

# Educating Egypt

Educating Egypt

Civic Values and Ideological Struggles

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## **[a-head]** Acknowledgments

This book essentially began in 1986 when I was a study-abroad student at the American University in Cairo from the University of California, Berkeley. At the time, I lived in the Falaki Student Hostel in Downtown Cairo, and most mornings, would wake up to the unfamiliar sounds of drum rolls, chanting, stomping, and commands over a loudspeaker. I was disoriented and decided to ask a fellow resident, what was going on down the street? She explained, emphasizing how obvious the answer was, “It’s a school.” Three years later, in one of those curious twists of fate, that very school was selected as the site of an ethnographic study for my master’s thesis. More than three decades after that, I revisited that study for this volume, placing it within a wider body of work and thinking on the cultures and politics of education in different eras, youth, civic engagement, and social policy, and the spectacular waves of change that have occurred in Egypt, the region, and world. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to countless students, teachers, parents, principals, friends, and other education workers who, over the years, opened their classrooms, homes, and minds to me, guiding the direction of my research. While preparing this book, I became involved in researching and documenting a major education reform currently underway in Egypt, “Education 2.0.” While this book just touches on those still ongoing reforms (hopefully another work will cover them in more detail), I am continuously reminded of the immense dedication of so many people who work in the field of education. I hope this work can be of some value to them, to students, and lay readers, and generate conversations about education policy, research priorities, and education futures, among other topics.

This volume combines original chapters with substantially revised versions of already published work undertaken between 1990 and 2021. Part 1, “Schooling the Nation,” is derived from a monograph, *Scenes of Schooling: Inside a Girls’ School in Cairo*, originally published by

Cairo Papers in Social Science, a division of the American University in Cairo Press (Herrera 1992). Chapter 8, “Downveiling,” appeared in *Middle East Report* (Herrera 2001). Chapter 9, “Education, Empire, and Global Citizenship,” is a highly modified version of “Education and Empire: Democratic Reform in the Arab world?” from the *International Journal of Educational Reform* (Herrera 2008). Chapter 10, “Young Egyptians’ Quest for Jobs and Justice,” was originally a chapter in the book, *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North* published by Oxford University Press (Herrera and Bayat 2010). Chapter 11, “Youth and Citizenship in the Digital Age: A View from Egypt,” originally appeared in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Herrera 2012), and chapter 12, “It’s Time to Talk about Youth in the Middle East as ‘The Precariat,’” was published in the open-source journal *META* (Middle East—Topics & Arguments) (Herrera 2017a). Acknowledgment goes to all publications and presses for permission to reprint or use portions of already published material. Regarding photos, much appreciation to my friend Dalia al-Aswad who shared her father’s primary school class photo from 1930 Ismailiya (in chapter 6). I also extend thanks to the anonymous Facebook creators and meme makers whose work I use in chapter 11.

When I initially entered the world of educational research in Egypt and the region, I felt isolated. But thankfully, the field has become more robust, diverse, and a space of conviviality. I would like to thank specifically Nadim Mirshak, Hany Zayed, and Mezna Qato, who read and provided comments on an earlier version of the introduction. My colleagues and students in the Department of Education Policy Organization and Leadership and the Global Studies in Education program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign have been beyond supportive and flexible. They consistently provide a stimulating, engaging, and enabling environment to explore critical and transnational issues in education. Nadia Naqib, my editor at

the American University in Cairo Press, has shown great patience and professionalism. Asef Bayat, whom I met within weeks of arriving in Cairo, has been a partner and sounding board for the better part of my life. Our two daughters, who live up to their namesakes, Shiva with the air of an eloquent and elegant poem, and Tara who channels the light of a glittering star, are sources of creativity, purpose, and strength. I dedicate this book to them.

Champaign, Illinois, 2021

**[ch]** Introduction

**[ch]** Educating Egypt: From Nation Building to Digital Disruption

Education in Egypt has unfolded in the past century with enormous success in terms of its reach and place in the collective imagination. The state and diverse groups in society have consistently leveraged education to shape identities, assert political and moral authority, and pursue ambitious visions for economic and social development. Indeed, education is such a compelling field of study precisely because of how it is intertwined in larger processes of power and counterpower, social continuity and social change, and because of its connection to the hopes, aspirations, labor, setbacks, and opportunities of millions of families and children, who make immense sacrifices to be credentialed and “educated.”

