

EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

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29. A New Curriculum and a Pandemic: Primary Teachers' Strategies

Nevine El Souefi

Abstract

Primary school teachers are at the frontlines of the Education 2.0 reforms. They are called to pivot from traditional classroom teaching to a more child-centered and activities-based pedagogy even though material conditions in their schools, with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, and ageing infrastructures, remain the same. However, one difference compared to the past is that teachers can access new digital resources and consult the new comprehensive Teacher's Guides about the new system. As teachers were adjusting to the reforms, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and teaching and learning went online. Through interviews with two primary school teachers from an urban and rural school, this chapter explores how teachers coped with the pandemic, where they turned for help, and how they navigated a system which offered them technical solutions but lacked the kinds of professional support and training they needed to ensure the well-being and positive learning outcomes of their students.

Keywords

COVID-19, Education 2.0, learning loss, student centered-learning, teacher autonomy, Teacher's Guide

1. Primary Teachers in the New Education System

Egypt's reform for a 'new education system' or Education 2.0, began in 2018 and started with kindergarten to Grade 2. The reform placed a heavy demand on teachers. It set out to change the pedagogy of teachers by replacing rote learning methods associated with the old system, with a dynamic multidisciplinary curriculum with project-based student centered-learning. These changes were supposed to lead to better student outcomes in literacy and numeracy. While the student books and educational vision were new for Egypt, teachers' circumstances and material realities on the ground remained practically the same. They continued to face constraints around space because of overcrowded classes and schools, insufficient resources, and inadequate training, to name a few issues. In addition, teachers were just starting to grapple with the new 2.0 curriculum when the COVID-19 pandemic hit resulting in schools closing in March 2020. Teachers were largely left to figure things out on their own, which resulted in some of them falling through the cracks.

Overall, teachers lacked direction on how to deal with 'learning loss', a term 'commonly used to describe declines in student knowledge and skills (UNICEF 2022). These losses may translate to greater long-term impacts' (World Bank 2022: 2). According to Kaffenberger (2021), after three months of school closures students can experience learning loss of more than one year because they fall further behind when schools reopen.

As much as this situation was challenging, it also served as a kind of opportunity for some teachers to think outside the box and find solutions. Linda Finlay, a psychologist of education, argues that teachers in critical situations find solutions for unexpected problems and learn from those instances. She notes 'Professional practice is complex, unpredictable and messy. In order to cope, teachers think on their feet and improvise. They act both intuitively and creatively' (2008: 3).

2. Two Teachers

This study is based on a series of interviews about Education 2.0 with two teachers, Ms. Fatema and Ms. Hend (pseudonyms). They both teach in the lower primary grades (first to third grades) and were introduced to

the new Education 2.0 curriculum when it was rolled out in 2018. They specialize in different subjects, Arabic and Math respectively, work in different locations (urban and rural), and are from different age groups or generations (fifties and twenties). Ms. Fatema was born in 1969 in Tanta, Egypt, and holds a teaching diploma from a Teachers' Institute in Gharbia governorate located in the north of Egypt, ninety kilometers north of Cairo. She has been teaching the Arabic language in Cairo for roughly thirty years. She has witnessed her share of reform initiatives and has her own perspective on each one of them. She has remained passionate about her profession, her students, and her country, and is known for being exceptionally skillful at making the most out of minimal resources. She has been ascending the Ministry's promotion and career ladder and reached the position of supervisor of the lower grades in her school. She was also a trainer with the Ministry of Education and Technical Education (MOETE) in her district.

Ms. Fatema was proud of her decision to remain in Egypt when so many of her colleagues and relatives went to work in the oil rich Arab Gulf countries. When her cousin who worked in Qatar showed her photos of impressive well-resourced classrooms and staffrooms, she joked with her saying, 'I swear to God ... even if we only have a tree to sit under, we will stay in Egypt to teach our kids'. Her husband on the other hand, benefitted from work in the Gulf. As their financial situation improved, he asked her to stop working but she refused. But she was careful not to let her work as a teacher interfere with her family life. She said, 'Once I leave the school that part of my work is done. When I am back home, I have another type of work'. She did not want to be a full-time homemaker because staying at home would have only benefitted her family, whereas she also wanted to be useful to society.

