

# EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL  
AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

EDITED BY  
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# 15. Nahdet Misr, Legacy Publisher for the New Arabic Textbooks: Interview with Dalia Ibrahim and Dahlia Fouad

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

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## Abstract

With the start of Education 2.0 reforms in 2017, the Ministry of Education and Technical Education commissioned the company Nahdet Misr, a leading Egyptian publisher since 1938, to develop the new textbooks for Arabic, Values and Respect for Others, and Christianity and Islam. It was the first time one publisher produced books for the two religions using a common framework and design. The company also developed a new methodology to teach the Arabic language that bridges the gap between classical and colloquial Arabic. Dalia Ibrahim, the company's CEO, and Dahlia Fouad, Director of Educational Content and Translation, detail the differences between the old and new education systems, and emphasize the need to adapt to digital futures in education.

## Keywords

Arabic books, digital content, multidisciplinary, religion books, Egyptian Knowledge Bank, teacher training, supplementary books, private lessons, teacher training

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## 1. A Legacy of Book Publishing in the Arab World

*LH* You have been working in textbook production in different Arab countries for many decades. What is the history of the Nahdet Misr company?

*DI*<sup>2</sup> Nahdet Misr Publishing Group has been working with the Ministry of Education in Egypt for more than sixty years. My grandfather started the company in 1938 in a popular district for books in Cairo called El-Fagala. He did not have a printing house, he was just a publisher with his own bookshop. He started with books on culture, fiction, and non-fiction for adults. For instance, he published books by Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, the famous Egyptian poet and journalist. He also produced textbooks for ministries of education. My grandfather produced textbooks for eleven countries across the Arab world. When my father and my uncles took over, they continued the work.

Unfortunately, my grandfather passed away in 1973 when I was just two years old, so I do not know the exact history of the company. I do not have copies of all the books he published, but I do have some of the supplementary books. Beside textbooks he used to make supplementary books to help the students with their studies. He would put advertisements in different newspapers. We have a sample of one of them in the American University in Cairo for example. This is to say that what we are doing now is not our first project. We went through a lot of competitions with the Ministry of Education previously to develop textbooks. But what has happened this time with the Education 2.0 books has been a totally different story.

## 2. The Old Versus the New 2.0 System for Textbook Production

*LH* How did you get involved in the Education 2.0 reform?

*DI* We visited Dr. Tarek at his office in November 2015, before he became the Minister of Education. He was leading the Presidential Council on Education and Scientific Research at that time. We knocked at his door to introduce him to a digital project we had been working on for three years. We had digital content learning objects covering Grades

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2 Dalia Ibrahim, Chairperson and CEO of Nahdet Misr Publishing.

1-9 in all subjects. At the time, our materials in math and science were only in English, not Arabic. He was very interested because he was managing the great Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) project. However, we did not manage to sign a contract or put our content on the EKB at that time.

We met Dr. Tarek several times after that and discussed how our digital resources were very important for students. He said he would try to manage his budget for the next year to be able to buy our content and provide it for free for students in the government schools. We started working on the Arabic version of the math and science materials. Soon thereafter, Dr. Tarek became the Minister of Education. In fact, we met in London a week before his appointment. I told him we needed someone like him with his mentality and mindset to be the Minister. A week later President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi appointed him as Minister.

Later, Dr. Tarek introduced us to members of his team, Nelly El Zayat, Dr. Deena Boraie, and Dr. Nawal Shalaby who talked about Dr. Tarek's great vision (see Chapter 5, Chapter 6, Chapter 7, and Chapter 13 in this volume). Actually, he stayed for that entire meeting. They explained that they were working with Discovery Education on the reform and drafting a holistic curriculum framework. It was really our honor to start with them early in the process.

