

*The Influence of Political Economy Context on Policy Reform Primary Education
Curricula Reform in Egypt*

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Abstract

Understanding the contextualization that entail a certain policy reform is highly essential to explain why some reforms succeed while others fail. Unlike to policy approaches that are scrutinizing how political circumstances, system, different political actors formal and informal influence policies; political economy approach could be providing a wider scope of analysis. Curricula development is in the heart of any educational reform. Successive governmental efforts has been launched more than two decades ago that aimed at reforming basic and primary education in Egypt; where curricula development represented one of the main targeted pillars of the reform. Notwithstanding, it is argumentative to say that it fulfilled the desired attained outcomes. The paper will seek to analyze the political economy context of curricula development of primary education in Egypt.

Keywords: Political Economy, Primary Education reform, Policy Reform, Curricula Development, Egypt

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Introduction

One of the ever-lasting questions in policy studies always is why some policies fail and some are not. Same question applies on why adopting some policy reforms might be successful while others fail. Understanding the context that accompanied the design and implementation of such policies is very helpful to analyze success/ failure of policies. Unlike political sciences that focuses more on explaining the dynamics of coalitions, constituencies, institutions, and interest groups without relating it mostly to policy implications. Political economy approach represents a useful analytical approach that helps in a better understanding of a certain policy reform as it demonstrates the implications of political and economic factors to policy reform.

By end of the cold war world countries scope had been reshuffled towards adopting a different development agenda. The new development agenda sought to focus on handling more crucial issues that would help in bringing a world peace and consider them as world goals; such as eradication of poverty, achieving socioeconomic equity, and providing basic universal education to all children around the globe. Hence, many international organizations and donors directed their interest and money to education development as it had been perceived as the main bridge for achieving other goals. Basic education in particular came to be on the top priorities of development agencies' donation planes. World Bank, the largest donor for education during the 1990s, defined basic education as “ a powerful instrument for reducing poverty and inequality, improving health and social well-being, and laying the basis for sustained economic growth.... and essential for building democratic societies as well as competitive economies” (Sayed, 2006)

The emergence of Education for All on 2000, EFA, that demanded world countries to provide at least first five years of primary education as compulsory and free to every child. Egypt is not an exception of that as it topped on the list of recipient countries of developmental assistances that had been directed to education reform during the two decades that followed Egypt's signing the Camp David Accords in 1978. Egypt was just second to Israel as a recipient of USAID, also it topped on the list of European Union development assistance. During 1990s development assistance that Egypt got amounted to 4.6 billion US\$, which represented 10 percent of the total world development assistance. (Sayed, 2006)

Curricula reform is just a part of a holistic process of education system. Curriculum generally could be defined as” a central structure that frames what and how s student acquires skill and knowledge” (El Nashar, 2012). Who is determining that content of curriculum or the trending of reform does the process of reforming curriculum is undergirded with technical and professional dimensions only? What are the key influential participants in the reform process? The current paper will try to highlight some of these questions.

Conclusion

The current paper tried to investigate how the changing political atmosphere and consequently changing political actors influenced the processes of curricula reform of primary education In Egypt. I thought that I could include all influential actors, such as the syndicate of teachers, big companies that prepare and publish extra books, I

believed they are highly interrelated to the reform processes; however due to some difficulties related to reaching some of them I couldn't cover.

To sum up, there are some policy recommendations regarding curricula reform; curricula reform as part of any education reform can't be conceived as a mere technical process rather it includes other dimensions that have to be taken into consideration.

Research Statement

The main research statement the current paper will try to examine is; how the turbulent political and economic conditions that Egypt has been passing through since 25th January 2011 affected the trends of reform in primary education? And how the political economy context influenced the curricula reform of primary education pre and post 25th January 2011?

Research Hypothesis

The main hypothesis of this research is that the Egyptian successive governments pre and post 25th January 2011 perceived curricula reform as a keystone in primary education reform. Therefore, Egyptian government endured some extended effort in that regard during Mubarak's reign, and allowed some Non Profitable organizations to work in cooperation with the ministry of Education and Pedagogy on reforming curricula within a limited freedom. The obvious shift that could be alleged is when Muslim Brotherhood got to power late 2011. MB sought feverishly to change the Egyptian primary education curricula; however intended outcomes of the reform didn't target improving the quality of the education process generally, rather than serving their controlling plan over state apparatus. Muslim Brotherhood efforts' deeply targeted neither education quality issues nor giving more attention to issues related to building a new generation that believes in democratic values.

