

# EDUCATION 2.0

## CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

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# 8. Advocating for Children with Special Needs: Interview with Ingy Mashhour

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

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## Abstract

The Minister of Education's Advisor for Special Needs Education Ingy Mashhour (2017-2022) discusses three key milestones of the Education 2.0 reform: the development of a new curriculum framework for children with intellectual disabilities; teacher guides for students with sensory impairments; and the launch of the Tenth of Ramadan Center for the Rehabilitation of People with Special Needs in 2019. These initiatives were developed as the Egyptian state integrated inclusive education and the needs of children with disabilities into state policies and laws. Changes on the ground, however, have been harder to achieve, and parents seem to not have confidence that the education system can adequately attend to the special needs of their children.

## Keywords

ADHD, autism, curriculum framework, inclusive education, people with disabilities, special needs

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1 The interview took place on 11 May 2020 via Zoom with a follow-up correspondence in June 2022. Special thanks to the members of the Education 2.0 Research and Documentation team Nelly El Zayat, Nairy AbdElShafy, and Hany Zayed who contributed to the original interview with background research and questions.

## 1. On Becoming Advisor for Special Needs Education

*LH* The Education 2.0 reform stressed the need for inclusive schools and accommodating children with special needs.<sup>2</sup> You served as a key ministry consultant for integrating children with special needs in Egyptian schools starting in 2017. How did you become involved in these reform efforts?<sup>3</sup>

*IM*<sup>4</sup> Dr. Tarek (Shawki) and I met when I was the Public Relation Manager at the Egyptian Autistic Society. He was forming a team of advisors and asked me to be his consultant for students with special needs. Even though I graduated from the Faculty of Commerce and used to work in the finance field, I have diplomas in education and child

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- 2 UNICEF has been an active partner with the MOETE in helping it develop policies for marginalized children and children with special needs. In a report on Education 2.0, UNICEF emphasized its contribution 'to ensure that skills-based learning is available to marginalized children, including those with disabilities and those who are out of school. UNICEF has helped MoETE to develop guidelines for the adaptation of learning materials for children with hearing and visual impairments as well as those with mild or moderate cognitive disabilities and has developed a Teachers' Guidebook on Inclusive Education' (2021).
  - 3 See the initial strategic document of the MOETE 'Education 2.0: Vision and Strategy. Egypt's Transformation Program (2018-2030) on 'Inclusion for children with special educational needs' which reads, 'This component will be cross-cutting and will apply to children of all age groups with special educational needs. Equity in access to a good education for children with disabilities—including those with learning disabilities, visual and hearing impairments and other physical disabilities—is a presidential priority. It is enshrined both in the Egyptian constitution and the most recent disability rights law, issued by the President. We will also implement specific policies and programmes for children with special educational needs (SEN). The MOETE has already taken steps to make a reality of this vision: we have issued regulations to enable inclusion in mainstream schools and to improve quality in specialist special needs schools. Building on these measures, we will now undertake further reforms on the existing system—Education 1.0 reforms—and develop new models, which will form the basis of Education 2.0 for SEN pupils. For the Education 1.0 reforms, our priorities include: (i) public campaigns to challenge negative stereotypes; (ii) celebrating the talents of children with disabilities; (iii) training for teachers and other school professionals; and (iv) implementing special workshops in technical education. Our priority for Education 2.0 for SEN pupils is to develop a radical new integrated approach to the education of SEN pupils' (2018: 29).
  - 4 Ingy Mashhour served as Advisor to the Minister of Education for Children with Special Needs, and Associate Minister of Education (2020-2021). For more information, see her LinkedIn profile, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ingymashhour201140saalem/?originalSubdomain=eg>.

psychology. I initially did this as the mother of a child with autism. I started doing some consultancy for parents of children with special needs and led training courses for shadow teachers and specialists working with students with learning difficulties and autism. Starting in 2005, I organized awareness campaigns and did a lot of media and advocacy on behalf of people with autism in Egypt.

*LH* How were children with autism and special needs perceived in Egyptian society at that time?

*IM* The words ‘autism’ and ‘special needs’ were not really recognized at the time. I can say there was a big change in society between 2005 when I started the work, and 2017 when I joined the Ministry in terms of the way society sees and deals with children with autism. But regarding regulation and a model of good inclusion to accommodate these children in schools, there were attempts, but no real change. I had a vision for children with special needs.

