

ESTUDIOS E INVESTIGACIONES

Analysis and Research

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A Perfect Storm: High-stakes Examination and Private Tutoring in Egypt

*Tormenta Perfecta: Examen de alto
riesgo y tutorías privadas en Egipto*

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Abstract

This paper presents the most recent evidence on the prevalence of private tutoring in Egypt and then sets out to discuss how the 2018 “Education 2.0 Reform” is trying to change the culture of both schooling and private tutoring by the replacement of the Thanawiyya Amma examination. The political economy challenges faced by the reform are discussed together with the communication and evidence gaps, and options moving forward are identified and presented as the conclusion. In most countries and in most cases, there is a symbiotic relationship between private tutoring and public schooling systems. To a good extent, both thrive with each other. The existence of external high-stakes examinations helps and fuels such symbiosis although, in cases such as Egypt, the private tutoring industry has become so powerful that it is parasitizing public schooling and somehow supplanting it. Empty secondary classrooms in the last two years of upper secondary education, and a volume of family investment on private tutoring that rivals that of the State in public schooling, together with a teacher force whose key salary incentives are related and dependent on the exam, all signal that the line between symbiosis and parasitism was crossed some time ago.

Keywords: Egypt; Thanawiyya Amma Examination; Private Tutoring; Education Equity; Quality of Education.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta la evidencia más reciente sobre la llamada educación en la sombra en Egipto y desde ahí analiza cómo la reforma educativa iniciada en 2018 ha tratado de cambiar la cultura tanto de la educación pública como de las tutorías privadas a través de la eliminación del examen externo al final de la Secundaria. La fuerte polémica política que esta reforma ha encontrado se aborda junto con los errores de comunicación y los vacíos de evidencia disponible, y se presentan como conclusión las opciones para avanzar. En la mayor parte de los países, existe una relación de simbiosis entre las tutorías privadas y los sistemas públicos de escolarización. En buena medida, ambos crecen gracias al otro. La existencia de exámenes externos “con consecuencias” (o de “alto riesgo”) alimenta dicha simbiosis, aunque, en casos como el de Egipto, la industria de las tutorías privadas se ha hecho tan poderosa que ha comenzado a parasitar la escolarización pública y, en cierta medida, a suplantarla. Las aulas vacías en los dos últimos años de Secundaria, y un volumen de inversión privada de las familias en tutorías privadas que rivaliza con la que hace el Estado en la escuela pública, además de un profesorado cuyos incentivos salariales dependen precisamente del Examen, señalan que la línea entre simbiosis y parasitismo se cruzó hace ya tiempo.

Palabras clave: Egipto; Examen Thanawiyya Amma; Clases particulares; Equidad educativa; Calidad de la Educación.

1. Introduction: High-stakes examinations and private tutoring in the Middle East and North Africa

As a result of the expansion of secondary education and the increase in the demand for tertiary education, all education systems in MENA have seen a rising trend in the number of students taking the secondary education graduation exam, which also serves as the entry examination for higher education, such as the Baccalaureate in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon, Syria and Djibouti, the *Tawjihi* in Jordan and West Bank and Gaza, and the *Thanawiya Amma* in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar. Despite increases in enrollment, graduation from upper secondary education is challenging and students who fail the examination leave with few relevant skills and no marketable diploma. Following a long tradition, these national public examinations not only condition the wider social perception of what counts as quality of education but, in doing so, they narrow down the number of “avenues of success” for students in the education system, so that the score in the examination is perceived as the only measure of and gateway to future success. The stakes are therefore so particularly high with these countries’ examinations that they have given rise to a flourishing private tutoring market, to the extent that it is putting education equity further at risk and even undermining the principle of free public schooling in basic education (Assaad and Krafft, 2015).

These national examinations share three fundamental traits: (i) they serve the double function of secondary graduation and university access, such that failing the exam implies that the student does not graduate from upper secondary education (in addition to not gaining university entrance); (ii) they are used as a selection instrument to determine access to university in general and to the most sought after institutions and fields of study; and (iii) they are a highly influential *institution* in terms of shaping teaching and learning practices, mostly in secondary schools; in other words, their capacity to shape the actual curriculum implemented in schools is second to none (Eckstein and Noah, 1993; Moreno, 2006; Kellaghan and Greaney, 2019). However, as measurement instruments, these exams are not very sophisticated. Since selection is the only thing that matters, the levels of difficulty are volatile from year to year and scores are not fully comparable across the country or among different administrations of the exam. This volatility concerning content examined and difficulty levels and the resulting arbitrariness in terms of scoring, make these examination systems the preferred ground for private tutors and exam prep companies that market themselves as the investment that will *turn things around and get you a passing score*. Thus, as secondary school enrolments have skyrocketed in recent decades, a rampant shadow education system (Bray, 2009 and 2013) has grown in parallel to, and mainly as a result of, the central and somehow hegemonic role of the high-stakes examination. In countries like Egypt, the mutually reinforcing relationship between the role of the examination and private tutoring amounts to a perfect storm that constraints and jeopardize education reform and modernization efforts aiming at improved education quality and equity. Ille and Peacey (2019) use the concept of Forced Private Tutoring (FPT) as a compelling description of such perfect storm.

