Egyptian Education in Times of Social and Political Unrest: Crisis or Serendipity?

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Abstract

This paper will look at the impact that different social and political crises had on the provision of K-12 education in Egypt during the academic years of 2009-2012. Clearly every crisis is unique, but crises can be managed and mitigated through the development and application of comprehensible strategies. The crises that Egypt experienced frequently required hasty responses from school personnel. Such immediate changes forced alterations in policies, procedures and personnel responsibilities. Change was often threatening to many; flexibility was a requirement during these crises. The past three years forced the Egyptian schools to experience the calamity of: (1) the H1N1 "Swine Flu;" (2) the volatile January 25th political revolution; and (3) tense strikes by teachers, transportation and other public employees. Reactions to these urgent situations resulted in a variety of school emergency measures to: restructure instructional delivery; reorganize security measures; and revise health procedures. The goal of this research is to examine: (1) how much instructional time was interrupted during these episodic crises and how each type of school addressed the disruption; (2) the reactions of all in the educational community; (3) how safety and security issues were tackled; and (4) how curriculum was provided. The theoretical framework is one of inquiry. This process has the aim of ascertaining facts, resolving doubts, and contrasting problem-solving methods and results. An open-ended questionnaire completed by school administrators will provide the data documenting the effects of the crises and resolve of the schools to resume the year's educational curriculum within a safe and secure environment. This methodology lends itself to the qualitative development of paradigms connecting an array of educational elements. The findings will confirm that the concept of a crisis can be both a threat and an opportunity for educational reform. A comparison between government, international, and private schools' crisis management reactions and procedures are only part of Egypt's education revolution. Experienced character education situations, increased instructional technology skills, and student participation in community service activities surfaced from hidden curricula to recognized contextual encounters. Alteration of instructional strategies, unified disposition of students and faculty, and compassionate parents developed, in spite of cancelled classes and student activities, numerous calendar revisions, high temperatures, bus hijackings, country-wide curfews, and the appearance of weapons. Reform efforts directed by school personnel and the Ministry of Education continue to encourage Egypt's Education Revolution. The future democratic election activities may also prove to be serendipitous catalysts for educational reform. Investigation will continue.

During the last twenty years, the use of the word "crisis" seems to be used increasingly around the world. Referring to sudden and intense political, economic, social, psychological, cultural or environmental changes; "crisis" is alive in Egypt. Multiple crises such as: the H1N1 flu; the political revolution; and elections in Egypt have created both danger and opportunity.

According to transformative learning theory, the emergence of a crisis represents a potential opportunity for personal and/or collective transformation. It is not just a process of learning something new; it has to do with the learner's conceptions, understandings and attitudes.

It is grounded in the capacity of individuals and groups to revisit the perspectives through which they interpret their own experience. Reflection on the past three years has shown how the emergence of social, political, and cultural crises manifested opportunities and expressions of transformative learning in Egypt.

The H1N1 "swine flu" crisis interrupted teaching and learning during the academic year of 2009-2010. The Egyptian Revolution "Arab Spring" crisis interrupted teaching and learning during 2010-2011. Political elections and strikes interrupted teaching and learning during 2011-2012. It has been a challenge, at best, to provide continuity in the education process during these past three years.

Government or experimental language schools' education curriculum is driven exclusively by the need to score high grades in National examinations, which determine access to university places. Consequently, parents invest their hard earned money in private tutoring to help children master tested material. This practice reinforces rote memorization and stifles critical thinking and creative expression.

Egyptian private schools give more attention to students' personal needs and school facilities. These institutions include: (1) language schools where most of the government curriculum is taught in English; (2) religious schools; and (3) international schools.

Descriptions provided by educators in 14 Egyptian schools (10 international, 3 language, and one government) provided the basis of this paper. The paper depicts the educational experiences and outcomes of the Egyptian social and political crises of the past three years. Convenience sampling of educators was used in this multi-site/multi-year review.

2009-2010 the Year of H1N1

The beginning of the school year was delayed till October 3, 2009 and the EID holidays were also extended to ten days from November 26 to December 5. Teaching and learning was off to a slow start that academic year.

Ministry of Education guidelines stated that if a student or teacher was diagnosed with H1N1, the principal was to shutter that particular class for two weeks and students be placed under surveillance for seven days at their homes. If more than three cases were confirmed at a school, the Ministry would close that school for two to four weeks. Also, in order to reduce congestion in Egypt's crowded classrooms, government school days were split into three shifts. This schedule shortened class periods from 45 minutes to 30 minutes. Smaller class sizes limited to ten students were also required. Classroom and faculty availability consequently became challenges for school administrators.