*LH The new curriculum framework for KG to Grade 3 calls for a multidisciplinary approach. Based on your long experience working in the Egyptian education system, do you think Egyptian schools can handle this transition to a different approach?*

*DI The multidisciplinary method is a very important methodology to introduce to Egyptian schools. We have been in the field of publishing for eighty-two years and have been preparing a lot of textbooks and curriculums for different Arab countries. We even have our own supplementary books, Al-Adwaa, that cover all subjects from K- Grade 12. For us, the multidisciplinary approach is the best and most effective way of teaching students and getting them aligned on common themes and concepts from different perspectives. We do not think this will face a lot of resistance. The question is more on the delivery. How will this be delivered to the students? The concept needs a top-notch way of teaching the students.*

DF<sup>3</sup> I need to shed some light on the themes for the multidisciplinary books. The first theme for example is 'Who am I?' This is different for every grade year and in every subject. We are working from the same framework, but this system allows for a lot of creativity when you are asking 'Who am I?' across grades and subjects.

*LH Under the old system, 'Education 1.0', textbooks were produced through competitions organized by the Ministry of Education. How is that different from what is happening under the current 'Education 2.0'?*

DI In the past, the Ministry sometimes produced its own content to, from their point of view, reduce costs. In these cases, the publishers did not have opportunities to work. Other times, they would open the textbooks to a competition. They would release a framework for the subjects and publishers worked according to it. The Ministry would select the best content for the best price. It became a war of pricing.

There is a very interesting story about this that one of the newspapers wrote about. We used to enter competitions for all subjects. In one of these competitions for the Arabic language, we got a score of 98% for the quality of our content. The second publisher, who came after us, received 90%. We wanted our name to be out there, so we put a symbolic price of only one pound for the books. Of course, we were not thinking we would actually receive one pound, it was like a joke. Publishers would fight to get their books to the Ministry of Education. What happened is that the other publisher priced their book at just five piasters. If you can believe it, the Ministry took the other publisher's content instead of ours because of the price, even though our score was 98% and both were basically offering books for free!

*LH That story is very telling about what happens in textbook publishing behind the scenes. When did this story happen?*

DI It happened around 2008, 2009. The framework was not done properly, and the selection of the publishers was not done properly. I remember quite well in this period, from 2006-2010, they made a competition for Grades 1, 2, and 3 in Arabic and the Math. Our

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3 Dr. Dahlia Fouad, Director of Educational Content and Translation at Nahdet Misr Publishing Group.

publishing house won the competition based on the quality of the books. The Ministry then opened a competition for Grade 4, and we won Math, Science, Social Studies, and Arabic, based again on the quality of the books. The Minister thought that Nahdet Misr was producing too many textbooks. So, what did he do? He gathered the other publishers in a room and started just dividing up the books saying, Nahdet Misr will take this book, and this other publisher will take that one, and a third and fourth publisher will take something else. I was in this meeting. It was unbelievable.

*LH* When you compare that process with textbook production now, what are the main differences?

*DI* It is totally different. You cannot even compare it. From complete chaos to someone with a very clear vision, very professional. This minister gets the best professional people worldwide, has consultants and technical people in the Ministry, and even advisors outside the Ministry like Dr. Deena Boraie to help get the best content possible for the students with the best framework, the best way of education. This is a totally different thing. Under 2.0 the focus is on the quality. Under 1.0 the focus was on the price, even when the price was essentially free. Or the focus was on dividing books between publishers even when they were not qualified.

*LH* *Nahdet Misr* has been commissioned to do the new Arabic language books. Did you have to take part in a competition?

*DI* No. The Ministry asked us to work with their team and submit some drafts. They were even negotiating with other publishers, one of them was Cambridge, our partner. They found that our content was the best, so they continued with us. They opened the way to not only local publishers, but even international ones.

### 3. A New Methodology for the Arabic Language

*LH* *Nahdet Misr* has been producing the Arabic language books for the new Education 2.0 curriculum. How do these books meet the needs of the new framework and overall goals of the reform?

DI We attended several meetings with Dr. Tarek and his advisors. We also met with Discovery Education to discuss the new curriculum framework and how the Arabic language and religion books could fit the framework's concepts and themes. Initially, they suggested that Arabic should be built within the multidisciplinary book. But from our side, as language experts, we made the case that it is important to have a separate book dedicated solely to the Arabic language. We discussed this with Dr. Tarek's advisors, Dr. Deena, Dr. Nawal, and Nelly. They agreed and accepted that we should have a separate book for the Arabic language.