Dr. Tarek told me about how the Education 2.0 reform would focus on special needs. He said, ‘Come and take this over and let’s do it together’. After that, I was in a group assigned by the President to study best practices and develop a model for detection, intervention, accommodation, teaching, and training of children with mental special needs. Egypt Vision also includes sections on special needs (Ministry of Planning 2016).<sup>5</sup> Our role was to come up with a good model for

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5 Article 53 ‘Equality in Public Rights and Duties’ of the Egyptian Constitution of 2014 states, ‘Citizens are equal before the law, possess equal rights and public duties, and may not be discriminated against on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, color, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation, or for any other reason. Discrimination and incitement to hate are crimes punishable by law. The state shall take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination, and the law shall regulate the establishment of an independent commission for this purpose’. Article 81 which deals with Rights of the Disabled states, ‘The state shall guarantee the health, economic, social, cultural, entertainment, sporting and education rights of dwarves and people with disabilities. The state shall provide work opportunities for such individuals, and allocate a percentage of these opportunities to them, in addition to equipping public utilities and their surrounding environment. The state guarantees their right to exercise political rights, and their integration with other citizens in order to achieve the principles of equality, justice and equal opportunities’ (Arab Republic of Egypt 2014).

including them in society and providing the best services to build their abilities. This was before there were regulations or laws for inclusion in schools, those started appearing in 2017, first at the Ministry of Education and Technical Education with Ministerial Decree No. 252 (about the admission of students with mild disabilities in public schools) and then with the important Law No. 10/2018 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

*LH How did the new ministerial decree and law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affect your work?*

*IM* There was a big opening. The President declared 2018 the Year of Special Needs. Every year the President chooses a certain cause, like youth or women. That year was for special needs education. This meant our work in this area would be supported by the President himself. When the parliament passed the new Law No. 10 for special needs, that was a really big deal because it led to more public awareness. There were public campaign commercials and a lot of conferences.<sup>6</sup>

*LH What percentage of children fall in the category of 'special needs'?*

*IM* The percentage of special needs in Egypt is somewhere between 10% to 12%. This means ten to twelve million people are in this group. This is a big part of our population. So, yes, everyone knows about special needs, but these people have been excluded from many activities and other things and lack proper accommodations or rights in education. And not only in education but in many other aspects of life (Fig. 8.1).

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6 Chapter 3, Article 10 of Law 10 of 2018 reads, 'Subject to the provisions of Articles (53) and (76-bis) of the Child Law promulgated by law no. 12 of 1996, the Ministries of Education and Technical Education, and Higher Education and Scientific Research and Al-Azhar Education Institutions - as well as concerned ministries and bodies - shall take the necessary measures to ensure that persons with disabilities and their children without disabilities receive inclusive education in schools, classes, universities, institutes, governmental and nongovernmental institutions available to other persons, which are close to their places of residence in light of the degree and type of disability provided that they meet the standards of quality, safety, and protection'.



Fig. 8.1 Tarek Shawki and Ingy Mashhour (third from right) visit a school for deaf in Sohag Governorate, 2019, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0, <https://tinyurl.com/mmmex39f>

## 2. Defining ‘Special Needs’ and ‘Inclusion’

*LH The Ministry had to come up with new policies and guidelines for inclusive education. How did you define this category of ‘inclusive education’?*

*IM* When we started to draft the new regulations, one of the main objectives was to provide a classification of special needs and define exactly what this word means. We tried to widen the meaning because it used to be understood as ‘disabilities’, the typical disabilities like those with hearing, physical, and mental impairments. It did not include people who need support. Those with learning difficulties or slow learners are also people with special needs. They need special treatment, special support. So, we tried to widen the range a little bit. Inclusive education refers to students who can be included in the normal schools. Inclusion is for those students who are educable, who take the same curriculum and are in the same schools as their peers, their ‘normal’ peers. They join

the same classes and take part in the same activities. We also have special schools for the hearing, mentally, and the visually impaired.

From the side of the Ministry of Education, we have two separate kinds of students in schools: the ones who can be included and get an education in the regular schools with their peers with some help and support; and others who are not able to follow the normal curriculum and need to go to special schools. We had to come up with a benchmark of who should go where and how to accommodate these students. For example, we had to decide on things like, during exams, do our special needs students need extra time or help? We had to come up with all the regulations needed. This was where I started. I worked on how to regulate education for inclusion. We started by changing the classifications of disabilities and setting proper accommodations or facilities.

*LH What terminology do you use in Arabic?*

IM In Arabic, I prefer to use the translation of special education or special needs which is 'ذوي احتياجات خاصة' (*dhouwy ihtiyajat khasa*). I do not like to use the word 'disability' 'إعاقة' (*iaqaa*). Here in Egypt the term 'إعاقة' is very heavy on people. It is a word associated with bullying. So special education 'ذوي احتياجات خاصة' is much more acceptable in Egypt and I think all Arab countries.