Students and teachers not only spend time preparing for these examinations at the expense of developing a broader range of skills and competencies, but families spend considerable sums on private tutors (and the learning materials these tutors produce and

manage to impose). Parents invest in private tutoring not because they feel that schools are low quality but because the game at stake is “cut-throat selective competition” for scarce places in highly demanded universities and programs. With a relatively small fraction of students excelling in these examinations, some stakeholders perceive the system to be academically sound and demanding. Others, however, despite perceiving it as favoring those with resources and connections, understand that it is the only available avenue for social mobility and are therefore determined to invest heavily in getting their children ready to compete. Overall, however, due to the structure of university-tracked education, students and their parents end up spending time, energy, and money acquiring knowledge that is not in demand by the labor market and that will not result either in meaningful learning or personal development. This has been aptly summarized as the “skills versus scores” debate or dilemma, with the implication that is an either-or decision.

In this regional context, this paper presents the most recent evidence on the prevalence of private tutoring in Egypt and then sets out to discuss how the 2018 Education 2.0 Reform is trying to change the culture of both schooling and private tutoring by the replacement of the *Thanawiyya Amma* examination. Data sources used in this study are, first, the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS) and, second, the Household Expenditure Survey¹. Further, the political economy challenges faced by the reform are discussed together with the communication and evidence gaps, and options moving forward with the examination reform are identified and presented.

2. The case of Egypt before the start of “Education Reform 2.0” in 2018

The *Thanawiyya Amma* (TA) in Egypt is the high-stakes examination that drives the whole education system with a focus on selection for university entrance. The entire Egyptian education system revolves around this examination, as it sets the incentives for all actors and therefore shapes the decisions made by teachers, parents and students. This examination impacts students’ future life since the results are the only determining factor for both secondary graduation and admission to tertiary education. As such, the *Thanawiyya Amma* score is a strong determinant of students’ lifetime prospects. The pressure to perform well on this exam is the main driver of a lucrative market of private tutoring where, in addition to small and medium-size companies, teachers in service in public and private schools offer after-school classes to supplement their salary income.

Private tutoring refers to any transaction whereby supplementary instruction is provided to students in exchange for a fee (Dang and Rogers, 2008). This phenomenon was estimated to incur household expenditures for a total of up to 1.6 percent of Egypt’s GDP (Ille, 2015). Private tutoring is in fact one of the largest expenditure items on households

¹ The Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS), 2018 is carried out by the Economic Research Forum (ERF) in cooperation with Egypt’s Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS). Over its twenty-year history, the ELMPS has become the most important source of labor market and human development research in Egypt, being the most comprehensive source of publicly available micro data on the subject. The last three surveys (2006, 2012 and 2018) have included specific questions on private tutoring throughout the school system. Further, the Household Expenditure Survey is carried out and its results published regularly by CAPMAS. See <https://www.capmas.gov.eg/HomePage.aspx>. The author also had several chances to discuss in person with T. Shawky, Minister of Education, and members of his team, between 2017 and 2019. I would hereby like to express my gratitude to all of them.

according to the Household Expenditure Survey (CAPMAS, 2016), with over 18 percent of household average per capita consumption. In Egypt, throughout pre-tertiary education, at least half the students hire private tutors; this increases to 62 percent of students in upper secondary for *Thanawiya Amma* preparation (ELMPS, 2018). The immediate and most visible impact of this shadow education system is that it further disadvantages poorer students. Only 32 percent of students in the lowest wealth quintile receive private tutoring, compared to 55 and 67 percent in the top two quintiles respectively (ELMPS, 2018).

As figure 1 shows, the percentage of students receiving private tutoring gradually increases as students advance to higher grades. Throughout the system there is a peak in the last year of preparatory education when 73 percent of the students take private classes (as of 2018). Thus, the closer students get to face high-stakes examinations, the more likely their families are to invest heavily in private tutoring. That peak of 73 percent takes place before students sit for Grade 9 examination, another high-stakes examination, administered by Governorates (regional education authorities), that sorts students into technical and academic tracks in upper secondary education. Given that the scores in this examination are not comparable across years or governorates, there are obvious issues of both geographic and socio-economic inequity directly related to or caused by the exam. This is a key factor accounting for the gaps in completion and transition rates between students of lower and higher income levels (World Bank SABER Student Assessment, 2013). Then, Figure 1 also shows how, after a marked drop in grade 10, private tutoring picks up again forcefully with students in grades 11 and 12, i.e., preparing for the TA exam.

