
Education in Egypt: A Conversation with Nelly ElZayat

Nourhan Shaaban

Nelly El Zayat is the co-founder and CEO of Newton Education Services and an advisor to the Minister of Education in Egypt on early childhood education and education policy. Nelly has been working in international education for the past 21 years, specifically in student advising, scholarship management, admissions, curriculum design, e-learning, learner-centered teaching, and student recruitment and on bridging the gap between education and the job market. She has held positions in several organizations including America Mideast Educational and Training Services (AMIDEAST), the International Institute of Education (IIE), and the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. She is specifically interested in education reform and development in Egypt and the Middle East and the role technology plays in education. Nelly holds a master's degree in international education policy from Harvard University and a master of arts in Middle East studies and a bachelor of arts in economics from American University in Cairo. She is an alumni ambassador and member of the International Peer Advisory Program of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

In your view, what are the most pressing challenges facing the education system in Egypt today?

It is no secret that there is a long list of challenges on both the access and quality fronts, starting with class density to teacher training and teacher

remuneration all the way to a common understanding of what comprises a successful education system.

What are the Ministry of Education's current priorities? How do you decide what is important?

Ideally, I would like to see all of Egypt involved in the reform; it has to become a nationwide priority, starting with believing that it is absolutely necessary, and frankly, our only hope. The Ministry has prioritized the youngest students in the system; the reform began with Early Childhood Education in KG1, KG2, and Primary One. The Ministry has also given priority to teaching for understanding and not for memorization and rote learning.

This Ministry of Education has established internal research units—can you tell us more about the role of research in the work of the Ministry? Can you give an example of a policy or program that has been shaped by evidence?

There are three important centers that fall under the Ministry of Education: the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development (CCIMD), the National Center for Education Evaluation and Examinations (NCEEE), and the National Center for Educational Research and Development (NCERD). NCERD has, so far, been leading the research effort in the Ministry. However, there has not been a clear link between research and policy. The Ministry is now in the process of establishing a new research and documentation project that will be a three-way partnership between the Ministry, NCERD, and the Social Research Center at the American University in Cairo.

In Egypt, unemployment is highest among more educated youth, with

tertiary degree holders exhibiting the highest rates. Why do you think the labor market doesn't absorb educated youth, and how does the work of the MoE touch on these challenges? How is Egypt preparing its youth for jobs in the 21st century?

Higher education is a totally different story. As you already know, the process by which students enter public universities in Egypt depends on their high school grades and the cutoffs that the different faculties decide on. It has nothing to do with the characters of the students, their true preferences, or their potential. All this definitely reflects in the labor market. In our new curriculum, we expose students at an early age to areas that have been neglected for many years: arts, PE, music, and others. We teach students about different jobs and skills that are not typical of the usual doctor or engineer that many families are after. The entire curriculum is built on the UNICEF's Life Skills and Citizenship Education framework, which includes all the usual 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, empathy, resilience, and others. We have also added two skills that are relevant to our Egyptian context: accountability and productivity.

There is an argument to be made for the role of technology in educational reform. You wrote an article titled "Trading a Tweet for Your GPA," in which you urged schools to incorporate digital literacy into their curriculum. How has technology been incorporated in education reform initiatives in Egypt?

Technology has definitely been a key dimension in the reform, but I should emphasize that it has been a tool and not a goal in itself. The Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB), for example, is now home to hundreds of interactive videos that have the secondary school curriculum mapped out lesson by lesson. This mapping and the videos were made by partners such

as Britannica, Discovery, Ureka, and others. In addition, there is a wealth of knowledge on the EKB accessible to every single Egyptian. For the younger students, technology is made more available for the teachers, who can access endless resources at the tips of their fingers via EKB. Technology for students will not be introduced before Primary Four to make sure students' motor skills are well developed first. Of course, the main technology-related tool that most families in Egypt have heard of are the tablets that were given to secondary students. The tablets, which many mistake for the epitome of the reform, are but a tool to allow for a new type of test in the secondary grades and take away the human factor when it comes to marking and grading the tests. The tests that secondary school students sit for now test their real understanding and require higher-order thinking, as opposed to tests that ask students to re-produce what they memorized on a piece of paper.

In 2014, you interviewed Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and scholar. You specifically asked him about lessons that Arab countries could learn from Finland. Did you see any of these recommendations transferred into the Egyptian education system? Can you us give an example?

In my conversations with Pasi Sahlberg during this interview and in class, I learned that context really matters and that there is no way you could transfer an education system and transplant it somewhere else. We kept that in mind during our work on this transformation. While we looked at examples and success stories from around the world, and while we sought help from international partners, we still made sure that this was a homegrown reform that kept the Egyptian context in mind. This is the only way to ensure the sustainability of this huge transformation. I would say that what we do now have in common with Finland and other successful education systems is that we no longer have exams in the younger years and assessment takes other forms.

The education system is part of a larger economic, social, and political ecosystem. How much collaboration happens across different stakeholders to ensure that education reform remains prioritized?

There have been several forms of collaboration across stakeholders, but we always strive for more. For example, there is an ongoing conversation between the Ministry of Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education to ensure that the pre-school experience is similar and follows the same philosophy as the new system, Education 2.0, and that the children's transition from one system to another is seamless. There have been many development partners both locally and internationally who have supported and contributed to Education 2.0. We have also engaged the private sector and collaborated with them on several fronts, from creating learning objects to teacher professional development. Nahdet Misr, for example, were the ones who worked on the new Arabic textbooks.

In your role as advisor to the Minister of Education, what initiative or program are you most proud of and why? How does it affect students/teachers in their daily lives?

I am most proud of the creation of a comprehensive curriculum framework that began with the ideal student profile in mind and then went backwards to the life skills the students need to acquire and the issues that matter to the Egyptian context that are woven in the curriculum. This is the first time in a very long time that we have a complete vision of the inputs and outputs of the system and how the curriculum unfolds throughout the 14 years of education. I am also proud that this is all happening nationwide at the same time.

Throughout your career, and now as founder and CEO of Newton

Education, you developed, advised, and managed many scholarship initiatives. Why is this work important? What role can scholarships play in reforming education? How do you assess impact?

Once international students ourselves, my partners and I see the value of the work we do. People need help and support when it comes to higher education, especially if it is abroad. Where to start, how would they choose the right school for them, how would they fund their studies? So many questions that our work helps answer. I was a scholarship recipient myself, and it was a very generous scholarship, and so again, I know, firsthand, how valuable a scholarship is and how scholarships help educate those who otherwise would not have been able to get an education.

Many smart people are not trained in education but deeply care about it. What are key metrics an intelligent citizen should monitor to assess educational reform?

That's a great question. First, they need to know that they would not see results overnight and that it would take years for us to see evidence of the success or failure of the reform. I would say one of the metrics would be seeing that teaching has been brought back to the classroom and that students are enjoying being in school and do not need to follow a parallel system through private tutoring.

What message do you have for those interested in improving the education system in Egypt and beyond?

I would say we still have a very long way to go, but we are finally on the right track—where the student is now at the center of the education system and where we are emphasizing learning and understanding. I would also say: we need all your support!

Nourban Shaaban is a second-year master in public policy student at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a fellow at the Center for Public Leadership. Her studies focus on technology, entrepreneurship, and behavioral economics. Her master's thesis examines start-up challenges in Southeast Asia. During her masters, she advised a health-tech start-up in Egypt and was the vice president of the Harvard Arab Student Associations. Prior to HKS, Nourban worked with Google and was a Rockefeller fellow in Indonesia. Nourban holds a bachelor of arts from Harvard College.