

# EDUCATION 2.0

## CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

EDITED BY  
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# 5. ‘We Break the Rules’: Interview with Deena Boraie

*Linda Herrera*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Deena Boraie, Senior Advisor for Assessment, Examinations, and Curriculum at the Ministry of Education (2017-2022), recounts how she joined the advisory team of the Minister of Education Tarek Shawki with a mission to ‘transform’, rather than ‘reform’ the education system. She explains their unorthodox approach to educational change and how they ‘broke the rules’ by, for example, foregoing piloting and consultations with the communities on the ground. She outlines the two main pillars of the reform, namely, to build a new curriculum and teaching methodology starting with the early primary years, and to change the structure and design of the Thanaweya Amma high school exit/university entrance exam which drives the system into rote memorization and superficial learning. While they succeeded with the former, the later faced public and political pushback and they were only able to make incremental inroads.

## Keywords

American University in Cairo, curriculum reform, evaluation, impact assessment, international donors, piloting, professional development, school-based reform, teacher training, testing, Thanaweya Amma, TOEFL, World Bank, USAID

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1 This interview took place on 10 and 14 June 2021 in Cairo.

## 1. A Career in Education and Assessment

*LH What positions do you currently hold at the American University in Cairo (AUC) and the Ministry of Education and Technical Education?*

DB<sup>2</sup> I am the Vice President for Student Life at the American University in Cairo and the Senior Advisor for Assessment, Examinations and Curriculum at the Ministry of Education. I am also overseeing the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of teachers, but it is not in my title. My colleague Nelly (El Zayat) works closely with me on CPD and the curriculum (see Chapter 7 in this volume).

*LH I know your first degree was in chemistry. How did you end up working in educational assessments?*

DB When I look back, I realize that life is unpredictable and hence, very interesting. At one point I imagined I was going to be the next Madame Curie, enjoying the chemistry lab. I was working on my master's degree in chemistry after I got married. One day as I was walking through the campus of AUC, I saw an advertisement, 'Free training course teaching English'. The course was offered by the Division of Public Service (DPS), which is now called the School of Continuing Education. If you passed this course, you would be able to teach. I was just a lab assistant at that time doing my master's degree and I was attracted to, you know, more money. So, I went through the teacher English language training course, and I did well. I passed my demo, and I started teaching. I was teaching in the lab during the day and teaching English in the evening.

Back then in the 1980s, I was in my late twenties and my students were adults. They were much older than me. I honestly fell in love with teaching these lovely Egyptians who wanted to learn English. And so, I did both chemistry and teaching English. When I finished my master's degree, I thought about doing a PhD in the UK in chemistry. At the same time, DPS offered me a fellowship to do a second master's degree in teaching English. I really loved teaching English, so I took the fellowship.

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2 Deena Boraie was Senior Advisor for Assessment, Examinations, and Curriculum at the Ministry of Education and Technical Education from 2017 to 2022. For a comprehensive account of her professional life, see her LinkedIn profile (<https://eg.linkedin.com/in/deena-boraie-36b75410>).

My science background sort of surfaced while I was doing my master's degree. I was introduced into language testing with my professor, Fred Perry.<sup>3</sup> His area of expertise was not quite in psychometrics but in education measurement. He identified my scientific skills and could tell I loved numbers, unlike many of my classmates who seemed to fear them. That is when my passion for language assessment and testing started. I found that this specialization fit me very well. Later, after finishing the master's, I took another course with him on advanced testing. That is where it all began.

*LH Did you make a full professional transition to language and assessment?*

*DB* Yes. I was hired full-time in the English Language Institute (ELI) at AUC. I was given release time to work with Professor Perry in the testing unit. Back then we used to develop the English language admissions test in-house for incoming AUC students. The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and the TOEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) were not yet recognized by AUC. I worked with a wonderful assessment specialist named Rozanne Hozayen who taught me all the practical hands-on skills for designing tests, evaluating test items, reviewing the whole process from A to Z. I had both the theoretical background and the practical experience. That is how I learned to be a good language testing professional. That is my story in terms of my area of specialization.