This book traces the everyday practices, policy ideas, and ideological and political battles relating to education from the era of nation building in the twentieth century to the age of digital disruption in the twenty-first. The overarching theme is that schooling and the broader field of education have consistently mirrored larger political, economic, and cultural trends and competing ideas about what constitutes the “good society,” the “good citizen,” and the “educated person.” Questions around citizenship, civic belonging, and participation in public and economic life have loomed especially large as sites of struggle and reimagining. These themes run through the book and tie its chapters together.

The book is divided chronologically and thematically into three sections: Schooling the Nation: Inside a Girls’ Preparatory School (chapters 1–5); Political Islam and Education

(chapters 6–8); and Youth in a Changing Global Order (chapters 9–12). Given the recent advances in digital transformation, and the uncertain educational futures made visible by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, the concluding chapter poses the question, “Is the school as we know it on the way to extinction?” The chapters draw on three decades of mainly qualitative educational research in Egypt, beginning with an ethnographic study of the everyday world of a girls’ preparatory school in Cairo over the course of one academic year (1990–91). This study provided the foundation for a host of inquiries that would follow, culminating in specialized research in global policy studies in education.

This volume takes an interdisciplinary approach that draws on anthropology, sociology, political economy, philosophy, social history, and the fields of international development studies, youth studies, gender studies, and technology studies. Since new tools, technologies, and ideas are periodically infused into the education system, leading to sudden changes in behaviors and attitudes, researchers must be methodologically agile. The methodologies employed here include ethnography, oral and life histories, critical analysis of education policies, laws, and textbooks, social historical analyses, and digital social research. Ethnographic and other qualitative approaches compel the researcher to grapple with reality in all its shades and contradictions while remaining cognizant of one’s own subjective positionality. These approaches do not lend themselves to tidy or grand theorization about the nature of schooling. The aim of this volume, rather, is to bring issues and social realities to the surface, raise questions, and put forward propositions for further investigation.

**[a-head]** The Two Sides of Education: *Tarbiya* and *Ta’lim* (Upbringing and Knowledge)

Across the ages, education in Egypt and the wider Middle East, North Africa, and West Asia (MENAWA) region,<sup>1</sup> has been understood and practiced as the joining of upbringing (*tarbiya*) with knowledge (*'ilm*). The words *tarbiya* and *ta'lim* (the latter derived from the word *'ilm*) are often used interchangeably as synonyms for “education” or “schooling.” These words, however, denote very different aspects of education and carry distinct historical antecedents.

The word *tarbiya* derives from the root *r-b-b*, which means to grow up, rear, raise, bring up, educate, or teach (children). Another form of the verb from the same root, *rabba*, means “to be master, be lord, have possession of, control, have command or authority over.”<sup>2</sup> The word *tarbiya* harkens to a time when teachers carried societal authority and power. They shouldered the responsibility of raising children as virtuous members of their communities, according to laws and customs specifically drawn from the Abrahamic religions. Muslim thinkers such as the celebrated jurist al-Ghazali (1058–1111), and figures from Christian and Jewish traditions, viewed education as a moral process (see Tawil 2001). Education, properly performed, would serve the greater good of the society. Teachers and other adult authorities were supposed to instill virtue, good manners, and proper comportment in children, which in Arabic is termed *adab*.<sup>3</sup> These concepts and practices around child rearing have left a lasting impact on educational thought and pedagogy up to the present, though with modification.

With the rise of mass national school systems in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *tarbiya* took on more “secular” and “developmental” connotations. Teachers trained in modern pedagogic sciences were charged with bringing up children within a framework of nation building, good citizenship, and economic productivity. In other words, as societies in the MENAWA region transitioned to modern bureaucracies, and schooling became organized through a process of considerable educational borrowing from largely Western models,

education professionals invariably carried notions and practices of *tarbiya* from local cultures into schools. In sociological theory, the terms “socialization” or “enculturation” come close to the meaning of *tarbiya*; however, these terms do not entirely capture connotations of “upbringing” and “*adab*” that have remained embedded in cultures of teaching and learning, even in their decidedly modified forms.

