaching foreign languages, and would follow the official curricula set by the Ministry of Education. During this time there was also a sharp rise in technical secondary school enrollments, and the introduction of private universities following Law 107 in 1995.³ One of the catalysts of the explosion in private schools and universities—and of the

country’s privatization agenda in general—has been what the World Bank calls the largest new cities program in the world. The Egyptian government has built 20 new cities over the past 20 years and is planning to build 45 more. The first wave of new cities was launched in the mid-1970s at the start of Sadat’s “Open Door” Policy and the beginning of Egypt’s privatization drive. In this push to privatize, the new cities were established as industrial zones for the private sector with incentive packages of low taxes and nearly free land. Then, a decade later, the government launched nine second-generation settlements around Greater Cairo. The latest of the new cities programs include twin towns close to provincial capitals. The public cost of the new cities program has been substantial, gobbling up 22 percent of the Ministry of Infrastructure’s investment between 1997 and 2001.

The expansion of Greater Cairo has enabled the growth of private schools and universities. Investment schools, or schools run by businesses for profit, and internationally accredited private universities have popped up in satellites like New Cairo

and Sixth of October City and in new “business districts” like Ismailiyya Desert and Alexandria Desert Roads. A massive new publicly funded road network, along with cheap land and amenities, has attracted private investors to put up the initial overhead needed to start a school or university.

Among the first wave of investment schools were prominent English-medium schools headquartered in the Gulf. These schools are often family businesses, and following the 1991 Gulf war families established schools in other areas of the Middle East, including Cairo. In effect, the Gulf investment schools became branches in region-wide businesses, with families owning and running schools from Beirut to Dubai to Cairo. Most of the elite private schools with American accreditation were established during the early to mid-1990s in Cairo proper, but in the past year or two—attracted by cheap land and tax incentives—they have moved outward, to the satellites of Greater Cairo.

The wave of privatization in education that was supposed to “fill in the gaps” of public provision has instead served those who can afford a private education. Lower taxes and less regulation have led to an explosion in private language schools and (less so) universities, and have transformed what was perhaps the preserve of the elite in the 1990s into a norm for upper middle-class families today, especially in Greater Cairo.

Even more, privatization has ushered in a new meaning and purpose of development. Education’s purpose of contributing to human development is now tied to market considerations, specifically, how education can meet industry needs and trends. Private schools do not just provide the well-to-do with a superior education. They provide the upper classes with the skills and acculturation needed to become players in the global market.

Export Quality

International development agencies, the World Bank in particular, have been pushing Egypt to reallocate public funds away from higher education and toward primary and secondary education. The government’s push away from higher education began in the 1980s through measures such as the suspension of public sector job guarantees for university graduates, and later accelerated after the international development pledge for universal basic education. Although one of the arguments in favor of primary schooling or “basic education” is that it allows lower income brackets a greater proportion of education funds, the concern over basic education cannot be divorced from the plan under structural adjustments to build export economies in developing countries. Being an exporter means not only having an elite who can wheel and deal in the world of global finance, but also having a substantial base of semi-skilled laborers. If there is a sufficient “qualified” (i.e., semi-skilled) labor base, Egypt can produce cheap goods and services for export, becoming a bigger player in the export market.

International calls for basic education have been coupled with calls for improvements in the quality of education—specifically, devising a system that moves beyond rote memorization. The UNDP’s 2009 Arab Human Development Report argues that the failure of the Arab world’s education systems is a major development obstacle—and Egypt along with its developing counterparts are the main culprits. In other words, the new economy relies not just on assembly-line workers but also on service workers and middle managers. Despite a decade of increased privatization, by the early 1990s Egypt saw little foreign direct investment and investors complained that there was no middle management in Egypt.⁴

Informal Privatization

Substantial public funds for private schools and universities, and the World Bank’s continued calls for more and greater privatization, paint the picture of a largely state-controlled education system with few private actors. But much of the system is already privatized informally through private tutoring.

Private tutoring in Egypt became rife as early as the 1980s, likely following a 1984 mandate limiting university enrollments in the mid-1980s. It has since exploded, and now cuts across socio-economic classes. The rich as well as the poor pay for private tutoring. In 2005, 56 percent of families across Egypt on average paid for private tutoring for their school-aged children. That percentage is up to 64 percent when isolated to private tutoring in urban areas.⁵

The Egypt Human Development Report 2005 survey of Egyptian households found that families rated private tutoring the greatest problem with the education system. It takes considerable time and money. Students go for hours of tutoring after school—and the costs add up: Private tutoring takes on average 22 percent of a family’s education budget.⁶ In a highly competitive education system with a perceived lack of quality, families feel they do not have much of a choice but to pay for private tutoring. And with insufficient income (in both private and public schools) teachers feel they do not have a choice but to tutor after school.

Another perhaps more glaring characteristic of the neoliberal restructuring of education is NGO-ization. The 2005 Egypt Human Development Report devoted to civil society highlights the heightened role of NGOs in the education sector—particularly in providing pre-school education and adequate schooling in under-served areas.