I received a promotion to build the testing unit at the Center for Adult and Continued Education (CACE) which became the School of Continuing Education (SCE). This was my first real administrative position. I created the admissions test for the school and was a coordinator for testing in the English language program. I then became head of the Testing Unit and ran it for ten years. CACE consumed my life. I was doing a lot of work. I had this dream to do my Ph.D., but this meant I had to lessen my admin load. So, when Fred Perry gave me the opportunity to come back to the academic side of the university to work under him, I said yes, right away. My main task was to oversee the university's English language admissions tests for undergraduates

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3 As of 2024, Fred L. Perry was a professor emeritus in the English Language Institute at The American University in Cairo. For more information, see the AUC website listing (<https://www.aucegypt.edu/fac/fred-perry>).

and graduates and to create new forms every year. Student admissions work happens in cycles which meant I had heavy work at certain times but not year-round. This is when I started my whole series of education consultancies which was allowed. These became my parallel life. I was also able to finish my doctoral degree.

*LH In what ways did consulting in education projects prepare you for the advising work you would eventually do with the Ministry of Education?*

DB Through my consultancies, I started learning about the education context in Egypt. I worked with almost all the agencies at that time. I worked at the World Bank as a monitoring and evaluation consultant and went on several missions to review the outcomes and impacts of their projects. I learned a lot from their local and international consultants. I also worked as a consultant with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) as their education performance management expert. It was a two-year consultancy from 2006-2008 and they loaned me to the Ministry of Education as a strategic planning consultant to write one chapter of their strategic plan. At that time, there was a visionary deputy minister of education, Dr. Hassan El-Bilawi,<sup>4</sup> who had a brand-new vision to change the K-12 education system. It was a school-based vision with all the reform strategies focused on the school. I wrote the curriculum chapter for their new strategic plan. I also worked with USAID on several consultancies on the impact of teacher training, testing, and evaluation of teachers and students, validation of performance standards for pre-service teachers in faculties of education, and an impact assessment of the Professional Academy of Teachers (PAT). Through these experiences, I got to know and understand how public schools and teachers work. I also learned a lot about how higher education works.

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4 Dr. Hassan El-Bilawi (PhD University of Pittsburgh, 1980) is a leading professor of Sociology of Education in Egypt based at Helwan University. He served as Chairman of the Committee of Teacher Education Sector at the Supreme Council of Egyptian Universities of the Ministry of Higher Education, and Secretary General of the Arab Council for Childhood and Development (ACCD). For further information on his former positions, see <https://mbrf.ae/literacychallenge/en/speakers/dr-hassan-hussein-el-bilawi>

I maintained my base at AUC which has given me a lot of insights into American education, its strengths versus what we are doing in public education in our country. At AUC I rose through the ranks and became a Dean of the School of Continuing Education, and then moved to my current position as Vice President for Student Affairs.

*LH Have you ever taught in an Egyptian university?*

*DB Yes, I taught for fifteen years in Cairo University in their master's and Ph.D. programs. This gave me insights into our public universities. For example, the classrooms were very different from what I was used to. I taught from a small, elevated stage. Students are seated in rows of benches like pews in a church. That was a fascinating experience for me. I loved my experience teaching in Cairo University and my students and academic colleagues were wonderful.*

## 2. On Becoming Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Education

*LH What is your current arrangement with the Ministry of Education? Are you hired as an advisor?*

*DB What I am doing now as an advisor is pro bono, my service to Egypt. I have been working as an advisor since 2017, before Dr. Tarek started as minister. At that time, President El-Sisi assigned him to head the Presidential Councils and to start a new program called the Presidential Leadership Program (PLP) for youth. Because of my expertise as a testing and evaluation consultant, he called me to design the assessment tools for the program. These included an English test, the interviews, and so on. That was very successful, and this program was transformed into an institutional entity. It has survived and is still working well. They have now added an Executive PLP program, which is also very successful. When Dr. Tarek became minister, he wanted me to leave AUC to work with him, but I persuaded him that I could handle both jobs. It has been five years now, and it is working. So that is my history, always working with Egypt's education systems on the side, from this wonderful institution, AUC.*