*LH How did the new books differ from the older '1.0' books in terms of content, teaching methodology, or other aspects?*

DI We had already been working on developing a new Arabic language methodology that required teaching it in a totally new way. And to tell you the truth, we did not dream that we would introduce this to the Egyptian Ministry of Education. Our goal was the Arab Gulf. So, when Dr. Tarek took over with his vision, it opened the door for us to introduce this quality work for Egypt.

DF We conducted our own research on Arabic language pedagogy. We have been trying to bridge the gap between classical and colloquial Arabic. What happens in the classroom is that the teacher of Arabic talks in colloquial Arabic while teaching the students classical Arabic. It is difficult for students to come out reading, writing, and speaking Arabic. We have been developing our own curriculum and adopted a different way of teaching the language that combines a holistic and phonetic approach.

We let the student identify the sound and the sight of the letter, and at the same time try to identify the meaning of the words. The way this works is first, students will listen to a story from the teacher. Throughout this story they will get to identify the high frequency words which they identify by sight and by sound. The same applies to the letters. The new thing we adopted is that the letters are not learned in alphabetical order. They are learned in an order based on ease of pronunciation. The first two letters they learn, combined together, have a meaning. So, the first two letters 'alif' and 'meem' make the word 'mother' (*oom*) and the third

and the first letter 'alif' and 'bey' make the word 'father' (*ab*) and so on. So, when they read, they try to reidentify the letters. The vocalization allows them to put the vowel after the letter, so they will identify the letter with the vocalization.

DF We had all this in our mind, but it was not yet developed on paper. The Ministry's framework has four main themes that we had to follow. We took the themes and divided them into topics. We had to be sure that the stories were inclusive and had representation from different governorates and areas of Egypt. We also wanted to be sure to show Egyptian habits and characters. In a nutshell, that is what we did in terms of the Arabic.

We also had to keep in mind that some students would start school in KG1 or KG2, but others would start from first grade with no prior background. So, we had this issue that we needed to tackle. What we did was use the learning outcomes across these three years but with a deeper and wider scope as we progress. Each successive year would include higher cognitive and higher order thinking skills adapted to the age of the student.

*LH From a linguistic point of view, what models influenced your new Arabic language methodology?*

DF We were influenced by two approaches: the holistic approach of teaching a language; and the phonetic approach of teaching a language. We merged them because each methodology has its own pros and cons. If we only used the phonetic approach, the students would not be able to read until they learned all the letters. And for the holistic approach, you will learn the sounds of the letter through the words. At that point some students would not be progressing in the acquisition of a language. So, we merged both approaches. And we did this, also, because of the high discrepancy and difference between colloquial and classic Arabic.

The problem in Egypt and other Arab countries is that we believe these are the same language, we use the same word, 'Arabic' to describe colloquial and classical Arabic. But actually, they are not the same. The terminologies and the grammar are different. For example, if I am talking in classical Arabic, a male and female will have the same verb, but in the colloquial Arabic you have to conjugate verbs differently for

male and female. That is why we thought we need to come out with a different solution because with the existing solutions, students are not able to speak Arabic well. They do not love the Arabic courses because they are bombarded with a lot of terminologies and language functions that they are not aware of in their colloquial language.

*LH Did you carry out any kind of pilot to test your methodology of merging the phonetic and holistic approaches to know if it is working, if it is an improvement over the old system?*

DF No, we did not have a chance to pilot it nationally. We assumed it would work first through a process of elimination, because the other two methods were not working. At the same time, our educational team with the subject matter experts, have experience in teaching the language in one way or another. They tried it on their students, and they learned the language better.

#### 4. Developing Religion Books for Christianity and Islam

*LH The Ministry of Education commissioned the religion books for Islam and Christianity from Nahdet Misr. How did you work with the two religions? Who provided you with guidelines?*

DF The CCIMD provided us with the basic life skills and the basic morals, and we developed them.

