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Madeline Waddell
mwaddell@pugetsound.edu

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Citizenship Education in Egypt
By Madeline Waddell

Introduction

The Arab Spring brought hope of a democratic Middle East to many in the international community. While the literature on democratic transitions includes an array of components, scholars on the region have concentrated on institutional developments such as elections and constitutions. While these structural components are essential, this paper advocates for citizenship education as another crucial element in democratic transitions. Although not typically part of this literature, citizenship education entails building an informed and active populace able to contribute to a total culture of democracy. This paper analyzes these pedagogic efforts in transitional Egypt by contrasting the State's role in citizenship education with that of civil society. This contrast leads to the conclusion that an emphasis on the third sector is necessary for carrying out the goals of citizenship education apolitically. Egypt's school system is not only the most robust in the Arab world, but has historically been utilized by different authoritarian regimes to advance political goals. When juxtaposed with the emergence of an abundance of NGOs after the 2011 Revolution, it becomes an ideal case study. Analysis is based on theories of citizenship education and research of the Egyptian education system, and is supplemented with informal interviews in the country.

What is Citizenship Education?

The literature on citizenship education is really only clearly unified in the sense that it describes itself as varied. Many in the West see its theory as emerging in the Western world from the desire to prepare students to become good democratic citizens. Even here it is diverse and often adopts different names specific to a type of course such as civics or nationalism curriculums. Much of the literature focuses on two main aspects that students need to learn to

become good citizens: rights and responsibilities. Further, a 2007 policy statement from the European Commission offered the following: “Practicing active citizenship involves empowering individuals, enabling them to feel comfortable in democratic culture, and feeling that they can make a difference in the communities they live in” (Fairouz, 2011).

The concept of teaching multiculturalism for the “global citizen” has globalized the scholarship. The comparative work by Torney-Purta looked at citizenship programs over 24 countries finding the definitions of citizenship to be varied but essential elements such as “participative, interactive, related to life, conducted in a non-authoritarian environment, cognizant of the challenges of society diversity and co-constructed with parents and the community as well as the school” (2002). The study also asserted that even if all those elements were not met, citizenship curriculums in the West helped to build critical thinking. In contrast to this, Baraka points out that literature on Citizenship Education from the Middle East also differs from the West in that it lacks “reference to what was going on in the outside world” (2006). Another significant camp of the Arab literature specifically basis evidence for democratic education from the Prophet’s saying “it’s the duty of every Muslim man and woman to seek education” (Baraka, 2006).

The understanding used in this paper bundles these different terms together and use them interchangeably as carried out by Fairouz, in order to get a better understanding of how Egyptian students are taught to see themselves in relation to their country. Henceforth, citizenship education will refer to the development of certain values pertaining to one’s role in society. The discussion of which values to teach aside there is also the question of how to teach those values.

Fairouz divides the literature into three methods of how to teach citizenship: formal, informal, and non-formal. Citing Kerr, formal refers to written curriculum includes specific values and knowledge-based information that is taught in a classroom. The differentiation of informal and non-formal comes from Schechens with non-formal including “extracurricular activities, the school ethos and school decision-making activities” and informal including “peer learning and socio-emotional experiences” (Fairouz, 2011). For simplification, this paper focuses on the first two methods and uses the term curriculum to mean formal and school climate to encompass non-formal aspects of citizenship education.

Mohammed Faour at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace makes a strong case for teaching the “necessary skills and values to build and sustain democratic societies.” He writes, “Authoritarian political systems create authoritarian educational systems that lack accountability and transparency and encourage blind obedience to *authority* figures” (2013). However, when discussing the effectiveness of the state in conveying these values to students, it is important to recognize the faults of the Egyptian education system in order to grasp the full picture of how citizenship education is executed and understood by teachers and students.

The Status of Education in Egypt

Egypt became a republic in 1953 and functioned as an authoritarian state until the first democratic elections were held in 2012. Before this, civil liberties such as freedom of speech were restricted and political opposition was confined to that approved by the regime. In line with economic liberalization policies in the 90s and the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, the Mubarak regime invested heavily in education and secured significant funds from international donors for educational reform programs. The programs were successful in improving educational

measurements like enrollment rates but failed to address many significant quality issues within the system.

The Egyptian education system is highly centralized with all power resting in the Ministry of Education, which dictates curriculum and operational practices. In 2008, UNICEF outlined the major challenges facing Egyptian education and highlighted the issue of centralization in not only administrative structures but also curriculum and “pedagogical practices” (GEI Summary of Challenges, 2008). The last 5-year plan of the Ministry of Education, which began in 2007 and would have ended in 2012, attempted to decentralize and give more power to the schools (Ministry of Education Five Year Plan, 2005). However, early results from these reforms noted they often produced “devolution of *burdens*” instead of power or authority (GEI Summary of Challenges, 2008). Improving the quality of education is a significant issue in much of the Arab World where youth make up around 27% of the population but with around 74 million people, the sheer population size of Egypt coinciding with economic woes, magnify those issues (GEI Summary of Challenges, 2008).