*Ta’lim*, on the other hand, a noun derived from the Arabic root ‘*a-l-m* (to know), connotes information, advice, teaching, instruction; training, schooling, education; and apprenticeship (Wehr 1980, 636). The underlying principle tying these meanings together is “having knowledge.” Similar to the concept of *tarbiya*, “knowledge” carries a deep historical legacy, although it too is a dynamic category. In his magisterial study, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Franz Rosenthal (1970) traces the genealogy of the Arabic root ‘*a-l-m* starting with its pre-Arabic antecedents. For centuries, if not millennia, knowledge was characterized by a dichotomy between human knowledge and divine knowledge, or “wisdom.”<sup>4</sup> Writing about the concept of knowledge in medieval Islam, Rosenthal (1970, 240) posits: “Information is the cement that holds together any human society, and a continuous process of education is necessary to assure its preservation and extension.” This description refers to knowledge as a tool to ensure the reproduction of societies and the social order. However it does not account for how education adjusts to accommodate and drive new knowledges, forms of power, and changes in the social structure.

In more contemporary education systems dating to the nineteenth century, *‘ilm* signifies new approaches to “scientific” knowledge and ways of knowing that could be codified, measured, quantified, and assessed: the kind of knowledge deemed essential for “modern” development and economic flourishing. Old and new knowledges and pedagogies comingle in

education systems and influence each other. And as scholars of critical theory (Apple 2000; Freire 1970; Kellner 2003; Mayo 2012), feminist epistemology (Abu-Lughod 2008; Harding 1991), and postcolonial and decolonial studies (Apffel-Marglin and Marglin 1996; Borg and Mayo 2002; Leonardo 2020; Mbembe 2001; Smith 1999), remind us, time and again, knowledge is always connected, in implicit and explicit ways, to systems of power. The ongoing contests over knowledge and power penetrate debates about the content of curricula, the rules of assessment, styles of pedagogy, the economics of education, and the very purpose of education itself.

Even as modern sciences gained primacy in contemporary education systems, *tarbiya* (*parvaresh* in Persian) remained the more commonly used official term to denote “education” throughout the MENAWA region. The education ministries in Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Iran are all named Ministry of Upbringing and Education (Arabic: Wazarat al-Tarbiya wa-l-Ta‘lim; Persian: Vezarat-e Amuzesh va Parvaresh). In Algeria and Morocco, the designation is Ministry of National Upbringing (Wazarat al-Tarbiya al-Wataniya), and in Syria and Iraq it is simply Ministry of Upbringing (Wazarat al-Tarbiya).<sup>5</sup> Education in its full sense involves the joining of *tarbiya* and *ta‘lim*, even during times when the scales are tipped in favor of one aspect over the other. As historian Susanna Ferguson (2018) cogently argues with reference to mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century Lebanon, “the dyad of *ta‘lim/tarbiya* marked the tension between reform and stability particularly clearly.” In other words, *ta‘lim* contains the promise of new knowledge, development, change, and progress, whereas *tarbiya* denotes social stability and tradition.

**[a-head]** New Schooling Rises

The type of schooling that spread and became dominant from the third quarter of the nineteenth century has been described as “modern,” “Western,” “civil,” “foreign,” “secular,” “new order,” “new method,” or simply “new” (see Herrera 2004, 318). Unlike indigenous schools and colleges run by religious communities and pious endowments (*waqf*), or forms of training organized by different guilds by way of apprenticeships, the new schooling was more standardized, centrally planned and monitored, and nationalistic in character.<sup>6</sup> It required a new professional class of teachers, administrators, and bureaucrats trained in the emerging sciences of pedagogy, education administration, and management.

The first national nod to the idea of universal “new” schooling in Egypt can be traced to the Constitution of 1923.<sup>7</sup> Written and ratified just four years after the 1919 Revolution, it declares Egypt a constitutional monarchy, though the country remained under partial British protectorate.<sup>8</sup> The constitution represents a bold rebuke to the woeful and intentional British neglect of the education of the local population. Article 19 stipulates: “Elementary education [grades one to five] shall be compulsory for Egyptian boys and girls and shall be free in public schools.” In a move towards educational consolidation, Article 19 also removes autonomy from local communities with the clause, “Public education shall be regulated by law.” The early nationalists and framers of the constitution understood that “education” was associated with patronage networks and practiced in loose, often questionable, and uneven ways across the country. They did not view elementary schooling as inherently positive, or a necessary asset to the national project. Article 17 sets the precedent for free education, though with a caveat: “Education shall be free *except when it breaches public order or contradicts morals*” (emphasis added). Though it would be several decades before the country would reach near universal schooling under the administration of a centralized ministry of education, the Constitution of

1923 serves as an important milestone that gave weight to the idea that *all* Egyptian children, female and male, from every ethnic and religious group, region, and background, should be educated and, at the same time, subject to state oversight.

