

EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL
AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

EDITED BY
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10. UNICEF's Life Skills Framework Comes to Egypt: Interview with Manar Ahmed Sharouda

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Abstract

UNICEF partnered with the Ministry of Education and Technical Education to help integrate its Life Skills and Citizenship Education (LSCE) framework into the new curriculum. Education Specialist Manar Ahmed Sharouda, recounts how the much-needed reforms prioritized early childhood education, play-based learning, and inclusive education. The process of turning ideas and policies into practice faced challenges due to difficult local conditions, the lack of a proper change management system and communication strategy, and absence of adequate evidence and data from the ground. Moreover, the reforms were pushed from the top without being coupled with a bottom-up approach where the school is the unit of reform.

Keywords

citizenship education, curriculum reform, early childhood education, inclusive education, life skills, play-based learning, project-based learning, social cohesion, strategic planning

1 This interview took place on 26 February 2020 at the UNICEF office in Cairo. Special thanks to members of the Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project team Nairy AbdElShafy, Ahmed Alaa, and Mostafa Hanafy for their contributions to the questions, background research, and filming of the interview. For a video highlight of this interview, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjpEy1EkiM>.

1. A Vision for Education Reform

LH UNICEF has been involved in Egypt's Education 2.0 reform from almost the very start in 2017. What did you think about this ambitious undertaking when you first heard about it?

MA I joined UNICEF on August 4th, 2017. Four days later, the Minister (Tarek Shawki) held a press conference where he announced that he was going to change the whole education system. He was not going to try to amend it, he would just take it down and have a new version of education. I am not sure why, but we as UNICEF were not invited to this press conference. I was going everywhere trying to get the Minister's presentation. It was in Arabic, so I had to translate it for my colleagues. He posed questions about why education was not working and what was happening in the Thanaweya Amma secondary exit exam. He talked about why we needed a new system, new thinking about how we understand learning and education, and what we want in 2030. There was this idea that we want a different graduate of the system, away from thinking only about grades. The competencies of this new person is what mattered. He said that children should feel happy about going to school, it should not feel like a punishment. I do think at certain times in this country, school is like a punishment, especially for very young children. I thought these ideas were absolutely inspiring. In UNICEF we felt it was an historic moment for this country and absolutely wanted to be part of it. I felt I had to jump into this. We wanted to support this vision. That was a very rewarding and exciting year for me, to see that something was going to happen with education. I think we at UNICEF were one of the first frontrunners supportive of Education 2.0.

LH What were the key points of alignment between the Ministry's vision for change and UNICEF's work in education?

MA At UNICEF—internally, globally, and in our MENA region—we had already started working on the idea that education is not only about knowledge acquisition and enrollments, though these are both very important, you also need to think about skills-based education. UNICEF developed the Life Skills and Citizenship Education (LSCE) framework which talks about why we need a different kind of education. In Egypt there were very high access and enrollment rates. The problem was

always about quality. Children were not learning. Dr. Tarek also started a dialogue about a learning crisis and how to overcome it. And I am not talking only about learning what is in the textbooks but learning for the future. What does it mean to be a twenty-first century young person? What would you bring to this country? What does it mean to your future? Are you ready to be employed? Are you ready to deal with all the social changes in the region? We have the refugee challenges, our social cohesion issues, and so many other issues. We started to say that maybe we can answer one small part of the question having to do with education during the early years.

LH When did UNICEF first introduce Life Skills and Citizenship Education (LSCE) to Egypt?

MA The LSCE framework started to be developed in 2014, so it predates this current reform. I was unfortunately not part of that process, which was very participatory.² We had workshops across different countries in the region, including with Egypt and the Ministry of Education. UNICEF had the conceptual and the programmatic framework and conducted a mapping analysis in the country. They did field visits and met with different people about what the words 'life skills' actually mean. There was a huge discussion around the word 'skills' and how it is different from 'competencies.'

The framework covers how to engage in a knowledge-based economy, how the world is changing, and how in twenty years you will not have the same jobs. One argument was that students in technical education across the region, not only Egypt, were being trained for jobs that will exist in ten years from now. At that time, no one in Egypt was speaking about an education reform, or 'transformation' as Dr. Tarek calls it. No one was calling for taking down the old system and building something new. Back then, the idea was that we can add the Life Skills to existing education systems. We did not tell anyone they needed to change their curricula. UNICEF usually does not go for this radical advice. We usually leave it to the country to decide.

