

# Introduction: Possibilities for Critical Education in the Arab World

LINDA HERRERA

AND

CARLOS ALBERTO TORRES

Arab societies have historically placed a high value on knowledge and formal learning. From the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the present, institutions of formal learning, including schools in national education systems of the contemporary period, have been intertwined with major religious, scientific, philosophical, political, economic, and social movements. Despite the centrality of formal education to Arab societies, little is known empirically about learning processes, the cultural, political, and social formation of individuals who pass through the education system, and the everyday life of schools. This book, resorting to critical ethnographic methodologies and description, offers rare glimpses into the life of schools in a contemporary Arab society and proposes a series of hypotheses and empirical analyses about the relationships between schooling and the social order. It does so from a perspective of critical theory practiced by scholars from the region, also a rare avis in an Arab society.

This study views teachers, schools, students, and the State in a relational perspective. But it is neither an evaluative study nor a study primarily of educational politics. It is not a study per se of public policy, or of educational policy, and it is not per se a study of administration and bureaucracy. It is a study that takes seriously the need to use qualitative

methodologies to address issues of social production, reproduction, quality, and democratization.<sup>1</sup> This study attempts, among other things, to show not only what schooling potentially looks like when there is attention to quality in the learning process, but, conversely, what happens when there is not.

Certain overlapping themes run throughout this volume such as the pyramidal and antidemocratic nature of schooling as it is often structured and practiced, the impact of social movements—particularly Islamist movements—on school cultures, the ways in which a neoliberal market logic contributes to a demise of the teaching profession and increases social inequity, the growing cultures of resistance to authoritarianism, the gap between official policies and the social and material realities of schooling, and the desire on the part of educators and youths to make schooling a more meaningful, respected, and transformative social endeavor.

### **Why Study Education through Critical Theory and Critical Ethnography?**

“... there is no way we can escape the social world in order to study it.”

—Hammersley and Atkinson, 17

From the outset we will outline our understanding of both “Critical Ethnography” and “Critical Social Theory,” remaining aware of the wisdom of the exiled Menchevique Russian social scientist, Pitirin Sorokin, who once said that sociologists say what everybody knows but in a language few can understand. Therefore, our purpose is not to obscure the discourse by incorporating a new jargon, but simply to make explicit the processes and foundations that oriented our research for more than two years.

Critical Social Theory (CST) has made impressive contributions to our understanding in the social sciences, particularly linking critique and utopia, leaving us a legacy from which the scholars involved in the project of this book work. It is evident that Critical Social Theory, its pedagogical counterpart, Critical Pedagogy (CP), and one of its methodological frameworks, Critical Ethnography (CE), are slowly reaching domains of education in the Arab world, but they have a long way to go. The con-

tributors of this book have come together out of a firm conviction that a critical sociology of Arab education can serve to inform educators, reformers, policy-makers, and diverse publics towards a greater understanding of issues relating to social justice, participation, and democracy, and also their antitheses, injustice, passivity, and authoritarianism.<sup>2</sup>

This book project began in 2002, when a group of educational researchers—all of whom identify broadly with a critical perspective—came together from universities and research centers based in Egypt under the umbrella of the Culture and Education in Egypt Working Group of the Population Council in Cairo.<sup>3</sup> The group met regularly to read and discuss critical education literature with the aim of eventually undertaking critical research on school cultures. It transpired early in our explorations and deliberations that our research should be grounded in the tradition of critical ethnography, an approach that, in the words of education anthropologists Bradley Levinson and Dorothy Holland, is “fundamentally local and ethnographic, yet moves beyond the school to examine links between local cultural practices and the community, the region, the state, and the economy” (1996, 2). Yet it was also clear that most members of the group were versed mainly in quantitative research methods and lacked experience in interpretive qualitative research.<sup>4</sup> We therefore integrated methodological inquiries into our discussions about how to achieve a critical approach to Arab education.