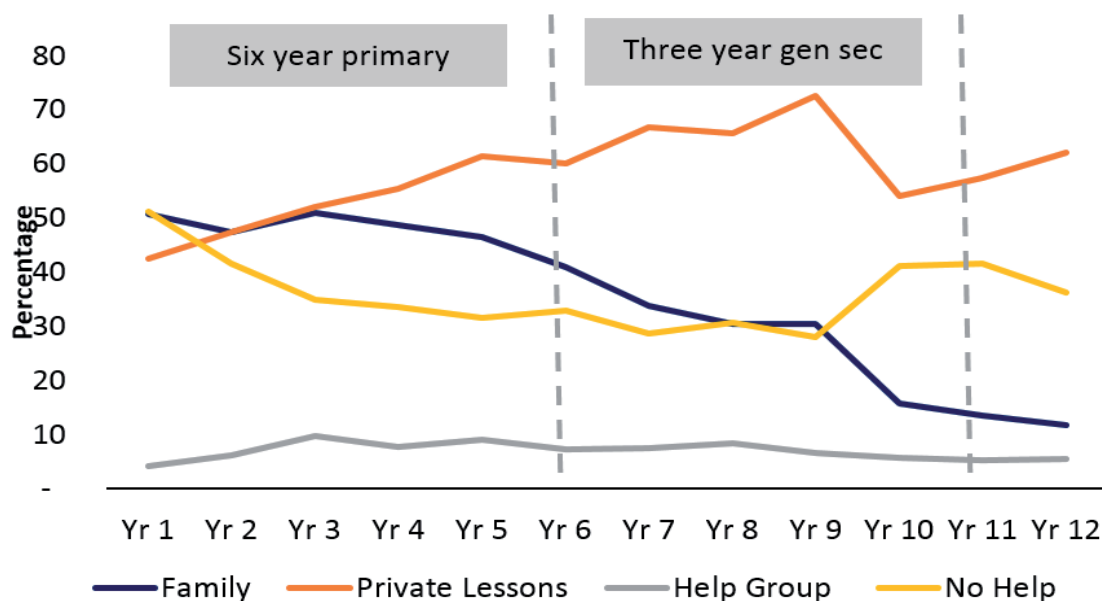


Figure 1. Percentage of students using various forms of supplementary education. Source: Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey, 2018

Tutoring in Egypt is primarily a matter of teachers offering support classes to their own students, creating a multitude of perverse incentives and enhancing the shadow education system (Jayachandran, 2014). For example, by holding back instruction of key curriculum material, or providing sample exam questions only in tutoring sessions,

teachers guarantee the additional remuneration, and that happens at the expense of student learning (Assaad and Krafft, 2015). The share of these support classes taught by the classroom teachers from the students' schools is about 50 percent or more regardless of the wealth quintile a student belongs to.² In addition, the alternatives available to parents are bleak: students can theoretically enroll in private education (although private school students are clients of the private tutoring industry at least as much as their public-school counterparts), help groups or solicit an older sibling for help. On an average, almost half of the students receive additional training from their family in the first few years of schooling, but this subsides as the curriculum advances, and for obvious reasons. Group lessons are much less prevalent due to perceptions of poor quality but do rise in the final primary school year (Sobhy, 2012)³. All in all, this perceived lack of effective alternatives to private tutoring undermines parents who would seek to circumvent the shadow system.

Increasing public university entrance score requirements and high youth unemployment rates, particularly for students graduating from vocational training, also heighten the need to receive the highest marks on high-stakes exams. The huge incentive to seek any additional help by students and the low wages for civil servants at the Ministry of Education (MOETE) creates a huge market during the year before the 9th grade examination and the two academic years before the TA is held at the end of the 12th grade. Exam-setting committee members can earn large bonuses that dwarf their daily wages by providing 'specialized training' exercises in the lead up to the exam date. Up until the 2018 education reform started being implemented, many curriculum-setters produced two versions of textbooks: those distributed to students in schools and the much higher quality textbooks sold via private publishers outside the school network (Lee, 2004; Liu and Bray, 2017).