In the 1950s and 1960s, on the heels of the Second World War and a wave of anticolonial struggles in formerly colonized lands, countries throughout the global South claimed their independence. Schools became pillars of citizenship formation in postcolonial societies. In Egypt, following the Free Officer's coup that overthrew the monarchy in 1952, a new military class came to power, led by Gamal Abd al-Nasser. The revolutionary government banned political parties and suspended the Constitution of 1923. The subsequent Constitution of 1956 maintained previous guarantees of free schooling for all Egyptians but added new language, asserting the state's dominion over the population's civic, moral, and intellectual education. According to Article 49, "Education is a right for all Egyptians guaranteed by the state. . . . The state especially takes care of the development of the people civilly and intellectually and morally." The revolutionary government used all methods at its disposal—soft power by means of schooling, mass media, and culture (mainly music and films),<sup>9</sup> and hard power in the form of the repressive arms of the state, the police, intelligence, and army—to fashion a society for a new Egypt.

During the Nasser years, public education was administered by a centralized state bureaucracy. Scores of Egyptians, particularly from rural and urban poor areas, became first-time school-goers. Their ability to access schools and earn educational qualifications led to high levels of social mobility. However, at the same time, non-Arabs and non-Muslims found themselves newly marginalized in a system that institutionalized discrimination and narrowed the definition of what constituted "Egyptian."<sup>10</sup> Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, large portions of religious,

ethnic, and linguistic minority communities in Egypt, including Christians, Greeks, Jews, Italians, Syrians, and Armenians, left Egypt as many of their properties and businesses were sequestered, and their schools nationalized and Arabized.<sup>11</sup>

Nasser's government (1956–1970) also famously brought al-Azhar University (est. AD 972) and its network of Azhari schools under its control. With the Law of al-Azhar of 1961, the government set out to weaken the Muslim scholarly class (*ulama*), who had long enjoyed social prestige and economic power. These religious clergy controlled vast amounts of property and wealth through the *waqf* system of religious endowments. They had enormous influence over the education of Muslim children through their networks of primary schools and mosque-based Qur'anic classes. Despite efforts in later decades to reassert their political and economic standing (Eccel 1984; Zeghal 1996), Azhari institutes came to be widely perceived by the rising middle classes as schools “of last resort.” Government policies perpetuated their lower status by, for example, requiring Azhari schools to admit students who failed in the general public schools.<sup>12</sup>

The pan-Arab project of the Nasser era would experience a precipitous demise following the Arabs' crushing military defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. After Nasser's death in 1970, his vice president Anwar Sadat (1970–1981) assumed the presidency. Sadat's government turned away from Nasser-era ideologies of state socialism, Arab nationalism, and Third Worldism, in favor of pursuing more free market “Open Door” (*Infitah*) economic development policies. While embracing economic liberalization, the new government also pivoted towards social conservatism and instituted Islamic law (*sharia*). Like Nasser before him, Sadat marked his epoch with a new constitution, the Constitution of 1971. In a departure from the previous constitution, it codified fidelity to Islam and the Muslim scholarly class. Article 2 stated: “Islam is the religion of the State and Arabic its official language. Islamic law (*sharia*) is the principal

source of legislation.” Sadat also lifted Nasser-era restrictions on Islamist groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood, in an effort to offset the growing leftist opposition in the country. He thereby emboldened the Islamist current in the country, a move that would later backfire.

The articles relating to education in the 1971 Constitution combined Islamic identity and cultural conservatism with free market capitalism. The constitution reaffirmed the state’s commitment to free, universal, compulsory schooling at the primary stage, but added a new condition: “Religious education shall be a principal subject in the courses of general education” (Article 19). Article 18 covered the political, economic, and developmental imperative of education, stipulating that the State is responsible for supervising every stage of schooling “with a view to linking all of them to the requirements of society and production.”<sup>13</sup> These dual positions reveal the state’s attempt to advocate for cultural continuity while promoting change through engagement in a global economic order.