Critical Ethnography is useful as a foundational method of inquiry for a number of reasons. Canadian sociologist and ethnographer Steve Jordan offers a good summary when he argues that CE draws from a large body of diverse yet compatible theoretical traditions including phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, neo-Marxism, Feminism, Semiology, and Cultural Studies. Jordan concludes that what distinguishes CE from conventional ethnographic approaches are several themes: first, CE is “focused on how ethnographic research could be connected with the wider political economy of capitalism”; second, CE focuses on power and social inequality; third, CE accepts the premise that the “contemporary world is organized through often exploitative and oppressive social relations, [hence marking] a decisive break with conventional forms of ethnography; fourth, CE “aims to enhance and empower subaltern groups through the research process itself,” and finally, since dominant forms of social and political theory are considered implicated in ruling Western capitalist societies, a theme “pursued by

critical ethnography is the refinement, or restructuring, of social and political theory” (Jordan 2003, 88–89). This last point brings us closer to the elective affinity (to put it in a Weberian fashion), between Critical Ethnography and Critical Social Theory in our research.

Here, the sobering and insightful voice of Freire helps to chart the journey of addressing social reality for social transformation when he argues:

Most professors do not address objective reality. Rather, they address analysis of objective reality found in books and articles. They turn this into the object of knowledge, within struggle for power, focusing upon accumulated knowledge. This impedes approximation to reality. The learning exercise is turned into a struggle around representations that we have of reality, and ideological struggle, addressing power that we do know how to manipulate. Consequently, the dialogue that should emerge from such analysis is no longer a mediated dialogue leading to reality. It is an alienating metaphysical ‘dialogue’ about an abstract ‘reality’ that has no real meaning (Torres 1994, 23).

As Carlos Alberto Torres argues, identities are social constructions with material and historical bases; indeed, they are based on perceptions of knowledge, experience, and power, particularly, what knowledge is (or should be considered) legitimate and should count, what experience should be celebrated and learned from, and how power can be negotiated among different forms of knowledge and experiences. Yet, as Joan Scott has argued so forcefully, the same notion of experience, which seems to underlie the notion of identity is something historically, culturally, and discursively produced (1992, 12–19). Alas, as Michael Apple has also so aptly argued for more than two decades, the connections between power and knowledge become central to any practical agenda of research and policy making in education, particularly in this new era of the conservative restoration (1982, 1986, 1993). This perception, of the ubiquities of power in any social relationship, forms the foundation of any CE.

Moreover, CE leads not simply to comprehension, but a calling into question of existing cultural traditions that conceal relations of domination to be overcome through the transformation of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> If, in the best of the Freirean education for liberation tradition, the role of education is the transformation of consciousness—, it should not be a surprise that CE could play a powerful role in research aiming at transformative educational models. This, of course, speaks to the universalization of a mode of critique and a model of analysis which is transparent,

normative, and analytical and is gaining more hold in academia world-wide. In a context like the Arab world, where education researchers are taking potential risks by embracing CST, it becomes an even more powerful mode of analysis.

That research has consequences never escaped the researchers involved in this study, particularly those making their living in the often difficult conditions surrounding social research in Egypt. Indeed, it is clear that our research was developed in opposition to the mainstream research conducted in Egypt and much of the region (and for that matter, in terms of its dominant orientation, elsewhere in the world).<sup>6</sup> Thinking about the difficulties and potential consequences of this research reminded us of a poignant statement made by Paulo Freire regarding university professors:

...There is no creativity without the risk of creating....The matter of freedom is basic for the search, for risk. However, we cannot fall into a naïve idealism when thinking it is possible to create a “province of freedom” outside a specific society where the material conditions of that society work against the affirmation of freedom (1994, 142–144).