Generally speaking the impact of the curricula development process could be described as limited to great extent. The strong centralized grip that the Egyptian government has been exercising over the curricula reform process could partly explain that. Moreover, it has been always circulated in an implicit way in media and among researches circles that there have been some interest networks that have and exercise a direct influence to keep that status quo of the current situation. In other words, those who are working on extra books industry have some sort of interest in hindering the reform efforts.

Literature Review

Previous research in policy studies, to some extent, recently examined the influence of the political and economic conditions through policy networks. Policy network as a policy methodology tool is considered to be one of the most useful methods to understand how different political, economic, societal actors and factors interact and affect policy outcome. Literature on primary education reform in developing countries such as Egypt highly emphasized some problems related to the low quality, classrooms density, poor teaching techniques, high dropout ratio, teacher- students' ratio, low expenditure, deteriorated school facilities, and lots of other major problems.

Notwithstanding, few studies aimed to examine how different interest networks, different political actors, and economic condition in a certain moments shall shape reform in education generally and primary education specifically. The current research will try to highlight that gap with a specific concentration on curricula reform in primary education in Egypt.

Based on a conceptual framework of education quality assurance in Chile developed by the World Bank; that framework provided a scope that helps to understand how different participants (individuals, politicians, actors, institutions, local municipalities, central government apparatus) interact and influence education process generally and education quality assurance in specific. Moreover, that framework identified a number of functions that any education system is aiming at attaining and ensure that those functions are well defined to all participants; (1) performance standard, (2) performance assessments, (3) performance reporting, (4) impact evaluation, (5) requirements to operate, (6) ensuring adequate and equitable resources, (7) autonomy, intervention, and support, (8) accountability and consequences (World Bank publications, report No.39830-cl, PP10-11). Interestingly, some of those influential participants, taking into consideration the political context, might seek to impede the reform some how. This is what Abdel-Moniem referred to in his study as he pointed out that the political regime in Egypt inclined to believe that injecting some real reform in the education system might not be in favor of the regime. Moreover, he explained that the longer the existence of some key players in the scene; the slower the outcomes of a reform (Abdel-Moneim, 2016).

Some studies pinpointed that influential actors in an educational system might seek to hinder the efforts of reform for their own interest. Kindon & Muzammil in their study that examined the political economy of education in India that focused on the case of Uttar Pradesh state; they strongly demonstrated the passive role played by the teachers union in hindering the state's effort in improving education quality through implementing more decentralized system. In addition, the decentralized system sought to adopt more accountable and transparent system that will enhance the poor performance of teachers who usually register high absentees rate in state's schools. According to them two factors can help in explaining how dynamics of political economy; one is understanding the guaranteed representation of teachers in the upper legislative body at state's level by constitutional rights. Second, teachers who are working in private schools that receive governmental aids, have a considerable representation in the lower house of the state's legislative body as they can run for the elections as long as they are not holding a public office being part of a public school teachers. Thus, teachers have a real substantial representation at both houses at state's level that enable their union to hinder reform to great extend (Kingdon & Muzammil, 2008). Through analyzing the implementation of three educational policies in El Salvador, combining three dimensions technical, institutional and political that permeated the selected three policies particularly the political one; it showed how a limited political elite that monopolized the political regime since 1800s, the 13th family, highly shaped the political scene and affected strongly affected policies. The study's main argument is that the political economy context it self of the state could strongly affect the preferences of the state's officials (Edwards Jr, Libreros & Martin, 2015)

Research Methodology

As the research can be considered an exploratory research; it will basically rely on some in depth interviews with senior officials in the Egyptian ministry of Education and Pedagogy, the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education, and the National Center of Developing Curricula. Moreover, the research will withdraw a random sample of some primary school students' parents to interview them.

Historical Background

Public discourse about reforming the education system in Egypt generally and reforming primary education in particular is an overheating issue that represented always an urgent matter to be reformed. The number of challenges that the Egyptian government is facing is enormously huge. Moreover, what makes situation worse is some demographic facts that tells any reader how much the reform generally is a fatal issue. Nevertheless, the allegedly formal enduring announcements of reform, the quality of outcomes represented through a real measurable sense is so low.

