

# EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL  
AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

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Linda Herrera (ed.), *Education 2.0: Chronicles of Technological and Cultural Change in Egypt*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0489>

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Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0489#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-701-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-702-5

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-703-2

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-705-6

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80511-704-9

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0489

Cover image: Ministry of Education and Technical Education, Egypt, CC0

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# 16. Rewriting Arabic Books for a New Generation of Readers: Interview with Nevine El Souefi

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

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## Abstract

Nevine El Souefi, CEO of the education consulting company Edupedia, worked with the publishing house Nahdet Misr and the Ministry of Education and Technical Education to develop a new methodology for reading and writing Arabic called the 'balanced approach' that combines the holistic language and the phonics approaches. She reflects on ways her previous experiences as a schoolteacher, a teacher trainer, and consultant for the International Baccalaureate (IB) prepared her for this important national work, and how she made decisions about whether the new books should meet teachers where they were, or take them where she thought they should be? She raises the importance of building the capacity of the next generation of teachers and curriculum specialists.

## Keywords

Arabic curriculum, curriculum development, Education 2.0, Edupedia, Egypt, holistic language approach, International Baccalaureate, Nahdet Misr, phonics, teacher training

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1 The interview took place in Champaign, IL on 22 March 2022 with follow-up interviews in Cairo in 2023.

## I. On Becoming an Education Professional

*LH How did you become involved in the education field?*

NS<sup>2</sup> I started as an English teacher in a middle school, and went through the ladder of career advancements. I was promoted to head the English department, and then became a curriculum coordinator in a number of private and international schools. I later worked in national and international contexts outside my own school as a trainer and a curriculum designer with organizations like Amideast, the AUC Graduate School of Education (GSE), and the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). By 2016, I became the Regional Development Consultant for the IB in Egypt, and the Head of the Curriculum Review Committee for the diploma programs at GSE at AUC. During this time, I also did my master's degree at AUC in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and I completed my Doctorate of Education (EdD) in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on Teacher Education at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom. In 2012, I founded a company called Edupedia that specializes in curriculum design, training teachers, and general educational consultancy. I am the CEO.<sup>3</sup>

*LH Edupedia has been active in different forms of training and consultancy. As the CEO, how do you lead and manage the company?*

NS I oversee the company's academic vision that guides the community. It is based on what is happening in education around the world. I have a small board that advises me on strategic planning, but the final decisions of approving projects are up to me. I am the academic director leading the academic team of consultants, trainers, and curriculum designers. We are a horizontal company. We share ideas and listen to the business development director and the operation manager on how they see new projects and ventures. In 2016, the company started to become really influential because we were training large numbers of teachers and advising a large number of schools. We also ran the Eduforum, an

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2 Nevine El Souefi, CEO of Edupedia.

3 Edupedia's Vision Statement reads, 'Our vision is to become a premier consultancy institution in education recognized for its excellence in delivering high quality educational services, based on the latest in research, with a diversity of services' (see <https://edupediaeg.com/our-story/>).

international conference we held in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. In 2017 and 2019 the conference was done in collaboration with the American University in Cairo. The company took its place in the market at that time. I have trained other people to play leading roles in the company so that I can step back a little.

*LH Prior to founding Edupedia you were a teacher. What kind of schools did you work in, and what did you teach?*

NS I started my career as a teacher in the 1990s teaching middle school English in one of the private national schools in Egypt. At that time, private schools were very limited. The new language schools were supposed to be the best kind of schools on the market that professional parents could approach. These parents basically had the status of engineers, doctors, professional people with a university degree who wanted a good education for their children. They did not want their kids to be in public schools or in the old private schools. These new schools on the market were promising parents something that was not in other schools. There were new ideas about how schools should be, new ideas about learning. Actually, I enrolled my daughter in one of these schools, and worked there as a part-time teacher. When we later moved to another private English language school, I started as a part-time teacher there and then moved to full time. When I became a full-time teacher, I felt I needed to learn more about teaching.

*LH Before becoming a classroom teacher, did you have training in education or pedagogy?*

NS No. My bachelor's degree is in Business Administration with a specialization in Accounting. I wanted to know more about teaching techniques so decided to take an Intensive Training Course (ITC) with one of the very big trainers in Egypt at that time, Ms. Alia Mokhtar. She had a company in Alexandria called Modern Education. I stayed in Alexandria for a full month to take this course in 1998. The course was supposed to teach us how to teach English, but actually it changed my whole concept about learning. It was a big turning point for everything I did after that.