Aware of Freire’s caution, we now turn to addressing possible reasons for why interpretive, qualitative educational research, which includes ethnographies of school cultures in the Arab states, has been so sparse.<sup>7</sup>

## Challenges to Critical Research in Arab States and Beyond

It is likely that critical, empirically based, interpretive modes of inquiry have been underrepresented—albeit by no means absent—in the Arab world due to structural and political constraints that inhibit critical approaches, and also due to a certain culture of scholarship that favors theoretical and quantitative research over applied and qualitative research. To a large degree, and similar to academic cultures in other regions, the culture of scholarship in the Arab world privileges the role of the *mufakir* (thinker), but less so that of the *mubahith* (researcher), a situation that finds some parallels with the *pensador* of Latin America.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, scholars derive prestige, legitimacy, and cultural capital in their ability to engage with theory at the macro level and in their capacity to conduct scientific (large scale) survey

research. Such professional values leave little space for exploring new areas of inquiry informed by empirical research at the micro level, reflexivity, doubt, risk-taking, creativity, and innovation, some of the hallmarks of interpretive ethnographic approaches.

To exacerbate the situation, universities and research centers in the Arab world, the hubs of knowledge production, tend to be located within authoritarian or surveillance systems that seriously impede academic freedom. In numerous countries of the region universities are heavily monitored by state security apparatuses that interfere in any number of university affairs—often in the name of cultural preservation or national security—in areas such as faculty travel, topics for research and conferences, curricular materials, and scholarly exchanges (Herrera 2006). Universities are also especially vulnerable to political instability and military conflict. Civil, regional, and international conflicts in the Middle East region drain material and human resources (hence the high degree of brain drain), impede scientific research and production, and often lead to increased repression at university campuses (Human Rights Watch 2005; Mazawi 2005, 154–156).

The widely circulated and debated Arab Human Development Reports (UNDP 2002, 2003) point to how, in addition to some of the above factors, the quality and quantity of academic production in the region has suffered due to inflexible and sometimes rigidly nationalistic approaches to knowledge. The reports' authors call for more regional and international cooperation, the reform of knowledge institutions towards more flexibility, and the pursuit of more translations of scholarly and literary works into Arabic, because "openness, interaction, assimilation, absorption, revision, criticism and examination cannot but stimulate creative knowledge production in Arab societies" (UNDP 2003, 8). An opening to new ideas and ways of knowing can also lead to what the report's lead author, Nader Fergany, (2005) calls an "Arab renaissance."

As other scholars are apt to point out, the crisis and deterioration of academic freedoms and scholarly production cannot be blamed entirely on government constraints, geopolitics, and relatively closed scholarly communities. There also appears to be a crisis of knowledge production whereby scientific inquiry and intellectual rigor are being replaced by superstition and ideological religiosity. As renowned Cairo University professor of political science, Mustapha Kamel El-Sayed, explains: "We must admit that society no longer believes in scientific research. Seventy-

five per cent of what Egyptians read is about religion” (quoted in *Al-Ahram Weekly* 2004).

A parallel with the conservative Christian restoration in the United States should not go unnoticed. With their purposeful mixing of religion and politics, one may conclude that the current Bush administration’s disregard for actual scientific proof (as demonstrated in efforts to put forward “intelligent design” as a biblically inspired explanation for evolution) may not drastically differ from the reported situation in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Among the many roles of critical, rational, research in the contemporary period, therefore, is to disentangle ideology from theology, expressions of extremism from religious faith, and to examine the structural factors that may account for the rise of fundamentalist movements.

### Struggles for Democratic Change in the Arab World

Despite the many impediments to critical research and action in the Arab world, there are clear signs of invigoration of academic and research communities who continuously struggle for democratic change. Prodemocracy movements have recently emerged on university campuses and snowballed with impressive rapidity. The Ninth of March Committee for the Independence of Universities and the Egyptian Association for Support of Democracy are two such groups. They call for greater freedom in universities (by way of higher salaries and less security interference) and in society (Human Rights Watch 2005, 4). The former also calls for political reforms, including the end of the Emergency Law, and the release of (Islamist) colleagues from jail (*Al-Ahram Weekly* 2005).