Students from low-income households are much less likely to use supplementary education. This is due to lower educated and informed parents, which goes hand in hand with their inability to afford private tutoring fees. As figure 2 shows, there is a clear rise in the use of all forms of supplementary education, particularly beyond the 60th percentile, where the share of students using private lessons is a full 22 percentage points greater than in the first quintile. Further, only 16 percent of students receive any family tutoring support in the first quintile, compared to 43 and 63 percent in the top two quintiles. These socioeconomic inequities are of paramount importance, as 40 percent of the children receive no support in the first quintile, compared to only 27 percent amongst the wealthiest⁴.

Table 2 also shows how, between 2012 and 2018, the share of students seeking paid help from help groups and private lessons has increased while non-paid help or help from family has fallen across wealth quintiles. In that short period, private tutoring grows for all the wealth quintiles except for the poorest one, while at the same time the share of students who do not get any outside help also increases for all wealth quintiles, again except for the poorest. The perverse incentives for teachers reinforce the low quality of education and deepen the inequality of opportunity when wealthier children can receive additional training and family support. In a high-stakes examination environment,

2 Author's calculations using data from the ELMPS, 2018.

3 Group lessons also do not cover other aspects of why students seek private tutoring. In some shadow systems, rife with corruption, private lessons often lead to direct exam help, which could sway parents away from group lessons. Private education is largely cost prohibitive in the country.

4 There is also evidence of private tutoring generating gender inequality. See Elbadawy et al. (2009).

ability and effort are superseded by the availability of ample resources. As seen in figure 3, higher income households also exhibit higher expenditure on tutoring, rather than just higher incidence; students in the wealthiest quintile annually pay about 2,400 Egyptian pounds more than students in the poorest quintile. Yet, for those families in the lower quintiles that invest on private tutoring, it could be safely claimed that their relative budgetary effort, i.e, the share of their total expenditures, must be greater than that made by families in the top quintiles⁵.

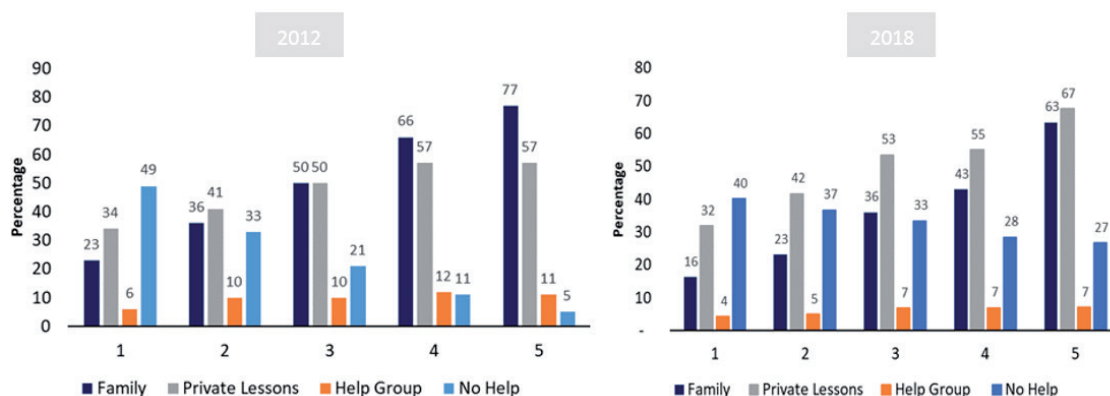


Figure 2. Type of supplementary education by wealth quintile in 2012 and 2018. Source: Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey, 2012 and 2018.

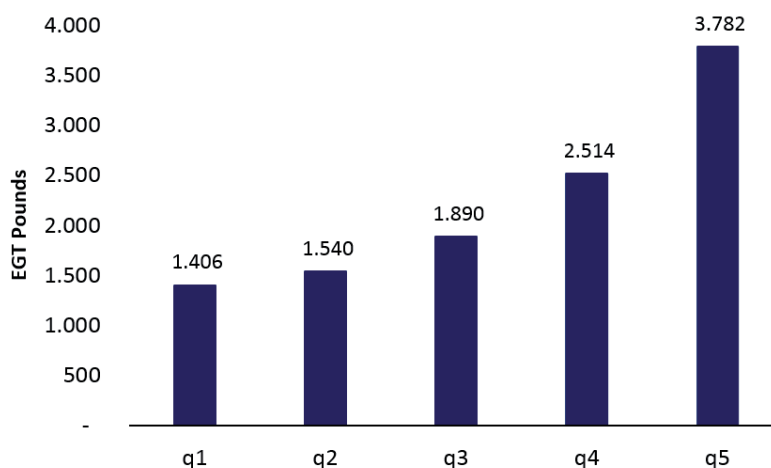


Figure 3. Average annual expenditure per household on tutoring (by wealth quintile). Source: Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey, 2018.