I became very passionate about the ideas I learned and returned to my school to implement them. The owner of the school asked me where

I learned all these things? I told him about Ms. Alia and he hired her as a consultant. I worked under her supervision for five years. I was the head of the English department at that time and I learned everything from her. She was mentoring me as a leader and as a trainer. I can say I was blessed to work with Ms. Alia at the beginning of my career. In 2000, I joined her company as a trainer, and eventually became a lead trainer. I worked with her until 2010 and handled most of her Cairo work. I learned so much. While I was with Ms. Alia, I got heavily involved in the International Baccalaureate and ways to bring it to Egypt.

## 2. Bringing the International Baccalaureate (IB) to Egypt

*LH What was your role in bringing the International Baccalaureate (IB) program to Egypt?*

*NS* In 2000 there was a school that wanted to be Egypt's first IB school. They contacted Ms. Alia as a consultant. She asked them to hire me to help them. Five days after hiring me, they sent me to a course in Prague to get the knowhow of the IB and transfer this knowledge to the school staff. When I read the guide of the IB Middle Years Program (MYP) with all of those requirements, I called Ms. Alia and told her, 'I do not think I can do this, it is too heavy'. She said, 'Yes, you can do it'. And she was right. I did it. I used to travel abroad almost every month for courses, return back to Egypt with the know-how, and share it with the school community, whether leaders, teachers, or others. I coached and guided teachers until we got the authorization for the Primary Years Program (PYP), and then for the Middle Years Program (MYP), and finally for the Diploma Program (DP), the last two years of the IB. I did all the documents and curriculums for all subjects for the Diploma Program, even subjects that I did not teach like math, business, Arabic, and the sciences. After this, they gave me the title, 'Leader of the Development Unit'.

The school encouraged me to apply to be an IB trainer. In 2009 I went to a workshop that trains and chooses IB trainers, which was another turning point in my career. I started as a workshop leader (trainer), then a consultant, and then a team member for authorizing schools. I gave trainings for English and Arabic language A and B, and IB philosophy and requirements. In 2016, I became a trainer of the trainers for MYP and PYP, a book author for IB books, and the regional development consultant

for the IB in Egypt. I also participated in writing some of the training material. When the IB organization was translating all the IB documents and curriculum guides into Arabic, I reviewed these for PYP and MYP. My job was not linguistic, I did not review the language. I reviewed the educational ideas to make sure the translation correctly conveyed the learning principles in a clear way. In 2014 I was also involved in the designing and training of a new curriculum for the MYP, 'The Next Chapter'. Being in the kitchen of the IB taught me how it all works.

*LH What exactly is the IB in terms of the organization? Is there a main headquarters and structure?*

NS The IB is not in one place. It is a real international organization. There are centers in different places around the world; Singapore, The Hague, Cardiff, and Washington. Each office does a different job. The one in The Hague is the service office for Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. This is the office I work with and where I was trained to be a workshop leader, consultant, and a team member for authorizing schools for the MYP.

*LH How did you and others involved in bringing the IB to Egypt, manage in the local education environment? How did you prepare teachers for such a different educational philosophy and system?*

NS When the IB first came to Egypt, the concepts and ideas were very new to teachers and schools. I was working in an IB school at that time. I wanted to find a way to deliver those ideas in a simple way and clarify them to make it easy for teachers to implement. My background as a trainer combined with working with the IB organization helped me, as did my master's and EdD programs. From 2015 to 2018, I was the Regional Development Consultant for the IB in Egypt. At that time, my job was to clarify the IB ideas to Egyptian schools and to the Egyptian Ministry of Education. I did workshops in schools, workshops for the Ministry of Education, and tried to show schools the benefits of the IB for their students, benefits I saw myself as an educator, as a leader, and as a mother.

*LH Can students take the IB entirely in Arabic?*

NS Now, in 2022, the Ministry of Education has IB schools in Arabic, so yes, they can do the IB up to the MYP in Arabic. The full Diploma Program should be taken in one of three languages, English, French, or Spanish.