In the area of educational research, a more critical oriented research grounded in ethnographic, interpretive, and participatory methodologies in and on the region has been emerging in past years. This literature, much of which is situated in the fields of development and educational reform, spans a range of topics including curriculum development and teacher empowerment in Palestine (Nakleh and Wahbeh 2005), the politics of development aid and in-school technology in Egypt (Warschauer 2004), problems associated with international aid and the importance of grassroots alternative development in Oman (Chatty 1996), schooling and changes in gender norms in Jordan (Adely 2004), and cultures and uses of literacy in Morocco (Wagner 1993).

There also exists a critical mass of education projects in the Arab region grounded in principles of Critical Pedagogy. They include, to mention just a few, the adult literacy programs of CARITAS in Egypt, the schools and myriad community initiatives of the Association of Upper Egypt for Education and Development, and the curriculum, research, and training programs of the Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development (QCERD) in Palestine. An especially well-documented initiative has been the community school movement in Egypt, a participatory, community-based, child-centered, initiative spearheaded by UNICEF, in 1992, to reach girls in some of the poorest and most remote areas of Upper Egypt (Zaalouk 2004). Among the striking manifestations of community schools have been that despite being under the management structure of the Ministry of Education, teacher/facilitators exhibit far more autonomy in their work than in mainstream schools, and appear to be endeavoring on a “new culture of learning.” (166). The movement has influenced aspects of mainstream education through a process of diffusion and provided new paradigms for training, curriculum development, and one-classroom schools.<sup>10</sup> The project takes the view that educational reform should be “a liberating force that unleashes the highest potentials of learners. . . . It transforms schools into safe spaces where relations are redefined, as opposed to institutions that reinforce existing relations of power and oppression” (163). Considered together, these developments represent the stirrings of change in academic, development, and critical research communities.

### Striving for an Education for Liberation

We hope this book can make a modest contribution to the emerging literature, debates, projects, and movements for educational change. At the very least, the publication of research findings can alert the reader to a new awareness, shape the climate in which both political discussions are undertaken and practical decisions made, and may even directly stimulate particular sorts of action. Yet we anticipate that some critics may argue that this book could have been done differently: that the research could have been conceived using the standard frameworks; that researchers could have pursued other logic of proofs in their own case studies; that Critical Ethnography as a method could have been conducted for a longer period, and in more areas of the country.



While theoretically all of this is possible, the practical constraints, and the differential in power in academic institutions (not to mention limited resources), needs to be taken into account when inspecting the results, the language of analysis, and the logic of proof presented in this book. We deem the possibility to impact the world of educational research in Egypt and the larger Arab world through the dissemination of this research as very likely (there is an Arabic version of some of the key papers already in circulation).<sup>11</sup> Less likely is the immediate effect on the systems. The circumstances of the geopolitics of the Middle East, the role of globalization in the intersection between culture and power in the region, and the role of international aid on educational reform, cloud the practical implications for critical educational change. Yet, this book draws attention to two key sets of issues, and could serve as a sourcebook for serious educational reform in the future.

First, the studies contained in this book demonstrate there is a small, yet vibrant and growing, community of researchers in Egypt who do not abide by the rules of the status quo and are able to seek alternative theories, data, and interpretation. The quality and diversity of studies in this book testify to this effect. A second set of issues is the connection between the personal biography and the location of the researchers in the use of theory, methods, and research infrastructure. To ensure a dialogue among the researchers, and to secure funding and permission for this research, took a good deal of negotiating and navigating complex national and international institutional contexts. The fact that the two editors do not hold nationality of an Arab country—though Linda Herrera speaks Arabic and lived and worked in Egypt for seventeen years—demonstrates the possibility of international collaboration as long as people converge on a similar set of values and, more importantly, practices. We converge on similar values that facilitate these studies including the appreciation for Critical Pedagogy and Critical Theory as a theoretical paradigm. We converged on similar sets of methodological strategies—the reliance on Critical Ethnography as a method of inquiry. Finally, we also succeeded due to collegiality, friendship, and commitment, particularly of those located in national organizations who were cognizant that their findings would be unpopular in many circles.