The State Role in Citizenship Education

Curriculum

While curriculum is politicized in most countries, this seems to be true in Egypt particularly. “Education can be considered to be the battle-ground for controlling knowledge and acquiring ideological dominance through discursive and institutional means” (Asik, 2010). In Egypt, this educational “battle-ground” has mirrored the national discourse regarding identity and values throughout its history and particularly what is being played out today in the public sphere. Citizenship education is the way policy makers attempt to convey those messages of

identity and values. As evidence of this, the first matter changed by the post-Revolutionary Ministry of Education was the addition of a new citizenship curriculum for grades 11 and 12. In a conference specifically devoted to citizenship curriculum, Cairo University Professor Elham Abdel-Hamed described how they rushed the changes to the nationalism curriculum so much that there were mistakes with the page numbers.

After 50 years of authoritarian rule, Doctor Abdel-Hamed and others expressed excitement by the potential to include principles of equality and tolerance into curriculum and encourage engagement with different cultures. However, she found it to be worse than what existed before the Revolution as it gave preference to Islamic history and jumped over the Coptic era. Furthermore, the curriculum defines democracy on the basis of the Islamic principal of Shura, using 18 verses of Quran and 10 hadith. According to Doctor Abdel-Hamed, the section on equality gives one example of egalitarianism as not privileging one Muslim of another Muslim (Conference on Citizenship Education *Arabic*, 2013).

Faour also completed analysis of the new curriculum largely confirming Doctor Abdel-Hamed's findings. He wrote that it "provides useful information relating to citizenship and human rights but gives special attention to the perspective on political awareness in Islam...It affords no attention to the perspectives of other religious groups..." (2013). Faour's biggest problems are the absence of statements proclaiming full gender equality and the right of individuals to change their religions. One could argue this is not surprising as it matches those ideals written in the new Constitution, which was approved by just over 50% of the vote in a referendum in 2012 and reflects the ideals of the Morsi government.

In general, those who have studied citizenship education in Egypt have found it largely in line with the ideologies of the current regime. Before the January 25th revolution, no class

existed specifically for citizenship like the ones added by the Morsi government, however it was a valued part of the social studies curriculum. However, the Ministry of Education (MOE) defined civics education as the “education that forms skills and abilities of students enabling them to take a vital part in social and political life, creating civilians believing in the values of society, democracy and freedom.” (Baraka, 2006). El-Nagar and Smolska trace the trends in citizenship education in Egypt historically. When Gamal Abdel Nasser took power in 1952, diffusing the concept of Arab Nationalism, the citizenship curriculum followed with new courses on “Arab society” emphasizing the “historical tied with the Arab region” as well as promulgating socialist ideologies championed by Nasser (El-Nagar and Smolska, 2009). A similar change occurred with the next two Presidents, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak who focused on liberalization as the way to achieve economic growth. Education was emphasized as a way toward economic growth and the making of “productive citizens” (El-Nagar and Smolska, 2009). While equality and rights were based on citizenship, the focus was on loyalty to the state without description of rights protected by the state. Baraka did a unique study counting the prevalence of words related to citizenship in Egyptian textbooks during the Mubarak era. She found the most used word to be “authority” which was used twice as much as the word citizen, a sign of what she calls “state dominance over individuals” (2006). Political participation is mentioned one time. As evidenced through the curriculum, although the state claimed democratic practices and an open political arena, few opposition groups were really aloud to exist. One teacher described he felt hypocritical teaching the active-participation sections of the curriculum when he knew there were no real avenues for his students to do so (Fairouz, 2011).

School Climate

As argued before, the deep history of the Egyptian authoritarianism has left its mark on the education system leaving a particularly difficult learning environment or school climate. Administratively, power is extremely centralized with little effective oversight because there is little funding for supervisory units or human resources. Even when reforms have been passed, there is little political will to actually execute them (Faour 2013). This hierarchal leadership structure seeps into the individual schools as well with a general culture of student submission to their teachers. The practice of using rote learning adds to this culture. Interviews confirmed the adherence to rote learning with descriptions of sitting in classrooms and copying what the teacher writes on the board. There is no room for mistakes, clarifications, and certainly critical thinking is not encouraged. Even young students would be chastised for failing to adequately record notes before the teacher erased them.