Sadat famously signed the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1978, an act largely applauded by the international community but controversial at home. People within Arab societies largely espoused nonnormalization with Israel because of its treatment and disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, Camp David led to Sadat being the first Muslim recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize,<sup>14</sup> and Egypt becoming the largest recipient of US development and military aid after Israel. Trade and international investment in Egypt experienced a boom. Multilateral and bilateral finance institutes including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and other development agencies within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries became more influential players in the country’s path of economic and social development, including the education sector.

Sadat's diplomacy with Israel and alignment with the Islamists tragically and violently led to his demise. On October 6, 1981, during a parade commemorating Egypt's military victory in the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, Muslim extremists marching in the procession assassinated the president. When Hosni Mubarak, Sadat's vice president, came to power, he had to negotiate his predecessor's complicated legacy. Mubarak (1981–2011) embraced economic liberalization and tried to walk a middle road as a regional power. Unlike his predecessors—and his successors following the January 25 Revolution of 2011—Mubarak did not attempt to reshape society with a new constitution but continued on the course already set by Sadat. The 1971 Constitution was updated and ratified in 2007, though the articles pertaining to education remained unchanged. On the heels of Sadat's assassination and the escalation of radical Islamist movements (see chapter 6), national security became an even more dominant feature of the state machinery. Yet many other groups and individuals were also vulnerable to the state's repressive system, from labor organizers and the full spectrum of the opposition, to people who did not fall in line with Mubarak era cronies' demands. Educational institutions across all levels were subject to policing and surveillance, in part to stop them from becoming zones of recruitment to illegal Islamist organizations. However, policing of schools and universities was also carried out to quell political engagement and activism of all sorts, and curb behaviors at odds with the intentionally vague category of “public morality” (see chapters 6 and 7).

With the geopolitical realignments after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the supposed dawn of a new world order, the education sector in Egypt swayed to the tremors of the times. If the 1950s to 1970s represented the postcolonial era—a time when schools and universities were forging the developmental Arab state and economy by cultivating “the future of the nation,” its young productive citizens—by the 1990s education was turning into a profitable

sector of the economy and an opportunity for investment. Subsequently, a new business class comprised of the ruling oligarchy, Islamists with connections to the Arab Gulf, and a new class of western-oriented entrepreneurs made their fortunes in the booming consumer and service sectors. These ranged from cars, real estate, and telecommunications, to private hospitals, kindergartens, schools, universities, and study centers.<sup>15</sup>

It was at this point, during the ascent of the Mubarak regime in 1990, and amidst a changing global and regional order, that I stepped into an Egyptian government school for the first time. Little did I realize then that research into schooling would lead me toward inquiries into politics and geopolitics, Islamist movements, youth cultures, online activism and revolution, the politics of international development, digital transformation, and the collective effects of all these issues on education futures.

### **[a-head]** Researching the Unfolding Drama of Education

This book moves between the local and the global, the micro and the macro, as it examines the broad social forces that drive educational practice, ideas, and change. These levels of observation bring into view the constant interplay between structure and agency. Among the main questions the work addresses are these: How have different interest groups—including foreign governments and entities, multilateral organizations, social movements, the private sector, civil society, and youth themselves—been forces for educational change? What happens when education actors harbor fundamentally different views about the purpose of schooling, the role of the citizen, and the character of the collective “we” in society? How do new educational ideas, policies, modes of financing, technologies, and practices emerge, and to what ends, to whose benefit?

This book is divided into four sections. Each one reflects different time periods, themes, foci, and methodological choices. Part One, “Schooling the Nation: Inside a Girls’ Preparatory School” (chapters 1–5) is an ethnography in the tradition of cultural anthropology, carried out between 1990 and 1991. At the time, I was a master’s student in anthropology/sociology at the American University in Cairo and the program required an original thesis. Influenced by the writings of the renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead and the work of social psychology around human development and life stages, I had an interest in learning about Egyptian girls at the stage of adolescence (see Mead 1928 and 1930). Additionally, as a student of Middle East studies, I had long been an avid reader of the rich and revered traditions and institutions of learning in the region. I originally considered conducting a study of the women’s section of al-Azhar University, or of girls in Azhari schools, but did not necessarily want to focus exclusively on Islamic institutions. I opted instead to explore “modern” state schooling, which was supposed to be more inclusive and comprise laboratories of citizenship and civic life. Schools were widely seen at the time as microcosms of the nation, sites of political socialization fundamental to the nation-state project.<sup>16</sup> There was no ethnographic record of the everyday life of a contemporary government school in Egypt, which made the undertaking all the more appealing.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this ethnography would become a snapshot of national schooling at the end of an era, a time overlapping with the close of the Cold War and the opening to more aggressive forces of globalization. Chapters 1 to 5 document the everyday workings of a school, paying attention to the human dramas and struggles therein, and the extraordinary amount of organization, effort, and work exerted by numerous dedicated teachers and other education workers in order to keep the system running. These descriptions show how the education system is dependent on a high degree of legal and administrative regulation, yet at the