While these are valid and valuable reasons for the production of this book, even more importantly, what these essays have in common and the reason that we have been able to collaborate over a long period of time, is the mutual respect and affection we have shown to each other. This is

so, clearly, because we all share Paulo Freire's perspective when he tells us that every book he has written is a report of a particular phase of his pedagogical and political experience. The politics of education is one of the key concepts that we have shared in trying to understand education within the Egyptian context. The other important lesson from Freire (and one that in our opinion differentiates the radical and critical perspective from the establishment one), is a commitment to social transformation.

Paulo Freire addresses this perspective in his book *Politics and Education*:

The comprehension of the limits of educational practice absolutely requires political clarity on the part of educators in relation to their project. It demands that the educator assumes the political nature of his/her practice. It is not enough to say that education is a political act just as it is not enough to say that political acts are also educative. It is necessary to truly assume the political nature of education. I cannot consider myself progressive if I understand school space to be something neutral, with limited or no relation to class struggle, in which students are seen only as learners of limited domains of knowledge which I will imbue with magic power. I cannot recognize the limits of the political-educative practice in which I am involved if I don't know, if I am not clear about in whose favor I work. Clarifying the question of in whose favor I practice, puts me in a certain position, which is related to class, in which I devise against whom I practice and, necessarily, for what reasons I practice—that is, the dream, the type of society on whose behalf I would like to intervene, act, and participate (1998, 31).

Education as a possible dream, a dream of liberation, is the lynchpin that articulates the research effort of this book. The utopian dream of liberation, in the best of the Freirean tradition, and the critique of banking education helps portray the landscapes of knowledge as described in the next section.

### Landscapes of Knowledge: Lessons Learned in this Work

The contributors to this volume are all concerned with education in the Arab region, yet due to the simple fact of the research group having been located in Egypt, the chapters are all based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in and on Egypt. Given Egypt's role in the Arab region

as a major exporter of educational expertise, teachers, texts, and political and social trends, it is an especially fitting country to profile. Individual authors had full autonomy in selecting their research topics and there was no systematic attempt to include a nationally representative sample of school cultures. Given the diverse interests of individual authors, a rich cross section of Egyptian society, from urban poor and slum communities (chapters 2–3), rural communities (chapter 5), to urban middle-class communities (chapters 1, 4, & 6) are represented.

For those employing the logic and modes of inquiry and engagement of critical ethnography for the first time, the method itself raises new awareness for “researcher” and “researched” alike. Referring to her open-ended interviews with teachers, Iman Farag notes:

It was apparent that none of them [the teachers] had ever been the subject of this kind of interest before, and if some of the material in this research paper hits the nail on the head, it is due to the novelty of the experience for the researched subjects and the researcher alike” (chapter 4).

For others, the method initially caused some difficulties and awkwardness. As Ahmed Youssof Saad experienced as an Egyptian “insider,” he could not initially perceive the research environment in a critical or analytical light (chapter 3). His familiarity with the environment and modes of interactions initially “dulled his observational capabilities.” Researchers were sometimes the objects of teacher suspicions and had difficulty justifying their presence in the schools and convincing school communities that they were not agents of the state (chapters 3–5). When conducting her research, Linda Herrera was chided by an intimidating school director who declared: “This is not research you’re doing. Who told you this research? What you’re doing has no value whatsoever. I advise you to stop wasting your time!” But we are joined in the conviction that Critical Ethnography is far from a waste of time. Rather, it is a necessary step in the arduous processes of social understanding and transformation. Despite expressing some initial and justifiable suspicions, most teachers were eager to participate, share their experiences, express their grievances, offer ideas, and generally have their voices heard and recorded in the hope that they could play a part in movements towards reform.

The authoritarian form of school governance came up in different ways in most all papers. The intersection between state authoritarianism

and banking education is self-evident in the Egyptian context. Consider, for instance the arguments advanced by Kamal Naguib who relates: “The elaborate hierarchies in the workplace and in schools are not designed to facilitate the management processes, but to reproduce symbols of authority and relations of control and submission” (chapter 2). Moreover, for those interested in efficiency of, and performance in the systems, the strictures of banking education make matters very difficult and change is straightjacketed by: “The inflexible static curricula, rigid examination practices, heavily bureaucratic school administration, and constant inspections, all [of which] reflect the authoritarianism of school governance” (chapter 2).