*LH How did you initially get to know Tarek Shawki?*

DB As I mentioned, I was Dean of the School of Continuing Education at AUC and sat on the Provost's Council. Dr. Tarek, who was the Dean of the School of Sciences and Engineering, was also on the Provost's Council. That is where we met, and where we clicked. We would meet for coffee and talk about my passion for education assessment. That was between 2013-2014. Many years ago, at UNESCO, he headed the project for creating a framework for teachers' IT skills. He has always been deeply passionate about ICT and education.<sup>5</sup> That is the story of how I came to be here now as a senior advisor.

### 3. Reimagining the Education System from Scratch

*LH When Dr. Tarek was appointed Minister of Education in 2017, he had a vision to rebuild the K-12 system but did not have a specific blueprint for how to do it. What was the role of his advisors in the reform? Did you work together as a team?*

DB When Dr. Tarek became minister, he created what he called the 'Dream Team'. There were about eight or ten of us, I cannot remember the exact number of advisors because very few are left (see Fig. 5.1). I think Nelly (El Zayat) and I are the only two left standing. There is also Shireen who is running the office now. When we started, we used to meet at the Ministry of Education building in Zamalek where the minister has an office. We met around a long table until they renovated his office at the Ministry (in downtown Cairo). I remember at those meetings he always talked about the blank sheet of paper, meaning we would start from scratch. He is an engineer, so he looks at a problem logically. He concluded that we were not going to do an analysis of the past because reforms have been done over and over again, and we still had deep problems with our system. About a year before he became minister there was a national outcry about Egypt's low educational rankings and poor performance on international assessments. He would

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5 Tarek Shawki was Director for the Regional UNESCO Bureau for Science and Technology in Arab States based in Cairo (2008-2012), and Chief of the Sector for ICTs in Education, Science and Culture, based in Paris (2005-2008).

tell us to start brainstorming on how we could approach the education system in a different way, something completely different. That is how the new system was born. We all sat together and brainstormed.

The traditional way was that you had to have these massive documents with extensive plans and frameworks. We decided we were not going to do that. Instead, we came up with a very crisp document, ('Education 2.0: Vision and Strategy. Egypt's Transformation Program 2018-2030').<sup>6</sup> We decided we had to be flexible because there are always assumptions when you set plans. However, when you go to implement them, they do not work. So, we decided to make it very lean and mean. This way, we were able to remove, add, delete, and develop plans and strategies as we went along. This is where I think we have been very unique.



Fig. 5.1 Tarek Shawki (center) with his team of advisors, 2018. Deena Boraie is seventh from right. Photo courtesy of Deena Boraie.

*LH In the early days when you were working from a blank slate, what did you especially want to change? What were the priorities?*

*DB Two main things were included in our pillars. The first was the Thanaweya Amma, of course. To me as an assessment person, this test*

6 This document was a concept note by the title, 'Education 2.0: Vision and Strategy. Egypt's Transformation Program (2018-2030)' issued May 2018. The document can be accessed via the website of the Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gO8G5J3meYhBi7n7GIL4gNjf4EWE8Eku/view>

is a horror. The problem is not about having an admissions test for the university. There is a lot of research showing that Egyptians view the Tansiq system, the admissions platform to enter higher education, as fair. For me as an educator, the main awful issue is the actual structure and design of the test. It drives the system into rote memorization and very superficial learning. Education systems internationally moved away from memorization to understanding and problem solving a long time ago. Learning and education should be about deep learning and skills development. This test has nothing to do with either of these.