The school where Ms. Fatema works is located on a wide unpaved street. The first thing one sees after entering the large door, is a concrete playground covered with sand and surrounded by high white walls. In her classroom on the second floor, the walls are covered with colorful pages from her students' drawing book. Some are designs of 3D shapes related to different units in the curriculum like habitats, houses, and Egyptian monuments. Ms. Fatema is very proud of her students' work and keeps the best ones hidden behind a large chart on the wall,

protected so that she can submit them for a competition with other schools in her district.

After three decades as a classroom teacher, Ms. Fatema complains that she still does not have an assistant. She said,

I am an expert teacher. They give me different responsibilities and loads of work. They want me to teach and make new lesson plans, and yet I still don't have an assistant!

The new curriculum added a heavy load to her already many responsibilities. Still, she regards teaching as her vocation.

The profession of teaching is a mission. You feel that you are useful in the society. I love teaching. Seriously, I would like to die while I am teaching.

The other teacher Hend is twenty-seven years old and lives in the city of Fayoum, located about seventy kilometers southwest of Cairo beside Lake Qaroun. The city is surrounded by agricultural areas and villages. She graduated from the Faculty of Arts but for the past five years has been teaching Math for the lower primary Grades 1-3 in a rural government school two hours away from her home.

Hend loves the teaching profession and considers it to be highly respectable work, though she wishes teachers were more appreciated and valued, especially by the Ministry of Education. She lamented,

We are the most important professional category in the country, and yet we are treated the worst, even from the ministry which is supposed to be our voice.

Ms. Hend pointed out how her students in the village were different from students in the city. The poverty and illiteracy of parents in the village put more demands on her work as a teacher. She asked,

What can I do with students who do not have the schoolbooks because their parents were not able to pay the school fees? How can students do their work when parents are illiterate? That of course affects the student.

Ms. Hend has two sons of four and seven years old and has high ambitions for them. She dedicates time in the evenings to following up with them on their studies. Although she has had offers to work in private schools, she prefers working in the public sector because she can maintain a better work-life balance and has a clear path of career

advancement, though the salary is lower. To be sure, the two-hour commute to and from the village takes its toll. She explained,

The public sector has a lot of benefits. There is a specific time to start work, and a specific time to leave. The holidays are more comfortable than private schools, and our maternity leave is four months with pay. I really have many privileges.

Although Ms. Hend values her profession, she sometimes feels exhausted by its requirements. She says, "Sometimes I feel that all the effort is worth it and sometimes I think, "What am I doing to myself?"

3. Teaching a New Curriculum

In 2018, the word coming from the Ministry of Education and Technical Education (MOETE) was that this reform constituted an entirely 'new system', and a 'transformation' (Shawki 2019). The curriculum reform was highly ambitious and in principle many teachers probably welcomed the change. But 'new system' and 'transformation' seemed to be hyperboles. Rather, it represented a modification of the old system by incorporating contemporary teaching and learning approaches, with some changes in teacher pedagogy and classroom practices. Ms. Hend and Ms. Fatema had different opinions about the new curriculum.

Ms. Hend had little familiarity with different curriculums and said, 'I feel that the curriculum is too long and too advanced for the child's age'. Ms. Fatema, on the other hand, a more seasoned teacher, expressed her opinion about the curriculum saying, 'The curriculum is smooth and progressive. It is good to take the student gradually into reading and writing'. Both teachers agreed that there was not enough class time allocated for the curriculum. Ms. Hend grumbled, 'We are really frustrated that we have to teach a big curriculum in a short time'. Ms. Fatema protested, 'We want to teach it all, but time... the time constraints are annoying'.

Time constraints were not the only obstacles for them. They both had to teach the new curriculum with all its advanced approaches and expectations in difficult working conditions. Class density and overcrowding stood as a major barrier. In 2020, the average class size in Egypt in the lower primary stage was 56.9 students per classroom

(MOETE 2019/20). Ms. Fatema's class had seventy students, but she knew of teachers with class sizes upwards of one hundred students. She complained,

You are giving me that big curriculum, a short time to teach it, and then you give me one hundred students in a class. What do you want from me? This is a crisis. We will not be able to do anything with those students.

Ms. Hend said with distress, 'I feel guilty because I cannot address everyone's needs with so many students in the class'.