DI Yes, we needed two religion books, one for Islam and another for Christianity. We are a Muslim publishing house, so we thought we would just do the Islam books. But the Ministry team told us we have to have the same theory, approach, and look of the book for the two religions. It is not exactly that the books have to be similar, but they have to be speaking the same language because in their core, the religions are the same. For example, the books show how the world works using a Christian and a Muslim perspective, which are complementary (see Figs 15.1 and 15.2)



Fig. 15.1 A page from the Grade 2 book on the Christian religion about 'How the world works', Ministry of Education and Technical Education, 2022.



Fig. 15.2 A page from the Grade 2 book on the Muslim religion with a quote from the Quran, Surah Ali Imran, Verse 190, 'Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the day and night there are signs for people of reason', Ministry of Education and Technical Education, 2022.

DI Of course, this point of religion is very critical and sensitive. The Pope of Egypt, Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, personally selected Pastor Poules to oversee the Christian books. Pastor Poules is the Pope's spokesperson and is very professional. He had been working with the Ministry of Education for almost ten years on developing good religious content. His presence served as the safeguard from the point of view of the content, to ensure we had the best material. And from the political side he was a safeguard since the Pope selected him himself. From our side, the approval of the church was very important. The Minister and his office directly facilitated this process through official letters and conversations with the Pope.

DF When we started working with Pastor Poules, he told us he had a dream to teach religion in a different way that was not so traditional. We wanted to align religion with the high order thinking skills according to Bloom's Taxonomy. We wanted to take religion as something concrete, not just abstract knowledge, but as something that actually touches their lives. When we sat together, he would give us an idea and we would develop it into an interactive activity. We did this for both the Islamic and the Christian religion books. We applied the same principles for both. We wanted things to be more practical and interactive rather than too theoretical.

Pastor Poules worked hand in hand with Dr. Dahlia Fouad to ensure the book had the same methodology and the same format as the Islam book. Even the graphic design and the games, the way of introducing the stories, student assessments, all aligned in the two books. The exercises or activities in the books developed the same higher order thinking skills. For instance, in each book there is a maze, but for the Islamic book the child reaches a mosque and in the Christian religion book he reaches a church.

DI It was a great success. I heard some people from the Christian community saying they wanted to use this content for people who live in different countries. We were very happy with this success story.

*LH Did you have advisors for the Muslim religion?*

DF All books about Islam have to be authenticated by al-Azhar. Actually, they did not modify anything inside the books, but they authenticated the books at the end.

## 5. The New ‘Values and Respect for Others’ Books

*LH Nahdet Misr is writing the new books for the course, ‘Values and Respect for Others’. Is the idea for this subject to eventually replace religion?*

**DI** No, it is going to be an additional subject, but without reference to any religion. It is a whole curriculum to be taught across Egypt properly with a Teacher’s Guide. We are starting with Grade 3 and will move to eventually cover Grades 1-9. The Ministry is requiring a new subject this year on morals, for building the character of the Egyptian student. Dr. Tarek asked us to do this book which shows the common morals and values among humanity. Morals are everywhere, all over the place, and we need to get students to be educated properly through stories and activities.

**DF** It took us a long time to build the team for the book because we wanted to include people with special needs, people from different governorates, males and females, boys and girls, Christians and Muslims. We have tried to include all the sectors of society. The students will feel that it is more of an activity book, a kind of coaching book for their life. For example, we are teaching them how to write a diary of the good things that happened to them and the things they want to change. All this is being taught through characters and stories with morals. It is a different approach. Morals is a continuation of religion and Arabic. Between Arabic, Islam, Christianity, and morals books, we have thirty or forty stories that have to be developed and illustrated. This takes a lot of time.