same time is shaped by human factors such as the principal's leadership style, the attitudes and life experiences of members of the school community, the condition of the built environment, and the spirited students who breathe life into the space.

Looking at the life of that school today, certain aspects seem dated, such as the analog, low-tech way of organizing everyday life, a style of corporal punishment that was more widely accepted then but would be frowned upon today, and an earnestness about the enterprise of schooling, which has been shaded with more cynicism in recent years. Yet other features are as relevant today as they were in the past, such as the obsession with examinations and grades, the importance of the "hidden curriculum" in understanding the reproduction of power and ideology at school,<sup>17</sup> teaching to the test, competition for private lessons, forms of cheating and gaming the system, population pressure and stress on the built environment, and power struggles that take place at the different levels of the administrative system. Above all, this ethnographic account provides a reminder of the immense labor and high hopes so many families place in their children being schooled, and the struggles of all involved to manage the system with its angels and demons, its promises and its perils.

Part Two, "Political Islam and Education," (chapters 6–8) emerged from an urgent desire to understand how groups and movements use the institutions and technologies of state power to try to forge alternatives to it. I had been living in Egypt since 1986 and witnessed firsthand the intense Islamization of society and escalation of conflict between militant Islamists and the security state. During this time, some schools were becoming supposed ideological breeding grounds for radical ideas and recruitment, making the entire education sector a matter of national security. At the same time, education markets were opening as part of a state-led drive towards privatization. A new category of for-profit private schools, private Islamic schools (*al-madaris*

*al-islamiya al-khassa*), combined schooling with lifestyle aspirations, business with politics, and upward mobility with piety. For my doctoral dissertation at Columbia University's Teachers College, I wanted to continue building my knowledge through grounded ethnographies, while incorporating aspects of social history, politics, and political economy. Fortunately, I was able to get permission to access three private Islamic schools from 1996 to 1999.

In the chapters of Part Two, I describe some of the unique rituals connected to these private Islamic schools, and the state's reaction to them. I also discuss the ways in which they represented experiments in counternationalism. This section, while containing a good deal of original ethnographic detail, is heavily supplemented with media reports, legal cases, minutes of parliamentary sessions, and other secondary source materials. In it, I seek to understand what was actually new about this "new Islamic education," and what was a continuation of older patterns. The middle school and high school students I came to know at the private Islamic schools proved extraordinarily insightful. When I was confused and at times oblivious about what was happening at the school, they would set me straight and explain the subtext of what I was observing. Chapter 8, "Downveiling," came directly out of conversations with students (some of whom appear in Figure 1), who were laser-sharp analysts of their schools and the power dynamics therein.

**[fig. 1 here]** In the classroom in a private Islamic school, Cairo. Author center. 1996.

Part Three, "Youth in a Changing Global Order" (chapters 9–12), came about as "youth" and youth subjectivities in relation to a knowledge economy became foci in international development interventions, similar to "women" and "gender" in the 1970s and 1980s. The

“knowledge economy,” also called “knowledge society,” became the development orthodoxy in the latter decades of the twentieth century (see Mazawi 2010; Powell and Snellman 2004). This framework favors technologically oriented and market-driven approaches to education and learning. It has manifested in the prioritization of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) over humanities and the arts, privatization over education as a public good, and investment in educational technologies over parallel investments in people and local communities. It has also infused a logic of competition and entrepreneurship into multiple aspects of social life.

In Egypt and other countries of the MENAWA region, democracy and related concepts—human rights, active learning, civic participation, gender empowerment, global citizenship, and entrepreneurship—were international policy mantras mapped onto education (see chapter 9). Many efforts were made to integrate these concepts into school curricula and to support civil society’s nonformal education programs as avenues towards democratization. Then, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, global attention was suddenly paid to “Muslim youth,” who became the objects of the US-led “war on terror.”