Among the daunting findings of these studies is that schools reflect the culture of the oppressed, not the civilization of the oppressed, as Brazilian scholar Jose Eustaquio Romão so eloquently defends in redefining Freire’s perspective (Romão 2003). A main argument, well-represented in the work of Ahmed Yousof Saad, is that schools breed the personality of the oppressed, “. . . bearing all the elements of the culture of oppression, sensing helplessness and insecurity in the face of the violence imposed by the master, policeman and landlord who use force, and by the bureaucrat who can get papers moving or stop them” (chapter 3). The culture of the oppressed is reflected in the ways schools are complicit in the reproduction of the despotic personality. Naguib cogently shows how despotism is reproduced in schools. He argues that:

The prevalent culture of despotism inside schools, as in the whole society more generally, is founded on the monopoly of the decision-making processes and the negation of difference and alternate points of reference. Relations . . . are based on dominance and submission. Clearly, the culture of despotism works at reproducing the despotic personality (chapter 2).

Further along these lines political scientist Ahmed Abdalla posits that “The problem in Egypt is not the ‘impossibility’ of constructing a democratic system, but rather the ‘difficulty’ of establishing it under the prevalent despotic values inherited from ancestor and forefathers. (n.d., 7).<sup>12</sup>

Paulo Freire’s insights on authoritarianism seem to concur with Abdalla’s views:

As one might expect, authoritarianism will at times cause children and students to adopt rebellious positions, defiant of any limit, disci-

pline, or authority. But it will also lead to apathy, excessive obedience, uncritical conformity, lack of resistance against authoritarian discourse, self-abnegation, and fear of freedom (Freire 1998b, 40).

Instead of experiencing schools as places where they can dream, express intellectual curiosity, form community, and prepare for the future, students often experience schools as places that thwart their creativity and suppress their desires. Schools tend to reproduce fear, not love or respect. Naguib quotes a school director who affirms, “this [young] age needs fear more than love. There is not sufficient time for all of that.”

A number of authors are especially disturbed by what they see as the rise of extremism in schools. As Saad elucidates, “A mature reading of the world has become a less likely possibility for those people who, in addition to poverty, sickness, and ignorance, are haunted by a ghost even more destructive of human consciousness; religious extremism” (chapter 3). We must be clear that by “religious extremism” the authors refer to an ideology that distorts religion to breed sectarianism and prejudice against the “other,” and a closing-up of society. We maintain that religion, whether Islam, Christianity, or any other religion, is not inherently extremist or progressive, it is what situated actors make it.

In recent decades, an important front of conflict, at least from the government’s perspective, has been the unofficial Islamization of schooling in Egypt. Educational Islamization should be understood partly as a political movement, but also as a long-standing dilemma in Egyptian education of how to simultaneously raise children in the proper Islamic way, while educating them in principles of secular nationalism and preparing them for employment in global markets determined in a moment of late capitalism. According to the research presented in this book, Egyptian parents are to a large—and growing extent—pious and conservative, and the moral education of their children is of paramount importance. But the government’s question is how to create the proper conditions for educating children in a pious, or Eastern/ Islamic model, while at the same time preventing fundamentalism?<sup>13</sup> This dilemma is documented in Linda Herrera’s first chapter on Islamic private schools, wherein she shows how Islamism can manifest in different ways: it can lead to politicization of school cultures, to more profit-driven schooling in which Islam becomes a commodity, and to youth-led movements towards either extremism or greater pluralism of practice and ideas (chapter 1).

Clearly, religious extremism represents just one aspect of an impoverished school and teacher culture. Apathy can be as detrimental to learning as extremism. Fadia Maugith documents cases of teachers and librarians who never read, who have no curiosity about the world, and who mechanically transmit to their students packed curricula in such a disinterested and unimaginative way that they cannot possibly instill a love of learning and joy of discovery in the young (chapter 5).