2 See UNICEF MENA Regional Office 2017a and UNICEF MENA Regional Office 2017b.

Then early in 2017, UNICEF started introducing the finished LSCE conceptual framework to the partners, donors, and people from the Ministry including the Minister and his advisors. After multiple attempts to get him to read it, Dr. Tarek finally read the conceptual framework in detail and was convinced. He thought the concept was in line with his vision for Education 2.0. We approached members of his team, Dr. Deena Boraie (Senior Advisor), Nelly El Zayat (Advisor), and Dr. Nawal Shalaby (Director of the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development, CCIMD) about mainstreaming LSCE. We asked them to come with us in October 2017 to a high-level conference in Amman where we were announcing the framework with representatives from fourteen countries across the region. A representative from Egypt's Ministry of Youth and Sports also attended since they had already adopted the framework. This pushed the Minister of Education to officially request UNICEF to mainstream LSCE in the curriculum update. At this time, this framework was very theoretical. Now, we call Egypt one of the 'champion countries' because it was the first country to integrate the LSCE framework.

LH Thinking about the timing of the LSCE framework, it was being developed in 2014 when many societies in the MENA region were just coming out of a period of uprisings. Were the popular calls for social, political, and economic change something UNICEF took into consideration when developing the framework?

MA Absolutely, there is a component on civic participation. In the conceptual framework, there is a huge part on how young people in this region are frustrated because they are not taken as part of the solution, they are always seen as the challenge. We always say 60% of our population is young, which is something to celebrate. But the country keeps saying, 'Ah, we are not able to provide good quality education, health, housing, job opportunities'. So, part of the discussion has been about what you can do to improve youth engagement, their prospects in the labor market, and how you can help them to better understand each other and be more socially accountable and responsible. Social cohesion is also a key challenge in a region that is facing wars and displacement both internally and externally. We have the challenge of the refugees. We call Egypt a country of destination and transit. Refugees come here

as a door to go to Europe, but it is also a place to stay. So, our education should prepare young people to deal with the refugee crisis, for a different economy.

LH Have other countries in the MENA region adopted the LSCE framework?

MA The framework has been adapted in some form or the other by most countries in the MENA region, including Algeria, Djibouti, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Oman. However, Egypt and Tunisia used the framework as a foundation for their new national curriculum. I think India is also one of the countries that endorsed it. The skills development agenda is now part of UNICEF's new education strategy. But remember, Egypt is a champion country. Before Egypt, we did not even know how to integrate it. Tunisia started their education reform before Egypt and are taking it slower than Egypt. They are having their own piloting and are assessing the outcomes. Their timeframe is very different from the one here in Egypt.

2. Integrating Life Skills and Citizenship Education into the Egyptian Context

LH The LSCE general framework was designed as a regional framework. How did UNICEF and your Egyptian counterparts ensure its suitability and relevance for the Egyptian context?

MA When we announced this framework in Amman in October 2017, we did not know how we would be able to operationalize it or what it would mean to countries and policy makers. About a year later, when we came up with a document, 'Analytical Mapping of Life Skills and Citizenship Education in The Middle East and North Africa'.³ Egypt was one of the first countries to teach us what to do, it was a solution country. There are twelve core skills, and Egypt added two additional ones, 'productivity' and 'accountability' (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 13 in this volume).

We started meeting with Dr. Tarek, Dr. Deena, Nelly, and Dr. Nawal after the Amman conference. As I said, they were talking about a vision

3 See Hoskins and Liu 2019.

for changing education, but it was not clear to anyone what that meant. Dr. Tarek kept saying, 'I want to bring fun back to the classroom. I want children to enjoy learning and education'. We started to talk about the competencies of the future. Dr. Nawal and her team at CCIMD were already in the process of thinking about Egypt's vision for the new curriculum and how UNICEF could help. We were pushing for the idea that you need to have a skills-based education system where you are promoting knowledge *and* promoting skills. When you integrate skills, you can bring in fun. We started discussing project-based learning and play-based learning, especially in the early years when children can acquire skills like communication, negotiation, empathy, showing respect to diversity and all of that.

LH The CCIMD is a local Egyptian institution, and UNICEF is an international UN organization. Can you talk about the dynamics and work relationship between these two bodies, especially regarding curriculum reform?