My second dream was that we ‘transform’, not ‘reform’ the system. Transformation starts from that completely blank sheet. Reform is fixing. We are reforming the Thanaweya Amma because we are just changing the test, not the curriculum. That will come later. The high school curriculum still runs on the Education 1.0 system. The transformation is coming with new Education 2.0 curriculum which we started rolling out for KG to Grade 3. We have done professional development for teachers and curriculum training at our national curriculum center (Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development) because 2.0 is based on a totally new methodology. If you have seen the books, the methodology, the teacher’s guides, you can say the transformation is to the max. Textbooks used to be commissioned through a system of bribes and kickbacks. They were not really professional, and the curriculum was weak compared to international standards. Now we have a very good group of curriculum designers here who have learned a lot.

#### 4. Redefining the Relationship with Donors

*LH A lot of the work you are doing involves international cooperation with various donors and partners. From what I have observed, you work in very different ways compared to your predecessors. Are you trying to redefine the rules of engagement with international partners?*

**DB** Yes, we are completely different. We break the rules, we really do. The donors make assumptions about us, categorize us as a ‘low-income country’, but we refuse these labels. We want to aim high and not be put in the box of the low-income countries. If we set the bar really high, we will be better off as a country.

LH *What are some instances of how you have pushed back against the 'low-income' country label?*

DB I can start with the World Bank. They have a group of experts who developed this instrument, the 'Teachers' Evaluation Performance Instrument'. They think it is wonderful because it was developed for low-income countries. I took great exception to how they assume again, that one size fits all. What I mind is having it imposed on us because they categorize us as a 'lower-middle-income' country. That is not a justification.

With the World Bank, because it is a loan, we get the money based on DLIs (Distribution Linked Indicators) and DLRs (Disbursement Linked Results) which we have agreed upon (see Moreno 2018). And we deliver results. For example, in Component 2 about the teachers, we are developing standards and the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) system, including licensing. Once that system is developed, we get X million dollars. That is how it works. They also give us advice and are pushing us to adopt this teacher evaluation tool and guiding us in a certain direction. That is fine, but it is *our* right to define where we want to go, even if it takes us a decade or two decades, which it will of course. We cannot do it in less time. This is how we are at odds with some of these partners, even though they are well-intentioned no-doubt.

I have also experienced something similar with USAID (United States Agency for International Development) who I worked with over many years as a consultant. They have this methodology they use in Egypt and with other 'low-income' countries throughout Africa and around the world. Their idea is to spend time researching and collecting data from teachers and to do a needs assessment. We are supposed to follow a needs assessment regardless of whether it makes sense. The good news is that now (in 2021), the USAID Teach for Tomorrow project seems to get it.<sup>7</sup> They acknowledge that USAID has not succeeded in changing or enhancing our education system, so this time around they are listening to us and doing what we are asking. We want to be treated with the same expectations as people in the West because in the end, humans will rise to the highest of expectations.

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7 In the interest of full disclosure, Linda Herrera worked with the USAID Teach for Tomorrow project as an international advisor from 2021 to 2023.

Not all people maybe, but we have those geniuses. I am telling you, we have young people and teachers, those exceptional individuals who can move a whole country.

*LH How do you get international partners to do things your way and in support of the new vision?*

DB One thing is I push back, and hard. For example, there was a case where USAID was trying to impose something on us that we did not need. Dr. Tarek met with them, and he was very polite. He told them in a nice way, 'No thank you, we do not want USAID. We do not want any more money'. He told them that if they wanted to start a project, they should do what we need. They should not continue with those fairytales. It is always the same: they bring a consultant, the consultant produces a report, designs a framework based on some weird project that is out of context and has nothing to do with what we need. Actually, it is the context that determines success. That is why we have not been successful all these years with tons of money being poured into this country. But now, we have been empowered by a minister who really speaks his mind. He tells them what we want, not what they want.

So, they listened. We asked USAID to help us with our Continuous Professional Development framework for teachers, and they came to us with Teach for Tomorrow. They tailored it to what we wanted. So, USAID now is aligned. More recently, they have come out with a second project for higher education called the Egypt Teacher Excellence Initiative. They have three pillars in that new project, and pillar number two is having an Education 2.0 post-graduate diploma. So yes, they have really changed their approach. They are coming to us now and saying, 'What do you need?' So, it has dramatically changed, more than I have ever seen in my life throughout my career. It is massive.<sup>8</sup>

*LH There are a number of private companies like Pearson, Discovery, and other publishers working in the Egyptian education space. What issues come up in dealing with them?*

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8 *Editor's note:* In 2025, the US government froze foreign aid and cancelled most USAID programs around the world, including its education projects in Egypt.