*LH What practices or attitudes prevalent in the Egyptian context did you need to take into consideration when working on inclusive education policies?*

IM We had many meetings with different NGOs, the Ministry of Social Solidarity, the Ministry of Health, and a lot of people working in this field. There is this massive reference book called DSM 5 (*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*). It is very clear what 'special needs' means there, but here in Egypt we need to fit it to our society and our schools. For example, we had some disagreements about how low the child's IQ could be for him/her to be educable and included with their peers. We also had to think about class density. We often have sixty or seventy students per class, and the numbers can reach up to one hundred, so how do we factor for this? But in general, we did not have big differences.

There is also the example of the visually impaired, those who have slight sight, but cannot be treated as people who see. Here in Egypt, parents prefer to send them to special Ministry of Education residency schools for

the visually impaired, rather than normal schools, even though in these special schools they take the exact same curriculum. Parents prefer to give these schools the responsibility to deal with their kids who only go home on the weekends. This is a 'social problem' more than a 'disability' problem because the parents are afraid that if their kids go to 'normal' schools, they might get hurt or be bullied. Some people were against those special schools, but socially, we could not dismiss them.

### 3. Training and Awareness

*LH Inclusive education is a relatively new concept for Egyptian educators. Have teachers and other school workers received special trainings or Professional Development on this?*

*IM* Yes, we started by leading a workshop between professionals from the United Kingdom, Egyptian specialists, and our curriculum center CCIMD (Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development). We took the new Law No. 10, and the President's mandate into consideration. We came up with two guides—one for curriculum experts and the other for teachers on how to accommodate the different abilities. Our next step was supposed to be to print, distribute, and lead the teachers. However, we faced a lot of obstacles, and this phase did not come to light, although the full document and workshop records are at CCIMD.

We were however able to complete big trainings in all twenty-seven governorates where we provided information about the new regulations and how to deal with students with special needs. We started to put a model of inclusion in place for schools. For example, if a student with special needs is admitted to a school, a committee is formed to make an assessment and write up an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to meet the child's learning needs. This includes information on how the class teacher can work with the specialist in the resource room. The resource room provides a one-to-one education for those who need help. Prior to this, learning difficulties like ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), dyslexia, slow learners, visual and hearing impaired and so on, were not really considered in any school regulations. We started to train teachers on how to identify different kinds of learning difficulties. We carried out more than 50,000 trainings in two years for class teachers and specialists. Trainings covered the big picture of how to deal with kids with learning difficulties, and information on specific disabilities.

*LH That is an enormous amount of training in a short period of time. How did you manage to cover all the twenty-seven governorates and hold 50,000 sessions?*

IM Actually, the teacher trainings were mainly in seven governorates, and the rest were more like video conferences. We sent committees to make sure they were aligned with what is happening and tell them about the new regulation and how to implement it in schools. The real capacity building and teacher training happened in seven governorates. UNICEF and Ain Shams University mainly oversaw that with the Ministry of Communication. School staff learned how to set up the system and resource room, where the kids have to do their IEP, and the person assigned to follow the IEP with the class teacher, the whole model. We have been upgrading the training. Now we have a good curriculum for teachers who are working with our kids on special education within the multidisciplinary system of Education 2.0.

*LH Given endemic problems of schools being over-crowded, understaffed, and under-resourced, do teachers have the capacity to cope with these new measures for special needs children.*

IM We always ask teachers what difficulties they face in the classroom. Usually, we find out that they have slow learners or students with learning difficulty, and they do not even realize it. We try to tell them the proper ways to deal with problems around concentration, hyperactivity, and so on. We also give them tools to develop activities themselves. By the end of the training, based on the feedback paper they fill out before and after, we have found that they acquired a lot of information that leads to big behavior change.

## 4. Developing the Special Needs Curriculum Framework

*LH The Ministry of Education and Technical Education had to come up with a special needs curriculum framework to align with Education 2.0. Who worked on developing that framework?*

IM When Education 2.0 was implemented it needed some accommodations for special needs, specifically the visually and hearing impaired. Our work started with making a Teacher's Guide that aligns with

the pillars of Education 2.0 and lays out the proper accommodations for each group. This year we made a separate Teacher's Guide about special needs because we finished late. In future years we will have one unified guide because even if a teacher does not have special needs students in the class, she will still have to know how to embrace differences and encourage other students to accept diversity. This is part of the new 2.0 philosophy.

We had a team for this work that included three international experts from Lebanon, Hungary, and England. We also worked with Dr. Nawal Shalaby from CCIMD and their special education needs department, and four professors from Zagazig University (Faculty of Disabilities Sciences and Rehabilitation). In the beginning it was not very easy to get everyone on the same track (laughs). Each group had their own set of terminology and thinking about how to implement and put this framework together. This was one of the biggest challenges. My main role was to just follow-up and review what they came up with. In the end, I offered a few remarks or asked for further details, but they did all the work.