MA I was present in every CCIMD workshop for designing the early curriculum frameworks. Dr. Nawal was talking about having a multidisciplinary framework. She kept telling us she did not want our help in the subject curricula and did not want Life Skills as a separate module. She wanted it to be an integral part of the story of how teachers deliver the content and manage the classroom. She said that when Life Skills are fully integrated into the curriculum, you will not be able to take them out later on.

I remember thinking in our very first workshop that they did not take me very seriously. I think they thought I was young, without a Ph.D., and not a curriculum specialist (I have a Master's degree from the American University in Cairo in Public Policy and a second Master's in International Education Management and Leadership). My background is in policy, but I was there to speak about skills! I think we initially only had the support of Dr. Nawal. But even with Dr. Nawal I remember, and we all joke about this with her now, there was one time when she kicked the UNICEF contingent out of her room. She kept on saying, 'You are here to answer one main question. How are we going to integrate the Life Skills into the curricula?' And we kept on saying we are learning together; we did not have a clear answer. I mean, the LSCE framework was there, but Egypt was the first country to apply it. And she said, 'Okay, either you

come up with the answer or I will come up with the answer and I will share it with you'. It was at 9:00 p.m. in her office and she stood up. I understood that she was asking us to leave. Hana (Yoshimoto, Chief of Education, UNICEF), and I were together. I was so embarrassed, and we just left. But then it was fine, we pulled it together and we were able to, not provide all the answers, but it became very much a collective work. We started helping each other to find the answers.

3. Prioritizing Inclusive Education

LH Inclusive education has become mainstreamed in reform initiatives across the globe. What role has UNICEF played in defining and promoting inclusive educational policies in Egypt?

MA When we joined CCIMD in late 2017 in the design of the curriculum framework, things were moving very fast. We addressed the issue of inclusive education on multiple occasions. We spoke a lot about differentiated learning. All children have special needs regardless of how we assess their capacities and their abilities. Inclusion is also important for assessment. The focus is usually on the sensory, on how to present an exam for children with sensory disabilities. In 2019, we started the discussion again about what the Education 2.0 reform means for inclusive education. At the same time, the Ministry started to say we have special education schools for children with severe mental disabilities. These children have their own schools, and they have different curricula, they do not take the national mainstream curricula.

What we did with CCIMD was to develop the special education curricula framework. We were looking into children with sensory disabilities, and children with simple and mild disabilities. In an inclusive education model, these children are eligible to attend the mainstream schools. However, you need what we call 'adaptation' and 'accommodation' of the learning outcomes. You need to adjust the learning materials whether they are paper-based or digital materials. So, with the CCIMD, we came up with some guidelines for the publishers of the paper-based and digital materials on how to adjust materials to meet the needs of children with sensory disabilities. Then we came up with the Teacher's Guide on inclusive education.

A few months ago, we were having a discussion with Dr. Reda Hegazy when he was still the Undersecretary for General Education, before he became the Deputy Minister of Education for Teachers' Affairs.⁴ We were discussing that in future years, and Dr. Nawal is pushing for this as well, we should not have a separate Teacher's Guide for inclusive education. There has to be a single integrated Teacher's Guide because it is for the same teacher in the same classroom. Teachers must understand differentiated learning, that every child has a different educational need, they are not the same. So hopefully in the coming years, Egypt will be able to merge the two Teacher's Guides. We will not reinvent the wheel, but from day one inclusion should be a key component of how we see education.

LH Not everyone understands 'inclusive education' in the same way. UNICEF uses the term in its documents to include sensory and cognitive differences, diversity, and also some emotional psychological aspects. Can you clarify the term? Are teachers aware of definitions of inclusive education and what it means for their classrooms?

MA For UNICEF, the word 'inclusion' is bigger than children with disabilities because you also want to include refugees, for example. You also want to include girls to make sure that girls have the same right to education. You want to include children from different ethnic groups. So, inclusion is a big word. Currently, the way it is used in Egypt is specifically focusing on children with disabilities. But going back to the idea that children have different educational needs, all children need to be looked at in an inclusive manner.