Another big part of understanding the school climate is the prevalence of tutoring. One study concluded Egyptians spent 20% of household income on private tutoring per child (Bray, 1999). Tutoring became prevalent in Egypt in the 1980's as the final high school exams became more competitive and determinative of student's future. However, they are now widespread even in vocational schools where some teachers intimidate and bully their students into paying for tutoring as a means of "securing their livelihoods" (Sobhy, 2011). A majority of Egyptian students report they don't feel safe in their environment. In general secondary schools, tutoring is just as prevalent but the market is differentiated where your scores are generally perceived to match the strength or price of your tutor. Tutors are necessary to get a good grade because they teach the exact material needed to be memorized and when students spend a significant amount of time.

The school climate of both vocational and general secondary schools is clearly difficult. Furthermore, Faour found in one study a majority of students don't feel safe at school. This is congruence with studies showing a big reason for lower enrollment of girls has to do with harassment from male peers and sometimes teachers (Langsten 2011). Even if policy makers in Egypt were to create a "perfect" citizenship curriculum it would seem extremely hard to effectively convey its message in the environment that currently exists in schools. Student learning is inhibited in any subject when schools are unable to provide base-level safety but citizenship education is particularly difficult (Faour, 2012). So much of how students think of themselves in relation to the state comes from their relationships in schools. It would seem extremely difficult to encourage students to participate in their government or even community when participating in school is frowned upon and sometimes punishable.

Fairouz conducted interviews with students in Egyptian middle schools where students said she was the first adult to actually listen to their opinions. Another example of this is seen through some programs of student government that the state has started to run. One student remarked that those elected to the board were used as "scapegoats" when problems arose at school (Fairouz, 2011). Furthermore, schools have institutionalized corruption because of the necessity of tutoring. How can students grow up to be honest citizens when the culture of lawlessness surrounds them? Dr. Elham Abdel-Hamed actually suggests that the goals of those who fought for the Revolution were not met precisely (as evidenced by the June 30 coup) because the Youth were never taught the critical thinking and analytical skills needed to accomplish them. Herrera who also conducted interview with Egyptian youth claims young people want to "live with dignity and freedom in accountable democratic systems with standard of equity and justice" but they must first be able to organize and find leadership to "imagine

alternatives and rebuild structures of power" (2012). There was no evidence that school climate had changed since the Revolution.

Civil Society

If the state of citizenship education from the Government seemed dismal, citizenship education from civil society organizations looks radically different. The law in Egypt prohibits non-governmental organizations from partaking in any formal political activity and during the Mubarak administration this law was enforced whenever the regime felt threatened. Despite this, civil society was robust during the Mubarak era primarily with service-based organizations but groups like the Cairo Institute for Human Rights cautiously worked to affect the harshness of the system. Some scholars even go so far to designate it as having built the foundation for the Revolution (Youniss and Barber et al., 2013).

In post-revolutionary Egypt, research and interviews conducted specifically for this paper found numerous organizations setting up new programs specifically for teaching citizenship education. Most of these were organizations dedicated to aiding Youth already established long before the Revolution. However, seeing the sudden existence of an open political system many organizations are starting programs that were once unthinkable in the Middle East. One leader told the author, he saw a need for encouraging citizenship values in Youth because of the lack of informed debate in the public sphere. Some examples of these programs include a youth debate program called *Arab Voices* and a series of conferences known as the *Active Citizens Program* where students created their own manual for teaching citizenship and then lead teacher trainings of students in their communities. Unique about this is that the values taught are not coming from any one source but the consensus of a group of students. This

seems to mirror the essential values of citizenship education such as plurality and critical thinking. Fairouz, also the leader of an NGO known in English as *Big Heart* looked to help school counselors improve school climate by tackling problems of teacher and administrative authoritarianism over students. These types of programs have expanded and multiplied in the past two years since the Revolution.

Conclusions

This paper has traced the importance of citizenship education in theory and then looked at its manifestation in reality through the State and Civil Society. First, it must be emphasized that although this paper argues for citizenship education as a means to democracy, it is also clear that without at least some layer of democracy, there would be no ability to teach citizenship values in the first place. The Morsi government would never have been able to come to power and change the curriculum as they did without the fall of the authoritarian Mubarak regime and citizenship programs were unthinkable before the revolution; half because they would have probably been deemed illegal and half because no one wanted to teach ideals such as participation in which there was no hope of having one's voice matter.

Second, while the difference between the state-lead citizenship education and civil society-lead programs is stark, this paper wishes to recognize its potential bias. The existence of NGO's became extremely controversial in post-Revolutionary Egypt. They were thought to be agents of foreign powers trying to influence the future make-up of the state. The high legislature attempted to pass a new NGO law restricting those organizations with foreign funding. All those organizations interviewed for this paper were receiving substantial funding from abroad and some such as *Arab Voices*, were co-led by the British Council or other foreign aid programs

rooted in the West. It would be worthwhile for further research to investigate Islamic organizations also trying to implement citizenship programs, perhaps with an in-depth look at the values they teach.

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