Parents were constantly inquiring about the number of students in their children's classroom and spreading or investigating rumors about H1N1 cases. Extreme caution turned to excessive worry and panic. Principals indicated that maintaining normalcy was of primary importance and their highest priority. However, all school assemblies, performances, and sport events were canceled. Students did not receive formal recognition of their achievements.

Ahmed el-Ganzoury, a representative of Egyptian private school owners, unveiled a disagreement between the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education over whether to postpone the school year or cancel it till the virus abated. Government officials often disagreed about the procedures to be taken. The Ministry of Health demanded postponement of school, while the Ministry of Education rejected the suggestion. The Ministry of Health later asked students to drink anise before going to school and required each school to establish an isolation room with a bed and oxygen tank to isolate a possible H1N1 case.

A team of two people from the Ministry came to check these special isolation rooms frequently. However, the team members seemed to change with each visit. Consequently, their messages also varied: (1) "a new bed is required"; (2) "the new bed with the vinyl cover is excellent for cleaning"; (3) "no a/c should be used in the room"; (4) "there must be telephone and restroom access"; and (5) "there must be an oxygen tank in the room."

When the first H1N1 case in a school was announced to faculty, often sheer panic broke out! Teachers were crying and physically shaking during the faculty meetings. Certainly these professionals were not calm role models for students. Simultaneously, school phones went crazy with parental requests to send students home.

Immediately thereafter the maintenance crews began to arrive at school sites earlier to daily disinfect the premises. In spite of complaints about the harsh cleaning solution smells of bleach and spray, students and staff brought Detol for personal use. A/C was turned off and class windows were opened.

The hot temperatures made students sleepy in class. Faculty and students alike, complained about the miserably hot bus rides to and from campus. Face masks were optional. Most were not furnished by the school. There was no flu vaccine available in Egypt. Temperature checks of students became a school entry requirement. The purchase of automatic ear reading thermometers was a challenge due to the limited supply in Egypt. Most schools had only one doctor or nurse for the entire building's population, so matrons were trained to take temperature readings. Temperatures were again taken later in the morning, forcing class interruptions. As a result, students requested that faculty also be tested.

Early December, the Ministry declared that students could no longer come to school. But high school students, especially those studying for Ministry exams, IB, or AP came to campus thanks to private drivers. They did not wear their school uniforms. Other middle and high school lessons were delivered via internet and Skype. The crisis or threat of H1N1 was extremely harmful to the educational process. It was unfortunate that the virus appeared during the first months of the academic year. Some schools were closed down; some schools had shortened days, and others removed parts of the curricula.

The number of days of lost instruction during 2009-2010 varied between three and ninety. Government schools had the highest number of closings. The smaller private schools had the least. The serendipitous result was the forced implementation of e-learning for both students and faculty. Using a wiki, Skype, blog, chat room, voice thread, blackboard, Facebook, and e-books were new technology options introduced for teaching and learning.

2010-2011 the Year of the Revolution

"Arab Spring"

As Tahrir Square demonstrations occurred, school was cancelled once again. This meant a time span of one to sixty days in which little, if any, teaching and learning took place. The government established a daily curfew from 3:00 p.m. till 11:00 a.m. Telephone and internet services were cut. Military tanks and check points were positioned all over Cairo and the countryside. Several thousand prisoners at Torah Prison escaped causing additional safety concerns as police disappeared due to escaped prisoners' weapons raids on local police stations.

Embassies instructed expats to leave Egypt. Consequently, there was a loss of personnel in the international schools. The shortfall of educators ranged between two and sixty, including one principal. Replacement local hires were needed, thus expanding the political crisis to the social scenario. Tuition collection proved to be difficult for the private schools. As students were not attending, many parents refused to make payments; however, the salaries for school employees were still expected. High school instructional hours for AP/IB courses were a serious concern. Many students met for class discussions on-line after internet service was restored. Other students met at teachers' homes or in cafes. The students indicated the violence was distressing, but what they remember most is the unity of the protesters and the friendly atmosphere among those gathered in the square. *(Egyptian Children…. 2011).*

Thanks to the previous year's H1N1 crisis, stakeholders had experienced new strategies for teaching and learning. Government and language school faculty deleted syllabi material and taught only ministry exam curricula. International school faculty, despite government curfew and mandated school closings, arranged to meet students in coffee shops or home gatherings. e-teaching and learning methods utilizing Moodle, E-mail, Skype, MSN Chat, etc. were implemented. Learning packets were created and delivered to elementary and middle school students.