The development of the formal Egyptian Education that based on a western style curriculum and teaching models could be dated to early 19th century when Mohammed Ali got to power. Mohammed Ali, as being known as the builder of modern Egypt, in his way for rebuilding and modernizing the Egyptian state economically and militarily; he sought to adopt a European education style that would help him in creating competent state administrative cadre. That moved education system from what prevailed centuries before of traditional education that based on some sort of religious education “Kuttab” or Madrasah to more modernized one. That had been considered an enormous shift in the education system in Egypt. The second drastic shift occurred after the toppling of the monarchy on 1952. During the Nasser’s reign free universal education had been hugely expanded and extended to free access to university as well. The over centrality feast of the state over education system generally and over curricula, instructional materials and teaching methods prevailed. (Frag, 2012).

According to law No (139) of 1981 the hierarchy and structure of basic education in Egypt, which is composed, of primary education and preparatory education. Primary education is composed of six grades, and preparatory is comprised of three years. The segmentation of schooling is so complicated as follows; there are public schooling that fully funded and supervised by the state where about 83 % of pupils are enrolled in. there are also what is known as an experimental language schools where science and math are taught in English and that type of schooling shows the necessity of English language proficiency for labor market. In addition, there are private schools attended by a7 percent of pupils; where national curricula are taught with some better or qualified teaching conditions in terms of less class density, better equipment, and more qualified teaches who receive slightly higher salaries than their equivalents who are working in public schools. Other private schools are sponsored by some foreign institutions and teach most classes in English, French or German; foreign curricula are taught side by side with some national curricula; these schools also provide the possibility to attain the American Diploma, French Baccalauréate or the German Abitur (Frag, 2012)

Historically speaking the Egyptian state, as most developing countries, perceived education as a principal tool for social and economic development of the state. Therefore, the right to education has been enshrined in Egyptian constitutions and Egyptian state sought to control education through a heavily centralized system. Nothing could be more expressive for state perception as Dr Hussien Kamel Bahaeddin's statement, former minister of education, on 2003 justifying the necessity of state's controlling grip over education " Education falls under the direct supervision of the state so that it would ensure the minimum common level of enculturation and socialization, this as he argued, would enhance the national unity and the cohesion of the social fabric" (loveluck, 2012). Henceforth, ministry of education is controlling all aspects of education process (curricula, schools management, instructions tools and materials, etc.....) centrally through education directorates and administrations that spread all over local units of the country.

Education for All 2015 National Review Report commissioned by UNSCO obviously mentioned that alleviating the central grip is so important for achieving educational quality " The Ministry of Education (MOE) is committed to provide a high quality pre-university education for all as one of the basic rights of the Egyptian citizen. This is carried out in a decentralized system based on the community participation" (Al Baradei, 2015)

The Reality of the Story

Why curricula need to be reformed? Or why reforming school curricula represent a problem?

After the Education For All meeting in Dakar on 2000, the Egyptian government declared its commitment to the goals of summit;

Box 1. The list of Education for All Goals that Egyptian Government committed to in April 2000 are:

- *Goal1: Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;*
- *Goal 2: Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality;*
- *Goal 3: Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life- skills programs;* - *Goal 4: Achieving a 50percent improvement in level of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;*
- *Goal 5: Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement;*
- *Goal 6: Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life links.*

Source: UNESCO (2015), Education for all 2015 National Review: Egypt
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002299/229905E.pdf>

Focusing on goal No 6 that is concerned with quality assurance; there are a number of policy and goals pursued by the Egyptian government as many as some national reports tried to tackle and related to curricula development including; (El Baradei, 2015)

- Curricula Reform: basically through adopting some national standards adopted by the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Educational Accreditation (NAQAEA) that had been founded on 2006. Also, resuming the implementation of number of improvement projects funded by donating agencies such as; USAID, UNICEF and the World Bank.
- Updating curricula and teaching methods at the various levels of schooling.
- Enhancing extra school curricula activities in cooperation with the ministry of culture
- Improving the evaluation methods

Concerning the institutional arrangement related to curricula development, Based on the Ministerial Ordinance No (192) on 1988 the Center for Curriculum & Instructional Materials Development had been established. Later on and based on another ministerial ordinance No (176) on 1994, its tasks and goals had been identified as follows;¹

- Adopting modern approaches and techniques in reforming curriculum in a way that contributes in developing the whole educational process.
- Taking part in fulfilling required level of coordination, integration and interaction among the elements of pedagogical and educational systems in a way that affects the educational outcomes positively.
- Working on interpreting the new and most updated societal changes that are inclusive in the social, political and economic developmental plans of the state. Therefore, School curriculums should be the mirror of such societal changes and play as main tools for the demanded community behavioral changes. Hence, that will correlate educational outcomes to the labor market needs.
- Supervising the whole process of curricula design and reform and follow up the teaching process later on.
- Upgrading and modifying educational materials and instruments in away that helps in overcoming the dilemma of excessive numbers of students at schools, the high ratio of students drop out and impoverished educational tools. Thus, working on creating new educational models that serve the educational process is an essential task of the center.