*LH How did you manage the relationship between a group that included academics from Zagazig University, international consultants, and CCIMD staff? Are there certain approaches or lessons you can share with us?*

*IM* Actually, we had four workshops and each one lasted two weeks. It is all about, you know, it takes a lot of breaking the ice. Here in Egypt, we do not like when people from abroad come and tell us what to do. So, we started by doing some activities together. They started to know each other better in those activities. Then we tried to discuss all the terminology from each group and settle on a common understanding. After each joint workshop I asked them for their feedback. If I had good remarks I shared it, and if I had negative inputs, I discussed it with them. I think after the third workshop they were able to all work together with no hard feelings. This was especially important for Dr. Nawal's team. In the beginning, they did not see why they should work on special education. They did not regard it as useful or important for everyone. We had to make them understand how fruitful it would be, how these children are capable and have lots of abilities and make up a very large number of children. I think they totally changed their way of thinking about special needs. So, this was a big change, since it changed the mindset.

Zagazig University had very outdated methodologies, ways of thinking, and lacked practical experience. Working with special needs

requires knowledge of the practical side which is more important than the theoretical side. We showed some videos about what is happening in the schools, the challenges that teachers face, and some examples of students who got through the system and went on to university. They saw how some of the children became very successful and others learned to overcome the challenge of their disability. This helped them to work with us, or to not resist working with us, which was enough, for me at least. By the end of the fourth workshop, I think they gained a lot of experience and new information. They told us they would go back to their university and change a lot in the curriculum.

*LH How many people participated in the workshops?*

IM Around forty. We were always putting them in four groups of tens. We did not have straight lectures but interactive activities. They worked in groups and exchanged what they understood together and then went back to the instructor to ask questions.

*LH That sounds like a very Education 2.0 approach.*

IM Yes, exactly (laughs).

*LH In 2019, the Riyadh Center for people with special needs opened in the Tenth of Ramadan. Can you talk about that?*

IM We designed and built Riyadh Center (The Tenth of Ramadan Center for the Rehabilitation of People with Special Needs).<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the center is to serve kids from ages three to age twenty-one in all aspects of life, not only formal education. The Center covers things like physical problems and has areas for sports and recreational camps so the kids can get more social interaction. A small part is for vocational training. We want to put some protocols in place with the factories so that they can get training and have career opportunities. The main goal is to support their education and wellbeing. This is a very brief description of this center.

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<sup>7</sup> The (Riyada) Tenth of Ramadan Center for the Rehabilitation of People with Special Needs was established in 2019. At a size of 24,000 square meters with green areas making up 70% the area, it is one of the largest centers for people with special needs in the Arab and African countries. It provides trainings for teachers and receives up to 500 cases per day from schools free of charge (MOETE 2022).

*LH Education 2.0 has involved a lot of technology integration with the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) and different digital platforms. Do these serve children with special needs?*

*IM We are trying to encourage special needs students to use the Study EKB portal which is very useful for them, and they can access it easily. Since the pandemic, we have also been encouraging special education teachers to form WhatsApp groups to keep direct communication with their students. We also accommodated the end of year project assessment to fit each disability. For the high-school students with special needs, we do not have them do electronic exams in Grades 10 and 11, they are doing projects instead. And now we are focusing on the Thanaweya Amma exams. It is really challenging. After two pandemic years, the level and knowledge acquisition of all students has been affected, but the most affected ones have been the students with special needs.*

## 5. Is There a Transformation?

*LH From when you started this work in 2017, to now in 2022, have you seen the kind of transformation in special needs education that you were hoping for?*

*IM Unfortunately, till now with all the laws and regulations, the actual situation is still frustrating and not even close to how it should be. The number of students who need special aid is augmenting. We have anywhere from 15% to 20% of students who have ADHD or dyslexia. These numbers are actually very large, and they are the main reason why students leave school early. I presented the minister with a full study on how we should create different paths to suit each student within the system, whether through academic, scientific, athletic, artistic, or vocational capabilities, but I did not see any change. Simply put, early detection and early intervention are not imbedded in the process, and we do not have a proper system to consider solutions and different paths. If we do not implement equal opportunity practices according to each person's capabilities, we will not be able to give each student their fair chance. The students' levels are deteriorating, and parents do not have confidence in the system. Teachers use new terminology, but with no actual change or impact. After many years in a process to bring about transformation, I cannot say that the situation has actually changed.*

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