Once schools re-opened, students and staff were determined to express concern for their rights. In response to the questionnaire, educators provided a number of examples in which rights were a concern. Workers protested regarding wages, work conditions, hours, and transportation. Students protested with demands such as: (1) campus-wide Wi-Fi availability; (2) removal of an administrator; (3) installation of a snack machine; (4) additional break time; (5) improved sports facilities; and (6) more field trips. Parents were called to attend school meetings. One faculty member was fired at a private school for his alleged support of a student sit-in. Parents were concerned with their children's safety as bus hijacking and kidnapping incidents were becoming frequent events. Consequently, students brought weapons to campus for personal protection. It was not uncommon for a school principal to collect guns, butcher knives, and tazers from students. Most schools adjusted curriculum offerings by removing physical education, computer (IT), music and art from student schedules in order to extend instructional time for core subjects.

International schools varied greatly in the quest to make up lost instructional days. Some extended the school day; some held classes on six additional Saturdays; most canceled spring break, and some extended the school year till the end of June. School calendars were revised as many as fifteen times. Printed versions disappeared; only website calendars were kept current. SMS messages became frequent reminders to stakeholders of the many schedule changes. Language schools created a special three day extended schedule for IGCSE students. Most schools cancelled mid-year exams which was a drastic school reform procedure in a country that prides itself on standardized assessment. Government schools did not make up any of the lost instructional days.

Policy or procedure changes also became frequent. Some examples were: (1) provision of mobile phones for bus drivers; (2) placement of security cameras on campus; and (3) written evacuation plans for ex-pats. The Egyptian Revolution was another crisis for schools. However, new policies and procedures were created as improvements to school health and safety issues, and teaching and learning strategies using social media and technology were introduced. Teachers gained professional development in curriculum compacting, and the focus on assessment *for* learning changed from that of assessment *of* learning.

A serendipitous result of the Revolution was that students gathered outside of school and organized: (1) food drives and distribution to the poor; (2) neighborhood watch schedules for security; (3) red, white, and black painting of street curbs, tree trunks, barricades to represent the Egyptian flag; (4) expressive street art scenes; and (5) trash collections. Community service hours were often documented on report cards. Students finally began to understand the importance of character building and community service.

2011-2012 the Year of Reform and Elections

On September 10, 2011, over 15,000 teachers gathered to protest in front of the ministerial cabinet's headquarters in downtown Cairo. They demanded a minimum wage of $200 a month along with the resignation of the Education Minister.

Then on September 17th, the first day of the academic year, tens of thousands of teachers began a nationwide, open-ended strike. This was the first collective action by Egypt's educators since 1951. Actually, 65 – 75% of Egypt's one million teachers did not report to their classrooms. Consequently, school did not officially begin till October 3, 2011. Once again, the start of the school year was delayed. Safety and security concerns continued to rise due to the limited presence of police and the population's anger with the military rule. Car hijackings became more frequent. Once again, instructional days were lost.

Public schools became the polling places for the November government elections. The voter turnout was enormous as it was the first time for most Egyptians to take part in a democratic election. Thus, multiple school days and multiple sections of the country were impacted.

As of March 2012, sampled schools documented the number of lost days to be between one and ten for the 2011-2012 academic years. Newspapers were also predicting that schools were to close early in May because of elections. That meant another twenty days (or more) of lost instruction in the government schools. Conclusion: Egyptian students in government schools lost a full year of instruction (approximately 170 days) over the course of the past three years.

Raymond Williams was an important (if largely unrecognized) theorist and proponent of 'public pedagogy.' Public pedagogy is an approach to education that projects beyond the schools to a host of other institutions that educate: families, churches, libraries, museums, publishers, benevolent societies, youth groups, agricultural fairs, radio networks, military organizations, and research institutes. This expansive notion of education, in which Williams saw great democratic potential, ran counter to education as traditionally conceived from the nineteenth-century. He saw modern people trying to understand new information and modes of communication, all of which educate. The fact that students from Egyptian government schools became assistants at election polling places not only proves Williams' theory, but this community service was a serendipitous civic lesson due to the closing of schools.