### 3. Working on the Arabic Curriculum for Education 2.0

*LH The publishing house Nahdet Misr contacted you to work on the Arabic books for Education 2.0. What kind of work had you done previously to prepare you for this big undertaking?*

NS Nahdet Misr has been interested in my field of work for some years. We had worked before on other projects. When the Ministry offered them the opportunity to create the new Arabic curriculum, they contacted my company and we discussed some ideas, which they liked. They felt that our ideas aligned with the Ministry's current frameworks that are in line with those around the world.

I have been involved in many frameworks such as those for the IB, American standards, British standards, the Qatar standards, and Saudi Arabia standards. The Education 2.0 framework itself was aligned with other frameworks I have seen before. It was very good, innovative, and up-to-date on how to approach beginning reading. In fact, I was jumping out of my chair when I read it because it was the first time for me to see something in Arabic that is very professional and speaks about phonics properly. I was so passionate. This was something I could work with and develop. Edupedia partnered with Nahdet Misr and we made a contract. I started with KG1, KG2, and Grade 1. Our agreement is to continue through Grade 6.

*LH What was the arrangement in terms of roles and tasks between Nahdet Misr and Edupedia?*

NS Nahdet Misr is responsible for design, drawings and layout, publishing, and production of the books in their final form. Edupedia is responsible for the educational content of the Teacher's Guide and the student books. Of course, we had to understand the Ministry of Education's vision, and align with the framework and outcomes.

Everything has to be approved by the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development (CCIMD).

We attended meetings with Nahdet Misr, the Ministry of Education, and CCIMD. I showed them what I had and explained the research that underpins the curriculum with all the references. We started designing the program, and I was very careful about introducing this new approach to reading in a way that would make it easy for teachers to implement. This successful partnership with the guidance of CCIMD resulted in good work. We are proud that we were able to design a very detailed Teacher's Guide that supports teachers in the public sector and we are happy that we are continuing with them.

*LH Who at Edupedia works on developing the Arabic textbooks? Do you have a special division for this?*

NS I formed a team of designers consisting of Egyptian educators with extensive experience in teaching Arabic in different grades, people I have met and trained in different situations through the years. I always make sure that team members have diverse expertise in areas of teaching Arabic like in grammar, reading, early childhood, and psychology. Most of them hold a master's degree. The team is all female. I did not manage to find any men (laughs). Usually in Egypt, you will not find men in private schools who teach Arabic at the primary level. Maybe you will find them in public schools, but not in private schools. The teams from Edupedia and Nahdet Misr provided input and ideas for the new generation of teachers. We worked off the curriculum framework which specifies language objectives, life skills, national issues we should include in the curriculum, and broad themes we should cover.

There is a team manager from Edupedia, though I am the academic leader. I spent a lot of time training this team and building their skills. I guide them step by step and review every word. Unfortunately, some of the best ones left. Every time I decided to take a step back from the work, I would lose a team leader which meant I needed to return. Currently, there is a leader for this team and we meet and discuss the work on a regular basis.

## 4. A New Methodology for Reading and Writing Arabic

*LH One of the longstanding problems in Egypt's education system has been the low level of reading as shown both in national test scores and international rankings for Grade 4.<sup>4</sup> Do you think the new curriculum and approach can improve this?*

*NS The problem was not in the content as much as in the approach, especially when it comes to teaching very young students reading and writing. Throughout my career, I have sometimes faced challenges with this very basic idea of 'What is reading?' What is the *concept* of reading, and how should this develop in children? For example, to assess students in reading we have to give them an unseen text. We should not use a text they have seen before. It is absurd to put a seen text in the exam. It is not equivalent to a subject like social studies. It is reading. You cannot assess students by giving them a reading passage pulled from the textbook with questions from the textbook with a model answer. If a student cannot read and read an unseen text, this is a red alarm that we need to address.*

Teachers should not use the old methods of memorization in this new curriculum. If they do this, the kids will most probably not be able to read fluently by the end of Grade 2 and they will not be able to write. You do not study reading by heart. It is not something to study. It is a skill. So, if students are being taught reading as something to study, meaning they read the same text more than once, or they write it out more than once, this is not going to lead to them reading.