DB Private companies are easier because they are about money. They will do what you want. Donors are different. They can be really stubborn. They have an idea in mind and want to implement something because it worked in Pakistan, or it worked in Nigeria. With private companies it is a different relationship.

*LH This goes back to your role as advisor to the minister. It seems like some of what you do is to set the ground for Dr. Tarek to be able to implement his plans. Is that an accurate description?*

DB Dr. Tarek is really the very high level, the vision maker. People misunderstand the vision and say, 'We have never done it like this', I say, 'I know, but we want to do it this way'. So, I handle all of these conversations which take time. He does not have the time for this. He cannot go down and convince every single partner, that is my role, to keep explaining and re-explaining in different ways. And as a teacher, I am used to repeating myself in different ways until they get it. I am always there putting out fires. The international experts we work with think we are very chaotic. Well, in fact we work in absolute chaos compared to the West. They cannot handle this chaos, so part of what I do is calm down partners and explain things. I understand both sides because I am a mix, half Egyptian and half British. I see the two cultures. I make things happen. I am maybe an enhancer? I do not know what to call it. I push to get things done.

## 5. The Case Against Piloting

*LH You have made a case against piloting in favor of implementing the reforms at scale and at a fast pace. Why do you feel so strongly about this?*

DS Yes, that is true. We decided against the old traditional approach of piloting. Since the 1990s and 2000s, we have done hundreds of pilots by all partner agencies. Depending on their budget they would choose four, eight, or twelve governorates. There is no right or real rationale, the choice depends on the budgets. The pilot always works well, and we have celebrations. I have attended many of them, and everyone is delighted! We have the M&E (monitoring and evaluation) experts who

show us the fabulous results from the pre-and the post-pilot. And then, everybody leaves. But I am still around.

Something always happens after these pilots, and it is heartbreaking. The teachers we have worked with on these projects leave the ministry to the private sector. They get hired right away. We do such a wonderful job transforming the teachers that they cannot stand their environment anymore. They go and work in private schools and get much more money, or they go to work in the Gulf countries. So, you see, our partners have donated the money, given us a lot of support, and have very good intentions. But at the end of the day, the impact is minimal and in the wrong direction. The real impact is a brain drain which is not a good idea. That is why this time we wanted to do things dramatically different.

You can imagine the resistance. For instance, there was a colleague from USAID who was horrified that we did not do pilots. I was tough with her and said something to the effect that we have done many pilots that did not ultimately work, so why would you expect us to keep repeating the same methodology? We also got pushback from the Development Partners Group (DPG). They kept asking, 'Where is the pilot? You cannot just throw a curriculum'. I told them, 'Yes, we can', and we did.

END OF PART ONE. SEE CHAPTER 6 FOR PART TWO OF THE INTERVIEW WITH DEENA BORAIE

## 6. Bibliography

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- Moreno Olmedilla, Juan Manuel. 2018. *Egypt - Supporting Egypt Education Reform Project* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/967021519215311151/Egypt-Supporting-Egypt-Education-Reform-Project>

## 7. Companion Videos

Video 5.1 Deena Boraie and Nelly El Zayat: 'Developing a New Curriculum', Interview by Linda Herrera, Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project, 17 June 2021, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86ZiLZuEi2k>

Video 5.2 Deena Boraie and Nelly El Zayat: 'Advisors to the Minister of Education', Interview by Linda Herrera, Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project, 17 June 2021, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nbxwZTgZW8>

Video 5.3 Deena Boraie and Nelly El Zayat: 'Communication about the EDU 2.0 Reform, Interview by Linda Herrera, Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project, 17 June 2021, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zI9CVV3fte0>