*LH What qualifications do you look for in the authors who work on these ‘Values’ books? Are they curriculum specialists or do they have other kinds of expertise?*

**DI** About our experts, it is important to understand that we do not just work in educational books. We also publish fiction and non-fiction books for children and adults. In the past twenty years we have won forty-one awards. Some are international, from the Arab world, and local. So, we use this mix of experts, including illustrators, who work together to get this material in the best shape. We also use external consultants and education experts. One of our illustrators is a top designer and educator. We have a huge team that is managed under the umbrella of Nahdet Misr to get these things out.

## 6. The Egyptian Knowledge Bank and Digital Content

*LH How did you become involved with providing digital material to the Egyptian Knowledge Bank?*

DI By way of background, we have been working in the field of digital content for twenty-two years. We established our software company, Nahdet Misr for Software in 1998. We also have an animation company. We did everything in-house—the programming, the software development, the animation, and the content development. We even started our own company for CD replication. Do you remember CDs! We used to sell the CDs separately from our K-12 supplementary books. About nine years ago, we decided to bundle the CD with the books. A couple years after that, we started working on totally new digital content that met the learning objectives for the private and international schools. This content ranged from basic videos, which could be live, 2D, 3D, or interactive videos. We also produced a lot of gamification of educational content with built-in assessments, and started selling it to the schools. We have a school and a teacher version that the teacher can use in the classroom through any interactive whiteboard or even a smart projector. There is another version for the students which they can download on their devices.

Getting back to the EKB, as I mentioned, this was the thing that triggered us to knock on Dr. Tarek's door. We introduced him to our Arabic content, including our cultural, fiction, and non-fiction books for children and adults. We thought these could be included in the EKB. He was more interested as a first step in the K-12 educational content, our digital learning objects. But at the time, this was November 2015, he did not have enough budget for our work, and he did not sign a contract with us. We continued with selling to the international and language schools. Then, after he became Minister, we resumed our discussions. He said he was interested but still did not have the budget. If I sold our products to the Ministry of Education, the content would be made available for free for everyone. I thought this would not be fair to our customers who have bought this content. So, I did not sell my content at that time. That was September 2016. Dr. Tarek finally managed to have a budget for our project, and we signed a contract at the end of 2018. Our content has been available on the EKB since that time (see Fig. 15.3).



Fig. 15.3 Dalia Ibrahim CEO of Nahdet Misr at an event of the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB), 26 November 2018, Egyptian Knowledge Bank Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=774633769547032&set=pcb.774634782880264>

After the coronavirus in 2019, we saw a huge shift in the behavior of students, parents, everyone. People went digital. Everyone is home now, so anything that can be done from home is the best thing for people. The resistance to change that we all studied in books, and we live with on the ground, has started to break in front of our eyes with COVID-19. People who have the access, started going online. They search for content to aid their studies through the EKB, and I believe the EKB use has increased tremendously.

Since COVID, we added special videos recorded by dedicated teachers to explain the missing parts of the lesson students did not get because of not being able to go to school. We got specialized teachers to record these lessons, and we just provided them to the kids for free. This was not a request from the Ministry, it was just a complimentary thing we wanted to do to contribute to our society.

DF If I may add to what Dalia Ibrahim was saying, we also did live sessions for the students to explain how to do the projects. We also did live and pre-recorded classes for the Thanaweya Amma students. In the recorded ones we used some animation and catered to different learning styles.

## 7. Private Lessons and Supplementary Books

*LH Do you think that this growing infrastructure of digital content and lessons is changing or affecting the private lesson situation in Egypt?*

DI The private lessons (laughing). It is a very difficult question to tell you the truth. For the students who know how to depend on themselves, they can start to study on their own. And parents who really want to help their kids will find perfect materials. They will not need any private lessons. But I can tell you, we do a lot of marketing research because we produce supplementary books for all K-12 subjects. One market research I remember quite well gave us very interesting insights about parents. It found that they do not want to exert efforts with their kids and prefer the easier way, which is to just send them to private lessons or any tutoring groups. Parents want to get rid of the kids and not be bothered by studying with them. So, the culture is a bit complicated, and it needs some time to change. Dr. Tarek is facing a lot of challenges, but I believe he will reach his goals. He is giving students all the facilities and resources they need. What is happening (during the pandemic) will lead to change definitely, it already started.