Demand for these services has not changed with the macroeconomic climate, i.e., high inflation, depreciation of the Egyptian pound and/or decrease in income. More broadly, demand for private tutoring did not seem to be affected by the Great Recession (2008-2015) and its impact on household spending. In that context, this inelasticity of

⁵ There is no data available to ascertain this claim, although the relatively small spread of the amount invested in private tutoring in the lowest quintiles, and considering the incidence is lower, necessarily implies that those families who invest are making a comparatively greater effort than their counterparts in quintile 5. This fact speaks volumes about the centrality of private tutoring in Egyptian society and its education system.

the demand implies, in sociological terms, that private tutoring has become an integral part of Egyptian society and culture and, somehow, a culture in itself. The concept of Forced Private Tutoring (FPT) used by Ille and Peacey (2019) is relevant here to describe private tutoring as an established social norm in Egypt.

2.1. Who is behind the shadow education industry in Egypt?

Even though private tutoring in Egypt is essentially about teachers offering supplementary lessons to their own students, this shadow system has also grown and evolved as a largely unregulated industry dominated by individual tutors and firms. Tracking this multifaceted sector can yield insights into what parents and students are prioritizing — and where they are looking for it — when it comes to secondary and tertiary education. However, it is hard to quantify the size of the industry as government data is virtually non-existent and, simply, because it is truly a shadow industry, mostly informal, underground and fiscally opaque. Out of 480 firms in Cairo advertising themselves on Facebook (including professional counseling, language schools, actual schools, social counselors, and skills development centers), 91 are classified as college preparation providers — which can be defined as education service providers, whose primary focus is to help students gain admissions to universities. Preparation for the *Thanawiya Amma* is indeed the lion's share of the industry, but tutoring services are offered and demanded starting in primary education. These providers vary in size, prices, and services offered. Some are well-known non-profits, but the overwhelming majority are for-profit businesses, and so are the individual teachers who are part of this market. What follows is a categorization of tutoring services by their main line of business (Enterprise, 2019):

Advisors and guidance counselors. These companies fill in the role of a high school guidance counselor, helping students decide what to study and where. They also counsel the students on the application process, including guidance on essays. These primarily come in the form of workshops and classes, one-to-one guidance, or through electronic platforms. These services either charge an hourly rate or provide courses and programs for a fee.

Agents. These firms act as recruitment agents for foreign universities, while offering advisory and guidance services to the students. They usually represent a university or group of universities from a particular country or region, and then cater their student advisory services accordingly. Most of these businesses charge foreign universities rates for every student they recruit from Egypt. Some may then charge students for their advisory services.

Test preparation. These businesses offer tutoring for both standardized tests and especially for the TA. International tests include SAT, IGSEs, GMATs, TOEFL, and the International Baccalaureate, which has been gaining in popularity in recent years. Private tutors offering hourly rates dominate the segment. Some businesses act as agents for these tutors, taking a commission from their private lessons. This revenue-sharing model is also applied in workshops and classes conducted by these centers and taught by the tutors. Newton Educational Services is the biggest player in Egypt in this field. But this segment is dominated by small-time centers.

Student development. These service providers seek to develop non-academic skills that help students adapt to life in a new country and being away from home for the first time. The focus here is on soft-skills development. Quash, a leading player in this segment, hopes to develop 10 skills championed by the World Economic Forum, including

leadership, negotiations, communications, dealing with failure, and learnability. These may include interactive games and even programs modeled on the Model United Nations. They charge students for a package of sessions, while also selling their services to schools.

At first glance, the value-added in terms of education quality by most of the shadow education system would appear to be very low, with many tutors and companies just relying on already available study guides and mock tests and sharing their tips for test preparation. Only a few pay-to-play test preparation providers who charge high fees provide a true chance to raise the chances of a student's admission to national and foreign universities. However, some analysts (Abdel-Moneim, 2021) have presented evidence of the growing demand for private tutoring from high-performance students in that particularly larger or more structured tutoring centers do supply all the many things that public schools should provide to their students (but do not): personalized and continued attention to their needs, a sense of community and predictability, and stress reduction regarding the external examinations they help students prepare to sit. In any case, even if this entails further confirmation that private tutoring is not supplementing but rather supplanting public schooling in Egypt, the word "learning" is not in the picture, simply because it is neither the mission of providers nor the priority demand or the expectation from the customers.

3. The Education Reform in Egypt and its focus on Examination Reform (2018-2020)

In September 2018, Egypt embarked on a major education reform, whose overall aim, in the words of the Minister of Education, was to "*bring learning back to the classroom*" and equip students with skills for the 21st century such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, higher-order cognitive skills and digital skills, thus preparing them for life and as well as for the job market. The reform is an impressive undertaking that targets nearly 24 million students, 1.3 million teachers and 47,000 public schools, focusing on promoting the foundations of learning in early grades, introducing a modernized curriculum around digital learning resources, and, most importantly, implementing a new secondary assessment system to pull teaching and learning away from memorization and credentialism towards the skills that matter to the citizens and workers of the 21st century.