When the MOETE authorized Discovery Education (DE) to start training teachers using the cascade model on the new curriculum in August 2018, they initially trained 2,000 'master trainers'. These trainers went to different governorates to train local teachers. By November 2018, less than two months after the start of the academic year, Minister Tarek Shawki stated that the Ministry had trained roughly 130,000 primary teachers on the new curriculum, or 8% of all public sector teachers (Masrawy 2018, State Information Service 2018).

Ms. Fatema was selected as one of the original master trainers. She conducted trainings in local districts. Some of the trainees were frustrated and complained that the new system was too theoretical and not practical enough. She herself agreed that the training materials about teacher strategies were too detached from teachers' contexts. Ms. Fatema took the initiative to make the training more relevant to teachers by building on their personal experiences. She started by recognizing and validating teachers' lived experiences in the classroom and incorporated those experiences into the training. She explained,

I organized the sessions like a workshop. I asked each teacher to choose a lesson and share their ideas of how to deliver the lessons keeping in mind the conditions of their classroom. Then we discussed their ideas together. We used to come up with very good ideas. Teachers who initially resented being forced to attend the training, became more involved.

Due to Ms. Fatema's long experience in teaching, she had the confidence and understanding that incorporating teachers' perspectives and lived experiences would allow them to better work together to solve problems. She was adamant that 'Some old ideas should not be forgotten', even when they are not consciously part of a 'new' system. She always stressed

to teachers that they should hold onto old strategies in the classroom if they still worked well.

Ms. Hend on the other hand, felt somewhat abandoned and left to figure out the new curriculum and pedagogic strategies on her own. She expected more support from the Ministry's local education authority, the Idara. The Idara supervisors are supposed to monitor and provide continuous technical support for their local teachers.¹ While the initial training provided a general orientation, it did not prepare Ms. Hend for the new requirements put on math teachers. She was stressed when she found out about the extra work expected of her. She was supposed to produce teaching aids like charts and cards to clarify mathematical concepts and math manipulatives, but her school did not provide any resources. She explained,

1 According to Prime Minister's decision No. 428 (2013), the executive regulations for Chapter VII of the Education Law, Articles 8 and 16 identify the job description of the Idara supervisor as follows:

'Article (8):

The workloads for the occupants of directing positions shall be as follows:

- (a) Preparing the general plan for guidance in the specialty subject and the accompanying activity and following up on its implementation.
- (B) Determining the position of the subject or activity in terms of the deficit and the increase in the schools that fall within the scope of the mentor's competence and the ways to treat them.
- (C) Develop a field plan to visit the schools within the scope of the competence of the guide to determine the academic level of the students and the extent of implementation of the educational activities accompanying the specialization.
- (D) Follow up the teacher's teaching performance, evaluate his performance, and provide all kinds of assistance and technical support that each teacher needs.
- (e) Preparing training programs at the local level to advance the subject of specialization to activate teachers and inform them of the latest developments in the field of specialization, and to suggest the necessary means to achieve a distinguished level of professional development for teachers.
- (f) Providing the Professional Academy for Teachers (PAT) with the training needs of teachers in the field of specialization.
- (g) Participation in preparing exam questions for the specialty subject, supervising transfer exams, and estimating grades.
- (h) Reviewing samples of students' answer sheets in public examinations at the governorate level, with the aim of raising the level of students' performance and providing educational evaluation methods for examinations.
- (i) Expressing opinion on appropriate books for school libraries and summer reading, and references that can be used in serving the curriculum and training programs.
- (j) Submit proposals and prepare studies and research for the development of the material or activity'.

They asked us to prepare a lot of teaching aids, but they did not have any funding for them. Still, they said we had to have them.

As a solution, teachers in Ms. Hend's school found ways to support each other. They made and shared manipulatives and cards with each other, lessening each other's burdens.

Even though in the new system the supervisors were supposed to be supportive and act as mentors, Ms. Hend found her Idara supervisors more punitive than supportive. She said,

The supervisors checked our work against a checklist of certain requirements. They were very strict. If we did not produce the teaching aids on the list, we would get a penalty.

She expected some direction or encouragement, but they only ticked items off their lists. When she asked them for support and ways she could apply the new curriculum, their answers would be something along the lines of, 'Just do it. We do not know how'. She resented how the Idara supervisors did not acknowledge her efforts but were only interested in their bureaucratic duties and papers.