*LH How has the reform affected the publication and the production of the external books Al-Adwaa? What kind of shape or form do you think these books should take going forward?*

DI Concerning the supplementary books, we were thinking of going digital with them even before the 2.0 reforms. Definitely Al-Adwaa should adapt and change. And of course, with 2.0, the content takes a totally different shape. What we need is something more like a parent's guide. We are trying to help the parents help the students in the education process and to get them more engaged with a totally different perspective of studying.

DF Actually, when we were doing Al-Adwaa books in the 1.0 system, memorizing was the main skill the students were supposed to master. With 2.0 now, it is different, it is about thinking skills. In Al-Adwaa we are working on aligning the exercises with the learning objectives and working with different skills through the different activities and exercises. This is the main difference.

DI And to answer the other part of your questions, first let me give you more context. In the past, when students received the Ministry of Education books, they just put them aside. If they could afford it, they would buy the supplementary books. This was because the content in the Ministry's books was not well prepared, the printing was not that good, the quality was not that good. The other thing is that when we used to submit in different competitions for textbooks, the Ministry obliged us as publishers to stick to a fixed number of pages. They would tell you, for example, you have to prepare the textbook in eighty pages. Even if you needed 120 pages to cover the material, you had to stick to eighty pages. So, students preferred to have supplementary books.

With 2.0 we do not stick to a fixed number of pages, we just sit and work and come up with an outline. We do the whole table of contents, decide what we are going to cover, and how many pages we need. We plan ahead. And actually with 2.0 they give us the freedom as publishers to determine the best way to submit this content for the student. So, 2.0 is not only about the ideology behind it, the framework, and the specialized subject matter experts, but also about producing a good book that does not require the supplemental books. So, in answer to your question, of course, 2.0 is affecting the quantities of supplementary books we sell, but this is fine with us because if it is good for the students and for the community, and we are part of the community, then it is great.

DF I would like to add that one of the things we put a lot of effort in with the Arabic and religion books is the quality and art of printing. We paid attention to the font size, the percentage of the illustrations to the script, the place where the student has to write. We considered the age of the child in all these decisions and referred to the theories of printing. For the first time, we made the schoolbooks very interesting, very colorful, with nice illustrations adapted to the age range and the requirements of the age range. For the student, Al-Adwaa is no longer the better book, it is the same quality as the schoolbook.

## 8. Teacher Training

LH *Nahdet Misr has been involved in training the teachers on the new Arabic curriculum. What have you learned about ways teachers understand this new approach and if they are receptive to it?*

DF In Nahdet Misr, we have our in-house training team and are used to doing two types of training: training in our products; and pedagogical training with teachers on how to use the books. When some schools found out that Nahdet Misr developed the Arabic program, they asked us if we could give training to their teachers. We did these trainings for free including in some international schools through Al-Adwaa. We found that a lot of teachers were not really comfortable with the 2.0 program in general, whether the Arabic, the English, or the multidisciplinary. There is this fear of change, and fear makes you not capable of doing something.

For the new Arabic language program, we devised a training that combined two methodologies. We knew that teachers of the governmental schools were not up to date with all the teaching methodologies, so we first gave them an introduction to the pedagogy of teaching language in general, and a brief explanation of all the theories we used in developing the books. For instance, we referenced Lev Vygotsky, the elements of Bloom's taxonomy, and Howard Garner's theory of multiple intelligences. The second session was more practical in nature with workshops. It dealt with pedagogy and training on how to teach the book.

DI There is another dimension to the training. We signed a protocol with the Ministry to train all the teachers of Grades 1 and 2 in an entire governorate. It was on the morals' books actually and how they are being utilized in the Education 2.0 reform. The training dealt with how teachers can cascade this to their students. It was very successful. We had a whole week, and every day from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. we would have four simultaneous sessions. We trained all the teachers in this governorate, and it was really amazing.