This explosion in the informal market of education may have come as a surprise in the face of extensive education reform efforts, but it is a direct consequence of reform strategies informed by neoliberal principles. Private tutoring is the informal side of privatization, the consequence of weakened public provisions in a deindustrialized era. Work and pay in the civil service have steadily dropped, while the costs of living

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emancipation to be consistent with socialist and internationalist values and any prospect of realization to encompass Israeli as well as Palestinian national rights.

The Gulf war of 1990–1991 created some political distance between Fred and *Middle East Report*. MERIP opposed Iraq's invasion and attempted annexation of Kuwait, but did not share Fred's support for the US-led military intervention to expel Iraqi forces, though many of us agreed that an end to the bloody dictatorship of Saddam Hussein would have to stand on the positive side of any balance sheet of the war. But this distance never became a rupture: *MER* continued to publish Fred's essays and reviews (his "revisit" of *Arabia Without Sultans* appeared in *MER* 204), though these did not appear as frequently, and Fred's academic and other work often cited *MER* articles on the

consequences of the war and US policies in the region. Fred often paid generous public tribute to MERIP for what he called "a unique combination of scholarship, moral commitment and independence of judgment."

In an interview published several years ago in *Salmgundi*, Fred spoke of "the vocation of an internationalist intellectual" as "beyond supporting human rights in these [Middle Eastern] countries, actually to try and promote informed discussion which may feed into public debate and education." For Fred I cannot think of a higher tribute than that he paid to Maxime Rodinson, his *murshid akbar*: "a man of the highest scholarly standards, firmest of analytic visions, and consistent and measured moral responses."

—Joe Stork

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have steadily risen, forcing people of many different trades and professions to find work, for example, as tutors, taxi drivers, construction workers or black market peddlers.

Securing the State

The universal education reform agenda had initially been promoted as a national security measure, at least rhetorically.⁷ In the 1990s the regime felt threatened by rising Islamism and education reforms were promoted as a way to drown out the "fundamentalist schools" that were servicing underserved areas. Essentially, in pledging to meet the EFA mandate, Egypt had not just been signing onto the new international order of "human development;" it was attempting to address its own security issues as well. By adopting structural adjustment policies, however, other security issues have emerged in the form of public unrest and the Egyptian state is now backpedaling in an attempt to enforce stronger regulations as it faces a growing crisis of legitimacy.

As a result, in decree after decree since the initial wave of privatization in education in the 1990s the Egyptian government has been attempting to impose more regulatory measures on private schools. For instance, in 2002 the Ministry of Education set up a council to improve the legal framework regulating private universities and in 2008 the Ministry set a minimum age for school enrollment. As of the 2008–2009 school year regulations of the formal private education market continue to be weak, however. The accreditation process for international schools lacks transparency. Schools claim to be American- or British-accredited but how they meet which educational body's standards is often unclear.

The introduction of these private international schools for the upper middle classes and elite has raised fears of growing inequality in educational provisions, especially given that the quality of public education has continued to decline after two decades of perpetual reform. Unless one has 40,000 plus Egyptian pounds to spend per year on an elite international

school education, the quality of education received even for the upper middle classes is indeed quite low.

Under processes of privatization more and more people face not only unregulated working conditions in the informal market, but also weaker labor regulations in the formal market. Teachers and support staff in public and private schools face low pay and arbitrary treatment in a strictly hierarchical education system. They are routinely threatened and denied pay.⁸ They lack representation: Teachers' unions operating within the public system are essentially unions of the state and in private schools there is no decision-making body to represent them.

More than state security concerns over a loosely regulated private education market, the state's security concern becomes one over its very legitimacy before the public. Rather than contribute to a new export economy, neoliberal education reforms have revealed the failed promises of development. Hopes of human development quickly turned to cries of discontent over a largely informalized education system with weak labor regulations and low educational standards. By marrying human development initiatives to market-led growth, neoliberal reforms have helped create huge pools of the formally unemployed and underemployed—a disgruntled mass that represents the achievement of neither human security nor state security. ■

Endnotes

1 USAID Egypt, *A Partnership for Prosperity: 2004–2009 Accomplishments*, available online at: <http://egypt.usaid.gov/Default.aspx?pageid=573>.

2 All education figures from the period 1990 to 2006 are from *Egypt Human Development Report 2008*.

3 Before 1996 the only private university in Egypt was the American University in Cairo, so named because it was chartered in the United States.

4 Alan Richards, *Higher Education in Egypt*, World Bank Policy Research Working Papers: Education and Employment, WPS 862 (1992).

5 *Egypt Human Development Report 2005*.

6 *Egypt Human Development Report 2008*.

7 Fatma H. Sayed, *Transforming Education in Egypt: Western Influence and Domestic Policy Reform* (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), p. 27.

8 On conditions in public schools, see Kamal Naguib, "The Production and Reproduction of Culture in Egyptian Schools." Assertions about private schools are based on the author's teaching experience in a private language school (2008–2009), as well as numerous conversations with Egyptian and foreign teacher colleagues.