Egypt has its own criteria for how to admit children into (mainstream) schools. Children with autism, for example, are eligible to go into classrooms. And of course, these children represent a spectrum and have different challenges. They might be challenges in communication, or in something else. You have different children in the classroom with different needs, and the teacher should be aware of how to identify them. We had workshops with international experts and colleagues at Zagazig University (Faculty of Disabilities Sciences and Rehabilitation). It was

4 Dr. Reda Hegazy served as the Deputy Minister of Education for Teachers' Affairs under Dr. Tarek Shawki. With the change of the Egyptian cabinet on 13 August 2022, he succeeded Dr. Tarek and became the Minister of Education and Technical Education until July 2024.

important to bring Egyptian Academics to the table. We were trying to provide awareness to how educators can observe a child's special needs and ways to address these issues (see Chapter 8 in this volume).

I think we need to do better awareness and training for inclusion more generally. For example, what does inclusion mean for the teacher with a refugee child in the room? Would it make a difference for the teacher? Should a teacher do something if the classroom is mixed with boys and girls? Are there specific practices that would ensure a gender sensitive classroom where girls feel included? I was recently in a mixed middle school with girls sitting on one side of the classroom and boys on the other side. The teacher was female. Her back was always to the girls. I am sure she was not aware of this. But I kept thinking about how this made the girls feel. What does real inclusion mean in the classroom context?

4. A Call for Strategic Planning and Management

LH This education reform is being rolled out with extraordinary speed. As UNICEF, what do you see as the main challenges and how do you think the process can be improved?

MA The reform is great, but it is very top-down. I really think reform cannot be pushed only from the top. It must be coupled with a bottom-up approach where the school is the unit of reform and there is an understanding of what it means in the classroom and to the teacher. Schools must own the reform. There are certain structures inside the school that can support change. You need to look and see what is there and build on it. How do teachers support each other? How is the school management supporting this system? How are parents supporting this system? There are communities of practice which some of the national teacher trainings are doing, but again, ownership is not with the school. If you do not create ownership at the school level, it will not be sustainable. This cannot be achieved with only two, five, ten, or even twenty days of training. These external trainings with coaches and mentors running from here to there, are very costly and will stop one day. I mean, this is not a sustainable model from a change-management point of view.

I think one challenge is that we do not have a shared common plan as a guiding document among all partners. A vision is great, but you

need to develop it into a strategy, an action plan that you can consult.⁵ This is a way to manage not only the reform, but also the partners. We still do not know what it means on the ground. Do we have the resources? Are schools ready? Is the Ministry itself ready? And by the Ministry I do not mean Dr. Tarek and his team of advisors, but the technocrats and bureaucrats within the Ministry itself. Are they part of the design of this? There have been so many questions and of course there have been doubts. I think schools should have been better oriented. Up until August 2018, schools did not know there was anything happening, it was business as usual. Many schools had already started to have the bidding to buy the new books. They were not even aware there were new books coming in September. They were just doing the same as every year.

I once read an article about how education reform is one of the most difficult kinds of reforms because of the huge political connotations and the level of conflict of interests. Egypt can be a good case study because of the stakes of the private sector. You have the private tutoring, you have the private schools, you have the private publishing companies. What does it mean for them?

LH Based on your experience, what would have been a better way to manage the reform?

MA I did some research in change management and especially in education. There is no model for change management in education. It usually comes from business. There are a number of key steps that are in all models. One of them is the need to communicate the change. What is your communication plan? Early in the reform we went to the Ministry, not to the Minister, and said we wanted to help them with a communication plan. UNICEF is very good at this. Our office in Egypt is second only to our New York office. We are that good across the world.

5 The Ministry of Education and Technical Education eventually completed an Education Sector Plan in 2023 (see MOETE 2023). The Development Partners of the Local Education Group (LEG) in Egypt that comprises donors, civil society organizations, and international non-governmental organizations, specifically USAID, World Bank, EU, Save the Children, GIZ, UNESCO, ISBD, CARE, FCDO, British Council, UNICEF, Sawaris Foundation, JICA, ILO, and Federation of Egyptian Industries (FEI) endorsed this plan in 2023 (see Global Partnerships in Education 2023).

And we said we wanted to help. We wanted people to understand and be more supportive of this change. The Ministry did not want us to do this work. I am sure they had their reasons—maybe political, maybe social, there are so many reasons when you make such decisions. In the end, we did not do the work. But I think one key challenge they faced was the lack of communication starting within the Ministry, with the undersecretaries, different governorates, schools, principals. In some cases, the educational inspectors, the supervisors, did not even know there was a reform. How were they supposed to give support to the teachers? But even beyond this, you have parents and the private sector who were not informed.

LH Dr. Tarek and his team talk a lot about the importance of reaching mothers since they are the ones who tend to follow-up with the younger children. How can communication with them be improved?