The Education Reform "2.0" was conceived, designed and articulated around the urgency to remove the *Thanawiya Amma* and, even more importantly, the incentives it creates in every actor of the education community in the country, including teachers, students, parents, employers, publishers, administrators and policy makers. In fact, it could safely be argued that Egypt has a solid examination system, but the examination has crowded out the very school system that was meant to prepare for it with the paradoxical outcome that such function has gone to a shadow education system that is not in the shadow anymore.

School teachers turn into private tutors of their students and further top up their public salaries with examination-related tasks. The rest of the staff in the public education system also benefits from these regular payments linked to the administration of the *Thanawiya Amma*. Furthermore, it could be safely argued that the national examination center is a de facto curriculum center as well, and therefore any potentially successful education reform must target this already legendary examination. Thus, the central

challenge of the ongoing education reform is to turn an examination system into a modern education system.

In the words of the visionary Minister of Education who is leading the reform, Dr. Tarek Shawki: *“Egypt’s Education 2.0 is an ambitious set of reforms that uses competency-based curriculum that is focused on learners,”*⁶ This new program is being rolled out while the existing one is reformed, underpinned by one of the largest IT integration programs in basic education, covering digital content, devices, in-class smart coaching and electronic examinations. *“We want to test students against what they understand, not what they have memorized... We want students to learn for life, not for an exam,”*⁷ Minister Shawki repeats, and notes that the new digital content enabled students to take the tests wherever they are, with access to all their materials, which represents an enormous departure from the previous system where test questions could be leaked, and answers memorized. Sitting for computer-based tests which are open book would amount to a true revolution in any country; in Egypt, even “revolution” would be an understatement. Thus, the key to the Education 2.0 reform was the replacement of the TA examination by a series of computer or table-based tests taking place every semester throughout the three years of upper secondary education. The GPA calculated at the end of this period would be the “passport” that students would take to the entrance exams administered by each university or even by each faculty at each university. However, already in 2021, the GPA option has been abandoned – which implies more uncertainty as to the discontinuation of TA – and the reform emphasis has remained with the use of digital platforms and item banks for the new generation of tests.

Not surprisingly, the reform faced many political economy challenges from its very outset, both from politicians and from educators. The scope and scale of the reform amounted to a cultural shift that could not be without resistance to change amongst some stakeholder groups including teachers, parents and many education administrators (Spade Consulting, 2019). The reform is challenging the status quo in crucial areas such as textbooks, teacher policies and student assessments. But most notably, the examination reform at the end of secondary education goes against the vested interests of the large private tutoring industry and its suppliers of learning materials. As a result, the Education sector attracted a lot of public attention in the media and more so on social media. To address this, the Minister of Education adopted a proactive approach in communicating with stakeholders, especially teachers, and by 2019 had become one of the most popular public figures in Egypt’s television and radio networks.

3. 1 The potential Impact of the Education Reform 2.0 on the supply of and demand for private tutoring in Egypt

As already suggested, private tutoring has become a culture by itself, and it is deeply entrenched in Egyptian society. It could be claimed that what once was a symbiotic relationship between schooling and private tutoring, has now evolved into the parasitizing of formal schooling by private tutoring. The Minister of Education explains this with a compelling argument: “a parent who cannot pay for private tutoring in Egypt is not considered to be a good parent⁸”. Thus, as pointed out above, it is easy to account for the inelasticity and the strength of the demand for these services regardless of macroeconomic

6 Personal communication to the author in 2019

7 Interview to Minister Shawky quoted in Saavedra, J. (2019)

8 Personal communication to the author in 2019.

changes or economic cycles. Tackling such a widespread culture, driven by strong expectations, aspirations and incentives throughout the Egyptian society, will clearly require much more than legislative changes within the framework of an education reform. Thus, while regulation of the shadow education system is catching up in some countries and is succeeding to address the negative effects of private tutoring, particularly inequality via the reduction of informal private tutoring (Mishra, 2010; Bray and Kwo, 2014; Bray, 2021), Hartman (2008) argued that scaling down private tutoring via regulatory changes is not a realistic goal considering the strong social expectations attached to it in Egypt. In fact, the government has tried to regulate this market, at least since the 1990s, but to no avail. It keeps getting stronger, under the nose of the government, and in plain sight even though it walks the fine line between legality and illegality. When designing the 2018 education reform, the Ministry of Education therefore assumed that more regulation will not make a difference, and the goal, rather, should be to understand how to create an environment which would fundamentally change the need, or perception of need, for private lessons, and lead to different practices and behaviors. And that, in short, implied and required examination reform and, more specifically, the discontinuation of the *Thanawiyya Amma*.