*LH Are these new books a bridge from the old system to the new one, or do they make a clean break with the old system?*

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4 Egypt ranked forty-nine out of fifty countries on the 2016 PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). 'The vast majority of grade 4 students have not achieved a basic level of reading skills, which limits their ability to learn other subjects. [...] A majority of grade 4 students (69%) did not even reach the low benchmark<sup>10</sup> for reading on PIRLS and 19% only reached the low benchmark, whilst no one reached the advanced benchmark' (MOETE 2023: 103).

NS My dilemma was whether I should meet teachers where they were, or should I be more aspirational, and take them to where I think they should be? There are different approaches around the world, and people have strong opinions. The approach I had in mind was very different from what was currently happening in schools. In the curriculum of KG1, KG2 and Grade 1, we decided to teach students reading through a new approach called the 'balanced approach', drawing on the work of David Sousa (2005). This combines the holistic language approach and the phonics approach for language skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, presentation, and linguistic elements. I shared this vision with my team and we also had collaborative meetings with the team in Nahdet Misr. We made sure we were all aligned on the curriculum path and the production requirements.

We put those ideas together in a way that makes sense to the teacher and the student. Students have to make connections on how parts of the curriculum relate to each other. We had to carefully balance between meeting the framework requirements and integrating new innovative ideas. We created a Teachers' Guide to provide detailed explanations on how teachers should use the curriculum, the reasons behind certain concepts, the activities to be used in the class, and how life skills are integrated throughout the curriculum. Everything was more or less fitting somehow. Now, if teachers stick exactly to the steps we use in the Teacher's Guide, the kids would be reading and writing at different levels.

*LH How did you design the books to ensure they would be user friendly?*

NS Through my work as a language teacher, I have been exposed to so many books. Some I liked, some I did not like. Clarity, organization, and structure are very important. I had a clear vision of how the end content should look. I designed the content breaking it up into units. I used the latest research in the field about how students gradually acquire skills of the language. At the same time, it had to be close to teachers and students.

The curriculum is divided into thematic units that are divided into different topics. Every unit begins with the holistic language, a story

matching the theme. The story is read to the children as a listening text. Children hear the language and understand the vocabulary because it is in context. They answer some questions and some specific sight words are repeated in the story. Those are high frequency words. The teacher points to those words while reading the story. In the holistic language approach students do not learn by blending letters. They know the sight words by sight. Teachers are guided to put those sight words on cards and put them in front of the students to play with them. For example, simple words like *qala* (say), *qalet* (he said, she said), *aby* (my father), and *oomy* (my mother), words like that are repeated a lot in children's literature.

The unit then introduces the sound of some letters phonetically, following the phonics approach. The child learns the shape of those letters, but not in alphabetic order. Letters are introduced in the order that would help students blend letters early to make words. They start blending and forming words after being introduced to their first two letters. As each new letter is introduced, they form more words. And letters are not just introduced with the one sound, which in Arabic is the *sukun* sound,<sup>5</sup> but they are introduced with the *fatha*, *dhamma*, and *kasra* (the short vowel marks in Arabic). This is new to some teachers. They usually introduce all letters in alphabetic order, and after that introduce the *fatha*, *dhamma*, and *kasra*, which I think is a very confusing way for young children to read Arabic. These are sounds of the language and they have to be introduced together.

The unit continues with blending and segmenting words and includes some writing and speaking activities. This is the phonics approach. At the end of the unit we go back to the holistic language approach by having students read a very short story with the letters they have been exposed to, and the sight words that were introduced. They read the *whole* story and read very early. So, if they had been exposed to five letters, the whole story consists of words with those five letters and the sight words only. For example, they will be introduced

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5 'The sukūn (سُكُونٌ) is a circle-shaped diacritic placed above a letter (◌ْ). It indicates that the consonant to which it is attached is not followed by a vowel' (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic\\_diacritics#Suk%C5%ABn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_diacritics#Suk%C5%ABn)).

to the letters 'ح', 'ل', and 'ب'. The story will combine these to make the word, 'I love' (*ahibb*) something. And we put a picture. It is very important to let students understand the concept of reading and print early. In every unit we introduce three or four more letters. After that, we introduce the long vowels 'أ', 'و' and 'إ' using the same method. This method makes sense to the kids. So, we have two ways of teaching language: from text to letter, and from letter to text. They have to work in parallel. It is very critical that exercises use this method so that students gradually make sense of reading. The beginning units in KG1 and KG2 are focused on phonological awareness and concepts of print before introducing any letters.