MA If you follow all the parents' groups on WhatsApp, Facebook, and all the social media, teachers and mothers did not understand what the Ministry was doing. Mothers specifically, and I am also a mother, so I understand, are usually the ones to study with their children. If children are returning home with absolutely no homework, and the mother does not understand what is in the book since they are more about activities rather than conventional lessons, they do not know what to do. And I think teachers and school principals were feeling the same. At least in the first semester, it was very hectic for everyone. Some mothers were voicing their concerns. But all the media attention was focused on the Thanaweya Amma.

LH: The reforms were implemented nationwide without being piloted and many international partners took issue with this. What did you think about this approach?

MA I remember Dr. Tarek was always saying in different conferences, meetings, and seminars when asked about this big change, 'It will never be worse than what we have now, so chill' (laughs). What exactly was the country going to lose? Dr. Deena was always saying, 'Do not mention the word "pilot" anymore. We are not piloting anything'. (See Chapter 5 in this volume.) I think we all, both national and international partners, understood that that the Ministry was fed up with all the piloting and

models that were conducted in the past that never showed a large impact. In Egypt we have these experimental schools, but they have been experimental for thirty years. Why? And even in meetings with the Minister I kind of understood his point. He was saying, 'If this works in 20% of the schools, then this is actually a change'. This resonated with me. What was this country going to lose? At UNICEF we say we are for every child, and we want to reach every child, of course. However, at the end of the day, if only 20% of children experience a positive change, it is better than none.

But generally speaking, doing a large-scale change without a pilot comes with a higher risk. And I think it could have been better managed with a monitoring system in place before the rollout. There should have been a plan about who is going to follow up on what. Who is responsible for what? We could have had a way to sample schools based on, for instance, geographical areas, socioeconomic conditions, capacity of the schools. We could have found criteria where we could have actually learned from the ground.

I remember in the early days there was one time when the Minister said, 'We want to document what is happening, we want to learn from it'. I think it was an interesting idea to learn from the ground, but things were moving fast, and it was very hard to get everything. Education 2.0 was rolled out at the same time as the introduction of the computer-based assessment system at the secondary level. Everyone was focusing on the exam and forgot about what was happening with the early years except for parents. Maybe that ended up being an advantage to Education 2.0 somehow.

5. The Need for Evidence

LH Without evidence from schools, homes, students, teachers, how can we know if change is taking place and the nature of that change?

MA The problem is that we do not have evidence of what is happening on the ground. We really don't. I meet teachers all the time. Some of them are amazing, and some of them are indifferent—their attitude is, 'To hell with the country, the parents, the children, the system'. But I do not know what is happening in the classroom. We need to have evidence from the ground, and it will not be through assessments, meaning the

Grade 4 exam, because what we are discussing here is not measured by how students can read and write. We need evidence about how children deal with situations, how they respond.

From what I can see, you have a shift starting from Grade 1, a mind shift as teachers move away from teaching single subjects into multidisciplinary teaching and Life Skills. You also have project-based learning and changes with how children are being seated in the classroom. The assessment is also different. It takes time for all of these things to sink in and for teachers to start to change their behavior in the classroom. At a certain point, teachers will need to be more innovative, more creative. Teachers are key in this process, and the school environment is key. As long as schools are not ready enough, the curriculum is only one aspect of it. Assessment is important, but again it is not the only way of how you can assess what is happening.

UNICEF's MENA region office together with the World Bank came up with an early measurement, an instrument of the Life Skills. Egypt is one of the countries where we have been field testing. Egypt already piloted the tool last April (2019). It is a very challenging task for a number of reasons. Children have to read and then answer the questions, so you require a certain level of literacy. When we were doing the Life Skills measurement tool in Egypt, Tunisia, and Palestine, we were discussing that the quantitative tool needed to be supplemented by qualitative research. You need to use more observations in the classroom, to understand the change in the behavior of children with each other. It is all about how they talk to each other, how they think, what they do. It is not about what they will write. It is not an easy thing. Egypt should not be expecting big changes in two or three years. It will take a long time. It will take endurance.

6. Education 2.0 Resources

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8. Companion Video

Video 10.1 Manar Ahmed Sharouda: 'UNICEF and Education 2.0 Reform in Egypt', Interview by Linda Herrera, Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project, 26 February 2020, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjpEy1EkilM>