Replacing a 19th century examination that rewards exclusively the recall of facts, definitions, formulae and the like by a 21st century computer-based test that is open-book and which therefore puts the premium on applied knowledge and problem-solving skills, could be the way to change the prevailing culture of private tutoring from within, i.e., pushing the tutoring industry to do things differently and creating incentives for parents and students to demand different *services* from them.

Put it in a different way, our assumption is that the ongoing reform will not curb private tutoring in Egypt, even though this could be desirable mostly to reduce education inequity and to limit the overly corrupt versions of this industry. Instead, the impact of an education reform that strongly emphasizes learning on what private tutors offer and what their clients demand emerges as a potentially very solid measure of success of that education reform. **If the education reform succeeds in changing the focus of the private tutoring culture, both on the supply and the demand sides, from rote learning to relevant skills and competences, Egypt would have used the very strength of such a culture to transition to a modern education system that delivers genuine learning for all students.**

As stated above, the examination reform has more enemies than friends in Egypt. Apart from the cultural inertia, there are constant fake news circulating in the media and social media that coincide in presenting all education actors – mostly students and their families – as the losers of the examination reform (Spade Consulting, 2019). This is apparently succeeding in creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear among parents, especially those who do not have access to other sources of information and are from vulnerable backgrounds (Albawabhnews, 2021). While the Ministry and the Minister personally have redoubled efforts to counteract those rumors and fake news, it will take a much more concerted set of actions targeting the different audiences. Thus, the communication dimension of the reform is crucial and strategic and needs to be fed with compelling evidence.

3.2. What could be done from the Government: an urgent research & innovation policy agenda

It appears to be crucial to collect and analyze evidence on how the education reform might incentivize or even force changes in the supply of private tutoring services, its format and prevailing practices; likewise, the Ministry would need to monitor how the demand from parents will be affected, particularly by the examination reform (and changes in higher education admission policies). In this digital environment, we can expect to see remote tutors, even from outside Egypt, new companies that work online, and obviously also clever students who know how to leverage the new resources online.

All this necessary evidence could then be used to inform the Ministry of Education communication policy on the reform and to engage in dialogue and consultation with key stakeholders in government, academia, international donors and media. Such monitoring and communication effort could also explore whether the current market structure changes and the market becomes more efficient and, more importantly, less unfair and less elitist. This could provide the MOETE with crucial evidence to come up with policy decisions to try and influence and shape the private tutoring market.

The scope of work that would be required can therefore be summarized as follows:

- Deepen understanding of the changing role of private tutoring under ED 2.0
- Draw early lessons on the impact of Education 2.0 on a shift to improved learning and teaching as reflected in changing patterns of supply of and demand for private tutoring services
- Draw early lessons on the impact of Education 2.0 on enhanced equity in learning and teaching (under the assumption that the Egyptian society will perceive private tutoring as a less relevant factor to ensure academic success)
- Test the assumption that examination reform can change the professional culture of teaching and, in doing so, the culture of private tutoring in Egypt
- Understand how access to a robust audiovisual and digital environment -- the Egyptian Knowledge Bank and Learning Management System, the resources available on social media and elsewhere – could in fact be game changers as the leaders of the education reform have expected (Abdel-Moneim, 2021). Are these disrupting the private tutoring culture and market in fundamental ways, and how? Or are these rather being phagocyted by the private tutoring *cartel*?

3.3. Enter the pandemic in March 2020

To be sure, school closures as a response to the Covid19 pandemic also included the closure of private tutoring “facilities”, and this while the TA examination was kept and, after some uncertainty and internal government debate due to the obvious public health risks, was administered in early June 2020. At the same time, Grade 10 and 11 tests were administered via student tablets and taken at home. The system was in 2020 in a pure ‘natural experiment’ stage, with both the old and the new examination systems in place, and under the exceptional circumstances of a pandemic that had forced the closure of

schools since March 2020. If public schooling reacted with relatively agile measures⁹, the private tutoring market has not been idle. There is no systematic evidence other than the reinvention of most of the companies that were already in the market and the acceleration of the digital transition of those that had not taken to the internet yet. The result is an acceleration of both the supply and demand for online tutoring services. Like in many other countries, the preferred measure to deal with learning loss and ensure learning continuity is tutoring, and in Egypt the private sector seems to have the absolute edge on this front, which implies that the pandemic might have been the de facto “nonstarter” to the elimination of the *Thanawiyya Amma*. And without the reform of that examination, not even the accelerated digitalization of schooling in Egypt will be enough to rescue the school system from the private tutoring *cartel* and back to a focus on student learning.