*LH This new Arabic 2.0 curriculum starts with KG, however compulsory schooling in Egypt starts in Grade 1. How can you build a curriculum when some students start it in KG and others in Grade 1?*

*NS This was another challenge to address. It is true that in public schools some students start school in KG1, but for others, their first encounter with school is Grade 1. We had to repeat what had been done in KG1 and KG 2 in Grade 1. This part took some work and designing, but it happened. We got very good feedback on this first curriculum. This positive reception encouraged me to push further when we started working on Grade 2. I was very optimistic about what we could achieve.*

*LH What did you want Grade 2 students to achieve in terms of reading and writing?*

*NS I wanted students at the end of Grade 2 to read a text fluently and be able to write at least a paragraph. This was considered very ambitious. In Egypt's new framework they are supposed to read and write by Grade 2. And it is not just Egypt's framework, every framework for any mother tongue has students reading and writing fluently by Grade 2. They should be able to write a paragraph. It does not have to be accurate, but they have to use the letters and write a paragraph. This is the norm for all languages.*

## 5. Teacher Readiness

*LH The success of the new curriculum and books hinge on teachers being able to understand the 'balanced approach' and teach it. How can you determine if these new books will be used by teachers in Egypt in the intended ways? Are there feedback mechanisms?*

NS All my ideas about teaching methods and learning outcomes were discussed first with Nahdet Misr. Also, each book is reviewed and revised by CCIMD. They deal with public school teachers and understand what will work on the ground and what will not. We do not know the ground the way they do which is why we discuss things together. Both Nahdet Misr and CCIMD provided us with meticulous and important feedback, including revisions on the books. These served as an extremely important buffer for us. They were always caring and had a vision of where this is going.

All curriculums and all approaches to teaching a language are different. It is very important for a teacher to understand what kind of approach is being used. We wrote the Teacher's Guides for each grade to explain everything. We included details down to how the child should hold the pencil. When we wrote the introduction for Grade 2, we made it simpler, more to the point, and more understandable. We included details of different strategies used in the student book and explained them. We included a table with life skills used in every book and explained to teachers how they can promote them in class. We also tried to design the student books to make things as simple as possible for the teachers. As we got feedback, we adapted parts. From what I see every year, more and more teachers are reading the Teacher's Guide and learning from it.

For me, I am always looking at how all other mother tongue languages are taught, and how much students around the world are skillful in their mother tongue. I would like Egyptian students of Arabic to have the same proficiency in their language as any other student in the world. The problem is not the kids. If you teach them something, they will learn.

*LH How can we know what teachers are doing in the classroom?*

NS We do not know actually. I have some anecdotal information. Some members of my team worked in those schools and we get feedback from them. I personally try to talk to and interview heads of departments and Arabic teachers in Arabic private and public schools. For example, when I went to Sohag for training I met some teachers and asked them how the curriculum was going, what they liked, what they did not like. It was the first year for the curriculum. They told me they did not like at all the idea of not having the alphabet in order. They really did not like that! I told them that in all language teaching we do not use the alphabetic order anymore, whether for teaching reading in Arabic, Romania, English or whatever. And by the way, we teach the alphabetical order in Grade 4 when they start using a dictionary. We use it for dictionaries and things like that, but not for teaching reading. We introduce letters for reading in a way that helps students read earlier.

*LH All students take a standardized reading and writing test in Grade 4. What kind of assessment do you think is the most effective to measure or understand childrens' reading levels?*

NS I was wondering about the type of assessment that will be used. I personally think we have to take the students to a standardized international assessment. There is no other way. With my team I discussed including an example of a standardized exam in the Teacher's Guide. It is a way to let them know that this is what we want your students to reach. There are two very important ideas that I care about in assessment of those curriculums. The first is that students have an unseen reading text, which for me would be a big development. They have to answer questions they have never seen before. The second idea is to have writing on the exam. This is what they are taught in the curriculum. All the books through the years are developing the skill of writing and every topic ends with a genre, like a letter, a story, a CV, a recipe. They are supposed to write from fifty to one hundred words on average for each genre in Grade 4. So, if we are assessing what was taught, this should to be the form of assessment. Simple as that.