Ms. Fatema and Ms. Hend witnessed a lot of people criticizing the curriculum reform, especially on social media groups. From Ms. Fatema's point of view, this was because they did not understand it. She says, 'Some people do not want anything that is new'. She felt that she had an obligation, a mission, to explain the new curriculum to other teachers and parents. She spent time on Facebook in some of the large groups to answer posts. In one post where a mother did not understand the approach to Arabic and writing, she wrote,

So, your son is in Grade 2. What will happen is that his teacher will guide him so that by the end of the year he will be able to write a small article, like adults. This is an accomplishment.

She encouraged her other colleagues to communicate with parents and explain the changes. She offered to hold a workshop for parents on the new curriculum, but they preferred coming to her individually to ask her specific questions to help their child.

Ms. Fatema and Ms. Hend both stressed the value of positive reinforcement over punitive behavior. For example, Ms. Fatema had a very bright student who was not able to read at all. The girl made excuses

to leave the classroom when reading started. Ms. Fatema called her mother to see where the problem came from. The girl's parents were on the verge of divorce and in hard financial circumstances. She gave the girl extra attention in class and asked the class to clap for her when she read something correctly. She even got her a small gift for making good progress because, 'students need to love the curriculum and love learning'.

3.1 Working with the Teacher's Guide

The Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development (CCIMD), issued a Teacher's Guide's for each subject with details on how to teach each individual class. For Ms. Hend, the notion of a Teacher's Guide was completely new. It took her time to understand its contents and how to use it. When she started really consulting the Guide she came to see it as a savior, giving her ideas for activities with step-by-step instructions of what to do.

Ms. Fatema found the Teacher's Guide to be a highly valuable part of the new materials. The Guide gave her creative ideas to help her change what she knew to be rigid style of classroom teaching. She learned, for example, ways to teaching spelling in more interesting ways. She said, 'The explanations in the Teacher's Guide of how to approach spelling are fantastic, I like them very much'.

Ms. Fatema used strategies in the Teacher's Guide's for dealing with large classes. One technique called, 'think – pair – share' is when the teacher asks a question and lets the students first think about it alone. Then, they share it with the person sitting next to them. This way, even in big classes, all students have a chance to share and discuss ideas.

The Teacher's Guide also introduced the concept of formative assessments which measures student progress to ensure *that* they are learning, rather than *what* they have learned. This approach is practiced widely, but it was new to Egyptian teachers. Ms. Fatema created her own formative assessments. She explained:

I give students a quiz that I make myself to see if my teaching was effective. This helps me to know where I stand and decide what I will do next. This is not part of the curriculum, it is my own initiative. I got this idea from the Teacher's Guide.

The Teacher's Guide was available online and many teachers downloaded the digital version on their mobile phones so that it would be with them all the time. But teachers preferred by far to have a hard copy, although these were in short supply. Ms. Fatema said, 'When we find a hard copy it is like a treasure'.

4. Learning Loss during the Pandemic

Teachers were just starting to understand the new curriculum requirements when the COVID-19 pandemic led to schools closing in March 2020. In the following academic years of 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, schools opened intermittently and then closed again. This meant that two of the first three years of implementing the new curriculum happened during the pandemic. Students in the early years were especially affected with learning loss (UNESCO et al. 2021).

During periods of school closures, most students in Grades 1 to 3 lacked access to their schoolteachers. Ms. Fatema found it difficult to initially adapt to online learning and said,

When students were staying at home there was no teaching at all. It was very difficult. I don't know anyone in the younger grades who did online learning.

Out of necessity, parents and students were accepting the idea of online learning. Ms. Fatema learned that many parents from her school were resorting to private lessons online for a fee. In principle, she was against private lessons in the early grades. She thought private lessons were only beneficial when there was an actual problem, and she had to admit the coronavirus presented a problem.

As for Ms. Hend, the village where her school was located did not have electricity. This meant the school could not use the Internet or mobile phones to communicate with parents and students. They were resigned to the idea that there was no way to teach students remotely. They had to wait for the pandemic to end. Ms. Hend believed that private lessons were the only way students could catch up with what they missed. As a mother of a child in Grade 1, she saw firsthand how her son was slowly forgetting everything he had learned in school.