4. Ways forward and the key challenge ahead

In most countries and in most cases, there is a symbiotic relationship between private tutoring and public schooling systems. To a good extent, both thrive with each other. The existence of external high-stakes examinations helps and fuels such symbiosis although, in some cases such as Egypt, the private tutoring cartel becomes so powerful and strong – even beyond the education system as such – that it starts parasitizing public schooling and somehow supplanting it. Empty secondary classrooms in the last two years of upper secondary education, and a volume of family investment on private tutoring that rivals that of the State in public schooling, together with a teacher force whose key salary incentives are related and dependent on the exam, all signal that the line between symbiosis and parasitism was crossed some time ago.

Doing away with the TA was the mother of all education reforms in Egypt. For a start, because it could paradoxically lead to the recuperation of the public nature of schooling in Egypt. The actual locus of control shifted towards private tutoring, and it was precisely a public examination – TA – the responsible for that shift. Just when Egypt had the perfect mix of political vision and political will to make the reform of the TA examination happen, the pandemic seems to have disrupted completely the reform as far as the examination is concerned.

Parents might be perceiving that the change in the examination is not for the better and seem to be putting even more money on private tutoring. More exams and tests result in more private tutoring, that seems to be the formula. In our view, the only way forward to get rid of this tremendous bottleneck in Egyptian education is to draw a line between the graduation function and the competitive selection function of the examination system. And to do so in such a way that the majority of those completing 12 years of

9 Within five days of the decision to close schools, the Ministry extended access to the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB), to all K-12 students. Digital content is organized by grade/ subject and available in both Arabic and English, to all students, parents and teachers, using the link <https://study.ekb.eg>. As of March 26, access was extended to Egyptian students in United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, and Italy. Students could access the digital content from the mobile phone or the computer. Education content was also made available through education TV channels. Further, a new digital platform that provides a communication channel between students and teachers via the link <https://edmodo.org> was launched on April 5, 2020. The MOETE also arranged with the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology and mobile carriers to improve connectivity. This helped make available SIM cards at no cost to students if they had a device (computer/ tablet/ smart phone) and connecting to education content through and <https://edmodo.org>.

education would have a fair chance to graduate successfully while those who want to get into the most sought after and demanded tertiary programs would still have to compete for it. How to do this within a “TA environment” that the Egyptian society seems to want to keep in place? That is the challenge.

One option, as embraced originally by the Education 2.0 agenda, is to consider the GPA of the last two or three years in secondary education. It would mean that, for the purposes of graduation the GPAs of 11 and 12 grades would be weighted with the TA score, thus relieving the pressure on the “examination day” and creating a fairer procedure for graduation. Since the graduation score would not be used as such for the competitive selection function, any accusation of lack of comparability of scores could be easily dismissed, while at the same time you would be empowering schools and teachers (also versus private tutoring) and creating a strong incentive for students to take their school grades seriously. Then, for those who want to compete for university entrance, the TA score, without GPAs, could be held and used as usual.

A second option, perhaps less convincing, could be to just lower the bar of the TA score for graduation while keeping the current thresholds for university entrance and colleges, community colleges, etc. This would solve part of the problem (failure rates and no-show rates could still remain high) but at the cost of creating a devalued image of secondary graduation. A variation on this option could be to link secondary graduation to the score of just two or three basic subjects, i.e., Arabic, Math and then use the scores on the other subjects for university admission giving them different weights depending on the stream or specialization that the student has pursued.

A third, more radical and somewhat Solomonic option, would be to give graduation to the schools and tertiary admission to universities and colleges. This would obviously entail downplaying the role of the TA, as it could still be used for both functions but with less weight and influence. In other words, the examination could still be in the picture, but it would no longer be the cut-throat one-day life-or-death experience that it is now. And the whole incentive system created around it would necessarily shift. Many European countries have embraced a similar system over the last decades. However, it would be doubtful that Egyptian secondary schools can take that responsibility at this stage while, on the other hand, Egyptian universities do not seem interested in taking up the enormous cost and political risk of managing admissions by themselves (and even less so in the critical context of the pandemic).

At this point, the education reform in Egypt has managed to put the replacement of the TA exam in the center of public debate, which is indeed an accomplishment considering the strong historical inertia that protects and fuels this legendary exam and the constellation of interests around it. However, even beyond the examination and its immediate future, the shadow education system is at the very center of the debate concerning the digitalization of education and whether it will take the re-schooling or the de-schooling path. Egypt’s public schooling system must start competing with the shadow education system, and that could end up as a competition for survival.

5. References

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