## 6. Negotiating Curriculum Content

*LH How did you decide on the specific content for the books? Were there instances when you had to revise something because of differences of opinion with your counterparts (CCIMD and Nahdet Misr)?*

NS We were always keen from the beginning to have meetings with Nahdet Misr and to send any finished parts to their curriculum unit to get approval before proceeding. We agreed on the broad guidelines from the beginning. Program managers from Edupedia led this process to help the project go smoothly. We have been working together for four years now and we generally are in alignment.

*LH How did you make decisions about which topics and historical figures to include in the curriculum? Were there discussions, disagreements?*

NS Yes, sometimes choosing appropriate topics and figures need discussions until we reach an agreement. Do we have topics and figures that students are used to, or should we expose them to new topics, and new ideas? Do we limit ourselves to Egypt or go international? Sometimes it is stipulated in the framework that we have to highlight specific issues. For example, the framework requires that we focus on young people who are innovators in Egypt. I thought we would not find a lot of people to choose from, but we found like one hundred young Egyptian men and women with innovations.

*LH Did you need to balance between males and females?*

NS Yes, it is part of the criteria. Also, we needed to include women's place in society. For example, in stories where we use a female character, even if she is a mother, her place is not in the kitchen. If the family is going to do something in the kitchen, then the family would be there, not just the mother, which is good. We also pay attention to including different types of disabilities, diversity, equity, since these are very much embedded in the framework (see Fig. 16.1)

*LH How do you convey diversity and equity in the curriculum?*



everywhere. So, every text is zooming in on a part of Egypt and conveying its traditions, culture, stories, and history. We very much want young people to see Egypt this way, and see their role in their society. However, exposing them to other cultures is also important, exposing them to things they do not know about (see Fig. 16.2).



Fig. 16.2 A lesson on the Golden Age of Islamic Science. Grade 3, Term 2 Arabic textbook. Ministry of Education and Technical Education, 2023, p. 65.

LH How did you deal with religion and culture? Were there guidelines about religious minorities or things like this?

NS The Arabic curriculum for students from KG1 to Grade 6 is focusing on the development of literacy and language skills to make sure that students can express themselves well in their mother tongue. Religious ideas are included in the religion curriculum. There is also the ethics course ('Values and Respect for Others') in the curriculum.

## 7. Building Capacity for the Next Generation

*LH* There are not many people in Egypt who know how to develop textbooks according to this new language methodology. Do you see what you are doing as building capacity for the next generation?

*NS* Yes, I would say so. On two levels actually. I think that the younger employees who work with us, whether on the team from Edupedia or the team in Nahdet Misr, or in the team in CCIMD, understand now what we are doing and how it is built. We all have more capacity and knowledge than when we started. People working with us are now more informed and are more flexible. Also, I believe the capacity of teachers in schools, especially young ones who read the Teacher's Guide and implement those ideas, is growing.

*LH* What do you consider your greatest accomplishment in this whole project?

*NS* When I heard from people at CCIMD that they printed over two million books for KG1, KG2, and Grade 1, this for me was something (laughs)! All those kids have in their hands my thoughts, what I wrote. It was amazing! When I heard that I told them, 'I will do anything you ask me to do'.

*LH* Will those books remain as the Ministry of Education books for some time?

*NS* Yes, I believe so. Every year we do some minor revisions according to what CCIMD asks. We might need to rewrite a question or something like that. But the books stay intact. The Ministry serves as a good buffer for those ideas. I believe this reform is not only about changing books. Changing books happened before. It is about a curriculum transformation of how teachers teach language, how they perceive literacy, which was something not there before. I believe this curriculum reform initiated change in the whole system, it changed people's minds and how they do things. Now teachers make their own YouTube videos to explain how they use the new curriculum (see Chapter 28 in this volume). The idea of having a philosophy, an approach to guide what you do is now in place. And because those ideas are in the Teacher's Guide, more people are starting to understand not just *how* to teach, but *why* you should do it

in that way. I think this is one of the successes of this education reform, this shift in thinking. This is something that is very hard to change. When I think about it, it has been a blessing to be part of all this, just to be part of people reading, really reading. It is amazing.

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