In October 2021 schools opened and students returned to schools after missing more than a full year of instruction. The learning loss after the pandemic disrupted the building block nature of the curriculum. For example, students who missed basic reading skills in Grade 1 could not meet expectations for reading skills in Grade 2. Ms. Fatema's students entered Grade 2 missing basic reading skills. They did not know most of the letters and could not blend letters and words, things they were supposed to cover in Grade 1. Ms. Hend encountered a similar problem with Grade 3 Math. Her students were lacking basic addition and subtraction skills. They were not ready for multiplication, which set back the whole curriculum.

Teachers were not given clear direction regarding what to do, which put them under real pressure. They had to be resourceful and creative to develop their own solutions. Ms. Fatema explained,

Corona, frankly, nearly destroyed us all. Students came back not knowing anything. They seriously exhausted us. I mean, we didn't know what to do with them.

Without direction from the Idara supervisors or anyone from the Ministry, Ms. Fatema, drew on her experience to improvise. Like other teachers around the country, she arrived at the solution of creating WhatsApp groups with the parents. She explained, 'When students returned after Corona, we teachers thought, "How can we work with them?" That is when we started asking parents to use WhatsApp'. Getting everyone onto the App took a number of steps. First, she had to get the permission of her school principal. Second, she had to contact the parents of each class, and they had to agree to join a WhatsApp group for their child's class. Once the group was formed, she shared all the work the students covered that day. She explained, 'I sent photos of everything I wrote on the board and also sent voice messages'. The parents—usually the mothers—were expected to follow-up with their child at home. When students came to school, the next day, she would review the previous day's lesson to make sure they grasped it before moving on. She proudly said, 'Yes of course we can help each other'. These solutions were the best teachers found at the time, but they placed more work and burden on teachers and parents. They only had success

in households where someone in the family had the time or capacity to follow up with their student.

The village environment where Ms. Hend worked called for different solutions. Forming WhatsApp groups with parents was not an option because many of them were illiterate and not tied to their mobile phones in the same way. Initially, she started the new year by devoting one week to reviewing the concepts needed to start the new curriculum. One week was not enough to cover everything, so she had to manage revisions while teaching the year's curriculum. She tried to organize extra courses after school for students, but the school already suffered from teacher shortages and the ones working did not have time. Instead, teachers decided to provide remedial lessons during the mid-year break, but students did not want to attend them because that was their break. They tried to contact parents to convince them to send their children during the break, but they did not respond. She expressed frustration that despite many efforts and good intentions, nothing seemed to be working. Reflecting back on that time she said,

It was very difficult for all of us. Our school in the village had a lot of challenges from parents' illiteracy, their hard economic situation, and our lack of resources. Sadly, a percentage of the students will get lost in the crowd.

5. Personal Initiatives and Tech Can Go Only So Far

Through extensive interviews about the Education 2.0 curriculum reform with two primary school teachers, this chapter explores how educators navigated both a planned change and an unexpected global pandemic. Ms. Fatema and Ms. Hend differed insofar as they were on different parts of the career ladder in terms of seniority, they taught different subjects (Arabic and Math) and worked in an urban and rural school respectively. While these teachers welcomed the ambitious curriculum reform in principle, they received only minimal support to implement it. Rather, the Ministry of Education invested heavily on short trainings and digital solutions. They did not sufficiently take into consideration the average school's material conditions, and teachers' capacity and abilities to apply contemporary and child-centered approaches in the

classroom. The Teacher's Guide offered grounded solutions and served as a valuable aid.

When schools closed as the result of the pandemic, the more senior teacher Ms. Fatema stepped up to find creative solutions to help her colleagues, students, and parents. She enjoyed the bout of professional autonomy that came with the pandemic. The more junior Ms. Hend did the best she could but was demoralized by the hard circumstances in her rural community and was not able to galvanize her colleagues, parents, or students to come together to find workable solutions. Both teachers believed in what they were doing but needed more recognition and support to face the challenges on the ground. While there is much to learn from these two committed teachers, their personal initiatives could take them only so far in a system where they were often left to fend for themselves. The system offered them technical solutions but not the kinds of robust professional support and trainings they needed to ensure high levels of student learning and well-being.

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