As in other countries, privatization of education has led to growing social inequality in Egypt. As Saad points out:

The slogan 'Education for all' . . . comes to mean equality of opportunity in climbing aboard the ship of education without necessarily implying the ability to stay aboard or to save one's place till the end of the voyage. With the rise of privatization of schooling, formal education has contributed to ever-widening social inequality (chapter 3).

By far the starkest manifestation of unchecked market relations in education are found in the phenomenally widespread practice of private lessons. Private lessons are so prevalent that the sum spent on them by Egyptian families, as Saad reports, "has almost become equivalent to the state budget for education (19 billion Egyptian pounds)." Farag links the phenomenon of private lessons to class struggle, which she sees as taking place in an unfettered education market. She astutely suggests:

Private lessons . . . may be considered a form of class struggle . . . which, like all struggles, contains non-ethical means and ends. This struggle has been left to the mechanisms of the market and has essentially led to a privatization of part of the education sector in the context of a society driven towards economic liberalism without a minimum level of social rights (chapter 4).

Perhaps Naguib offers the most unsettling critique of private lessons when he suggests that teachers "by pursuing the objective of giving private lessons, a practice that allows them to secure a livelihood, . . . sacrifice their mission as educators" (chapter 2).

The discourse on privatization, profit, and corruption of teachers needs to be placed in the context of the dynamics of globalization and the standard neoliberal recipes for educational reform. The analytical premises and strategies employed by the World Bank and the institutions associated with the Washington Consensus are based on supply-side economics (Torres 2002). The neoliberal agenda includes a drive towards privatization and decentralization of public forms of education, a movement

towards educational standards, a strong emphasis on testing, and a focus on accountability. With regard to accreditation and universalization, major efforts are underway throughout the world to reform academic programs through accreditation processes and various strategies that produce increased homogeneity across national boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

At a macro political-economic level, these chapters document some of the ways in which market trends and a growing “neoliberal mentality” have distorted a range of relations that take shape around schooling. Not only do we see the expansion of profit-driven schooling whereby students and parents become customers and teachers, exploitable workers, but the very vocation of teaching, so revered and put upon a pedestal, is in fact becoming increasingly based on business exchanges through private lessons. Farag explains:

The teaching profession has clearly been negatively affected by...market trends. Moreover, it seems that the ‘vocational’ dimension of the profession has been ‘against the current.’ For whether we view teaching with the criteria of competency (professional) or equity (social), it would seem that what is asked and expected of teachers is contrary to the wave of neoliberal tendencies (chapter 4).

The questions raised are by no means easy, for teachers repeatedly expressed that they do not earn enough salary to live a minimum dignified life. Teachers’ financial insecurity is exacerbated by the hierarchical and antidemocratic nature of the school machinery in which they are professionally located. The situation does not fare much better for school administrators who must work within rigid hierarchical structures and who lack any significant decision-making capacity. Despite some attempts by the Ministry of Education and NGOs to democratize at least certain aspects of schooling (chapter 6), teachers repeatedly pointed out that they were subject to increasingly anti-democratic regulations. They were also subject to constant recriminations and monitoring by an array of supervisors from the national, district, and local school levels (chapters 2–4). Educational inspectors and a range of follow-up evaluation committees hinder what little autonomous space teachers possess in the classroom. One teacher tells us, as reported by Farag, that “These inspectors are no more than disgusting creatures coming to find mistakes, not to look at reality, they waste time and generate paperwork” (chapter 4).

As a consequence of financial insecurity, lack of autonomy, and impoverished school cultures, it comes across clearly that for the most

part neither teachers nor administrators derive much satisfaction, let alone creative pleasure, from their work. Needless to say, this experience may not be idiosyncratic to Egypt but part of a larger universal educational experience.<sup>15</sup> Much of the research reported in the chapters in this book reflect both the culture of submission to bureaucratic authority, and the rebellion, disgust, or occasionally the indifference of students, parents, teachers, and administrators, to that authority. Even the most simple act could reveal the most complex social and psychological aspects involved in the tasks of teaching and learning in the life of the school.