¹ Egyptian Ministry of Education, Center for Curriculum & Instructional Materials Development, CCIMD (http://moe.gov.eg/ccimd/create_center.html)

Notwithstanding, that the above tasks show that reforming curricula as a part of a bigger picture of education policy, some studies pointed out that the process is politicized as long as it is managed through an over centralized manner. When students came back to school after the ousting of Mubarak in 2011, there had been about twenty percent omissions of some educational materials as those were heavily about the legacy of Mubarak's regime and the achievements of the National Democratic Party the ruling party during Mubarak's reign (Loveluck, 2012). This is what Dr Nawal Shalaby, the former director of CCIMD; confirmed to me in interview I conducted with her; as she mentioned that taking into consideration the political situation at that time many curricula parts had to be omitted. She continued that when Muslim Brotherhood prevailed in the political scene during (2011-2013) the CCIMD most leadership had been replaced by some elements that are showed their loyalty to the Muslim Brotherhood regardless of their competency. She pointed out that during Ikhwan presence in power there had been some implicit trends to push with some certain topics to be included in some particular curricula; specifically history, Islamic religion, Arabic language, and national education.

Dr Shalaby gave me an illustrative example; she mentioned an illustrative picture used for the fifth grade students that shows state's institutions such as the legislative body " the House of Representatives". That picture according to her explanation, had been replaced with another one that showed Dr Mohammed Saad El Katatini, the speaker of the house, senior member of the MB, and head of Justice and Liberty Party. She illustrated that the political influence on the curricula design and reform always was there implicitly some how through the ministry main guidelines sent from the minister's office. She also admitted the absence of a well-articulated philosophy that should frame the curricula reform process. Moreover, she emphasized that the reform of school curricula and materials are not student-centered reform rather it is exams centered. She insisted that curricula couldn't be under real reform unless that reform is genuinely linked with reforming the evaluation and examination methods. Dr Shalaby ended her interview with me emphasizing the necessity of incorporating the 21st century skills in Egyptian curricula effectively.

In that context Abdelrahman illustrated in her valuable study that she tried to articulate the most acute problems facing curricula reform in Egypt, based on a comparative analysis with international experiences; she pointed out to a number of obstacles that hinders curricula design and development in Egypt (Abdelrahman, 2016);

- ✓ The absence of a clear legal framework that regulates the curricula reform.
- ✓ The blurred role of the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Material Development, CCIMD, in developing curriculum. Also, there are no clear rules about the selection criteria of recruited staff.
- ✓ Over - centralization control on curricula development process; which in turn results in a non- participatory reform.
- ✓ Most of the curricula are not student-centered rather they are exams- centered. The current curricula are not concentrating on students nor on the required live skills and knowledge they should acquire during their educational years.

- ✓ The irresponsiveness of the current curricula to the global changes, not only in terms of technicality and ways of teaching, but also in the absence of a general guiding philosophy that articulate the reform process and its periodical revision.
- ✓ The absence of required coordination between those who are responsible for reforming the curricula and teachers who are responsible for teaching at schools level.
- ✓ The rigidity and stagnation of most curricula in a way that don't motivate learners to use critical thinking and innovation.
- ✓ Unequal chances between public, private and international schools' pupils due to the gap between their curricula and teaching methods followed in each.

Conclusion

The current paper tried to investigate how the changing political atmosphere and consequently changing political actors influenced the processes of curricula reform of primary education In Egypt. I thought that I could include all influential actors, such as the syndicate of teachers, big companies that prepare and publish extra books, I believed they are highly interrelated to the reform processes; however due to some difficulties related to reaching some of them I couldn't cover.

To sum up, there are some policy recommendations regarding curricula reform; curricula reform as part of any education reform can't be conceived as a mere technical process rather is includes other dimensions that have to be taken into consideration. The current study comes out with three main policy recommendations:

- The necessity of developing more articulated philosophy that should regulate the reform process. The hard core of that philosophy should be based on a student- centered approach.
- Adopting more participatory approach for curricula reform, where different influential actors. That will enhance the inclusiveness aspect of the reform.
- Developing curricula process should be linked with a comprehensive plan of teachers' capacity building. That would ensure more successful implementation of the new curricula.

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