This section takes “Muslim youth” and “youth” as key categories. It explores the relation between youth, education policy, citizenship, and global politics using two methods: critical discourse analysis of international development reports and policy documents (chapters 9 and 12), and life history interviews with young people (chapters 10 and 11). The chapters highlight the dissonance between the voices of Egyptian youths who articulate their struggles, aspirations, and ideas for fair social policies, and the oftentimes out-of-touch and ideologically driven policy prescriptions about what young people need and should do.

Chapter 12 turns to Egyptian youth and citizenship in the digital age. The bulk of research and theorizing on youth and digital media have largely come out of the global North. However, Egypt provides a compelling and prescient case of digital disruption and change. There is no denying that in our current digital age, in this Fourth Industrial Revolution, children and youth are coming of age and learning and exercising citizenship—communicating, socializing, deliberating, and doing politics—in fundamentally different ways compared to previous generations. But to what ends? Chapter 12 ponders civic engagement in the digital age from the point of view of the young tech-savvy generation in Egypt who participated in the January 25 Revolution of 2011.

The study is informed theoretically by the sociology of generations and methodologically by biographical research with high school and university students, with a focus on “communication biographies.” The social media platforms and communication methods they used provided incredible opportunities for networking, organizing, and creating memes and a host of artistic content, but at the same time were rife with risk. The platforms were easily infiltrated and surveilled, crowded with bad actors with nefarious aims, and owned by foreign corporations incentivized by profit, to name just some of the darker sides associated with digital communication. Still, during that moment in history, young, wired youth took their citizenship and civic education into their own hands and collectively tried to create an alternative society that was fairer, and more inclusive, experimental, and participatory.<sup>18</sup>

The concluding chapter, in Part Four, brings education to the current era. Just as in previous epochs, when new governments attempted to reorder society through drafting constitutions and long-term development plans, so has been the case with the government of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi (2014–present). This postrevolution, or “counterrevolutionary” government as

detractors call it, is attempting to steer Egypt in a radically futuristic direction. Among its more ambitious undertakings—along with building a new capital and up to thirty-four new “smart cities” in the desert from the ground up<sup>19</sup>—has been to build a “New Education System,” or “Education 2.0.” The new government’s broad commitments to education can be found in the Constitution of 2014 (the third constitution produced after the January 25, 2011, Revolution), which goes into more detail than previous constitutions. It lays out government expenditures on pretertiary education (at least 4 percent of gross domestic product) and devotes articles to technical education (Article 20), academic independence (Article 21), teachers (Article 22), scientific research (Article 23), Arabic language, religious education and national history (Article 24), and illiteracy (Article 25).

The actual reforms toward the “New Education System,” or “Education 2.0” are moving fast and furious in different directions.<sup>20</sup> At the primary stage, they involve building an entirely new curriculum framework and supplying books that support multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and activity-based learning. Whether or not this new framework has been changing classroom culture, teacher pedagogy, and learning remains to be seen and requires investigation. The most far-reaching changes in education have to do with the digital transformation of the sector. By any measure, some remarkable and pioneering digital initiatives have emerged in connection to the reforms.<sup>21</sup> The Egyptian Knowledge Bank (Bank al-Ma‘rifa al-Misri) (EKB), a massive online library that provides high-quality peer-reviewed resources in three languages, rivals and surpasses top-tier research university libraries. The EKB also contains portals for all preuniversity stages, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, with multimedia materials corresponding to the curricula. All secondary school students have government issued tablets and can access a wide range of learning materials on the EKB and other platforms. At the time of

writing, the EKB is free of charge and accessible to all 100-million-plus citizens and residents in Egypt. Moreover, access to the EKB extends to other countries in the Arab world and Africa through special agreements.

Efforts to reimagine, update, and redesign the education system have been led by Dr. Tarek Shawki, minister of education and technical education (appointed 2017). An engineer by training, Shawki is a former director of the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science in Arab States (2008–2012) and chief of the section for ICTs in Education, Science and Culture (2005–2008).<sup>22</sup> As someone who has been an evangelist for technological innovation in education and culture, the minister exhibits techno-optimist inclinations. A “techno-optimist” or “techno-utopian” believes in the power of technological solutions to redress social problems and create improved, more efficient, and more prosperous societies. Techno-optimists tend to take an ahistorical approach to social policy, meaning that they do not necessarily see a problem with imagining society as a blank slate on which to map development visions and plans.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, there is little recognition of the darker and dystopic sides of digital futures. Media theorists, social scientists, philosophers, and science fiction authors, among others, have pushed back against ideas associated with techno-utopianism. Douglas Rushkoff (2019), for instance, argues in *Team Human* that digital technologies are eroding human communities and human freedoms.