Conclusions/Findings/Lessons Learned

Shakespeare wrote in *Henry V*, Act 4, "All things are ready, if our minds be so."

The recent crises in Egypt have contributed to the awakening of a student's relationship to self and others. There is a clear need for Egyptian educators to focus on the quality, relevancy, and equity of educational opportunities, particularly during adolescence.

The three years of social and political unrest created an acceleration of serendipitous transformational educational experiences and thinking in education reform. Examples include: (1) new and revised educational policies and procedures; (2) contractual adjustments in salary and working conditions; (3) teaching and learning changes of curriculum additions, curriculum compacting, e-learning, and creative enhancements for community service/character building, and civics. All three examples represent important intellectual leaps of understanding by Egyptians of all ages and social status.

Inspired by experiences in Tahrir Square, students are now organizing their own revolution. They have come up with demands for how they want their schools to be improved. Student Councils have been established in most schools to include student voice in school processes. "Citizens before the revolution were apathetic and careless. We didn't care about what is happening because we felt the country was not ours. But now that the revolution has succeeded, everyone feels this country is theirs and that's why we will try to rebuild it and make it a better place," said Jihad, age 14 (*Egyptian Children…2011).*

Mezirow (1999) defines transformative learning as a process by which our taken for granted frames of reference are transformed by making them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective. Cranton and Wright (2008) define transformative learning as "… a process by which individuals engage in critical self reflection that results in a deep shift in perspective toward a more open, permeable and better justified way of seeing themselves and the world around them" (pp. 33-34).

"Classrooms die as intellectual centers when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge. Instead of transferring facts and skills from teacher to students, a Freirean class invites students to think critically about subject matter, doctrines, the learning process itself, and their society. Freire's social pedagogy defines education as one place where the individual and society are constructed, a social action which can either empower or domesticate students." *(McLaren and Leonard, 1993).*

Some might argue that the job of schools is to enculturate and socialize youth. But the world that all children go into is not simple, static, or fair. It is complex, rapidly changing, unjust and damaged. "The curricula taught in Arab countries seem to encourage submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thinking," *(Arab Human Development Report, 2003).* The school day itself starts with the highly regimented morning assembly. The taboor is supposedly a time for pupils to connect with their nation and express patriotism by saluting the flag and singing the national anthem. This hallowed ritual is actually a decree by the Ministry of Education. In Egypt today, anything approaching quality education is provided only in the private sector.

Revamping course content, methods of teaching, and scheduling 180 days of annual instruction are among the most significant steps Egyptian schools should take for reform. In this context, the education system should underscore the importance of a citizen's role in society. Students should be educated and prepared to be active citizens -- an approach that develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills for the 21st century while promoting equality, freedom, and respect for human rights.

Teaching continues to be far too didactic and teacher-directed rather than student-centered, and adverse to environments that foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving capacities. Communication in classrooms is one-sided; teachers talk at students and see textbooks as the only source of indisputable knowledge. As noted in international tests, notably the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), student learning relies on memorization of definitions, facts, and concepts rather than the ability to think critically.

By increasing classroom interactivity and dialogue, both teachers and students can be better prepared to respond to a crisis within formal educational settings and participate in developing democracy in Egypt.

"Those people who do think holistically and critically about their conditions reflect the highest development of thought and action, 'critical consciousness.' Freire refers to this as group thought and critical action. Here, the individual sees himself making the changes needed.

A critically transitive thinker feels empowered to think and to act on the conditions around him or her, and relates those conditions to the larger contexts of power in society." (*McLaren and Leonard, 1993*). The challenge for Egyptian educators is to determine the kind of future wanted for its students. Schools are expected to enlarge the minds of young people, to prepare them to be socially adept, responsible citizens with a clear sense of identity and of belonging to their community, of being part of a people's history, and trustees of their culture.

History tells us that the positive messages of tragedy do not last very long. Young street artists have painted a trompe d'oeil on a downtown Cairo street barricade. Don't be fooled by this artistry. Egyptian youth have already learned that the 21st century requires critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. This masterpiece illustrates the freedom of thought, collaboration, and the creativity of Egyptian youth and should be preserved.

Egyptian education during times of crisis resembles the Egyptian lotus flower. For thousands of years the lotus symbolized spiritual enlightenment, just as Egyptian education should be. Thanks to recent crises, Egyptian educational reform is beginning to blossom serendipitously.

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