The concluding chapter is a rumination on the future of education. It reviews three factors that are upending the Egyptian education system: a runaway shadow education system and continuous innovations of educational entrepreneurs; the attempt by the post-2014 government to build a new education system that involves, among other things, digital transformation by way of injecting it with a number of digital tools, platforms, and learning technologies; and the Covid-19

pandemic that opened the way for a hybrid model and normalized distance learning. It asks if schooling as we know it, the model born out of an earlier industrial revolution, is on a life support system gasping for its final breaths of air? And if so, what is on the horizon to replace it?

Among the objectives of this work are to take stock of major education trends in Egypt, the region, and the world in the past half century, reflect on what merits preserving and strengthening from the past, what needs to be relegated to history, and what might be imagined totally anew. Questions about civic belonging, and the ideological consequences of new ideas and visions, loom large. These times require immense imagination, evidence, and consensus building as we charge ahead in uncharted territory toward education futures.

**[part title] Part One**

Schooling the Nation: Inside a Girls' Preparatory School

**[ch]** 1

**[ch]** An Ethnographer's Orientation

**[fig. 2 here]** Falaki School, Cairo. 1990. (Photograph by Linda Herrera).

**[set as extract]** Summary: It is extremely difficult to get the necessary security clearances to conduct qualitative research in Egyptian schools, but gaining access is just the beginning. This chapter describes how an ethnographer enters the world of a girls' preparatory school (sixth to eighth grade) in Cairo in 1990–91, and recounts the early, awkward encounters with members of the school community. Over time, and with the help of the principal, a group of teachers, and the students, she slowly learns to navigate the environment. She comes to understand the school as a microcosm of the nation, where performances of citizenship, power, hierarchies, class, and gender dynamics, are on full display. **[end extract]**

**[a-head]** The First Day of School

On a bright fall morning two weeks into the 1990–91 term, I was nervous and full of anticipation for my first day of school. I would be spending a good part of the next nine months at an Egyptian government girls' preparatory school, in order to produce an ethnography of its everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Wishing to dress for a part I had little idea how to play, I cobbled together a loose and long outfit that I thought might help me “blend in.” It consisted of a long-sleeved white button-down blouse, a striped cotton skirt that went down to my ankles, and tan loafers with no socks. I tied my unruly hair back in a ponytail

and slung an oversized black leather briefcase over my shoulder. Looking back, this get-up made me look entirely conspicuous.

I arrived early to the security office of the American University in Cairo (AUC) in Tahrir Square. Mr. Amr was waiting in his neatly pressed powder blue uniform. He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a white envelope that contained my long-awaited research permit. As if setting my eyes on a holy relic, I asked if I could see it. He carefully unfolded the long single sheet of paper, adorned with an array of official stamps in indigo, black, and red. I stared in awe. For nearly two years, I had traipsed through countless security offices of the ministry of education, state security, and local district offices, on a quest for this permit. By some miracle, and surely with behind-the-scenes follow-up from AUC, the permit had now materialized.

To my enormous relief, Mr. Amr announced that he would accompany me to the nearby selected school to introduce me. We headed down Mohamed Mahmoud Street, crossed Yusuf al-Gindi dodging honking taxis and whizzing bikes, and stepped over the curb of Falaki Street, where we could hear girls chanting in unison from beyond the cement fortification. We walked a few paces down the tree-lined street and stopped in front of the main wooden gate. As Mr. Amr reached for the brass knocker, I muttered, “I hope they let us in.” He reassured me, “Don’t worry, we have the paper from the government (*al-hukuma*). They can’t say no.”

Someone on the other side cautiously unlatched the door just enough to allow us to squeeze through. Two girls sat on a small bench behind a rickety wooden table. They were wearing red caps and red arm bands with the words “*al-hukm al-dhati*” written on them in white Arabic script. *Al-hukm al-dhati*, which means “self-rule,” was instituted in