This book offers interesting glimpses about the qualities of a good teacher within the restraints of the system. Whereas the seeming standard bureaucratic understanding of teaching is that of “a pedagogical enterprise that aims at transmitting the maximum amount of information to students” (chapter 2), or as someone who can “impart knowledge and maintain surveillance” (chapter 4), alternate understandings exist. A student expressed that, “A good teacher is kind to us, solves our problems, cares about us, and is humane” (chapter 3). Within such a diverse, struggling, and rich cultural landscape, we can find conscientious, creative, and committed teachers who manage to realize their ideals of what it means to be a teacher (chapters 4–6).

Through their journeys into critical ethnography the authors suggest that the struggle for a liberatory education is still a long haul in Egypt and the Arab region more generally. Iman Farag eloquently explains: “Education . . . is a powerful tool of political control, whether as a tool for dreams, or for liberation. To be precise, knowledge liberates while the institution controls: such is the structural problematic” (chapter 4). Yet as this book shows, school environments are places in which contradictions and confrontations may open up spaces for alternative constructions, new pedagogical initiatives, true learning, and eventually a renewed sense of utopia and hope.

### Forging Critical Communities

How can we move from interpreting and understanding difficult and sometimes bleak findings in research within an analytical and normative approach that emphasizes utopia and hope? Is cynicism the answer? Is stoicism the answer? Or worse yet, is skepticism the answer



leading (as it sometimes does as an illness of our contemporary culture), to nihilism? Let us reject all those portraits of the future, arguing that our conviction, for the need to develop a transformative social justice learning model, may offer a basis for hope. One of us has defined elsewhere, that transformative social justice learning, as a social, political, and pedagogical practice, will take place when people reach a deeper, richer, more textured and nuanced understanding of themselves and their world (Torres 2003).

Not in vain has Freire always advocated the simultaneous reading of the world and of the word. Based on a key assumption of critical theory—that all social relationships involve a relationship of domination, and that language constitutes identities—transformative social justice learning, from a symbolic perspective, is an attempt to recreate various theoretical contexts for the examination of rituals, myths, icons, totems, symbols, and taboos in education and society. It is an examination of the uneasy dialectic between agency and structure, setting forward a process of transformation. From a sociological perspective, transformative social justice learning entails an examination of systems, organizational processes, institutional dynamics, rules, mores, and regulations, including prevailing traditions and customs, that is to say, key structures which, by definition, reflect human interest. We hope that the essays contained in this book help the process of transformative social justice learning in Egypt and beyond, and that if there is at times a somber picture, we should not overlook the richness of the educational experience and the struggles taking place in those settings; there are also the immense qualities of imagination and cultural actions for freedom. They never let us, even when marginal or in a subordinate position, perish in the abyss of nihilism, stoicism, or skepticism.

## Notes for Introduction

1. Quality is often measured by various quantifiable inputs such as expenditure on schooling, class size, equipment, teacher education, and outputs based on exam scores. This dominant approach suffers from a serious conceptual problem in that it leaves out the learning process. As Joel Samoff and Bidema Carrol so cogently argue in reference to the World Bank, an institution that has been dominant in setting the terms of the debate in education policy circles, “inattention to the learning process becomes itself an obstacle to improving quality. Seeking broadly applicable patterns, commonly termed

'best practices,' is a further obstacle, since to be effective education must be continually modified to suit unique and local circumstances. . . . [T]he learning process remains a lower priority concern for the World Bank" (Samoff and Carrol 2003, 30).

2. For literature in Arabic on the need for a critical sociology of education in the Arab world see Hassan Al-Bialawi (1993).

3. The contributors to this volume were all members of the Culture and Education in Egypt Working (CEEWG) group of the Middle East Awards Program of the Population Council (MEAwards), West Asia and North Africa Office which was coordinated by Linda Herrera and funded by a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The CEEWG members consisted of Kamal Naguib, Ahmed Youssef Saad, Iman Farag, Fadia Maugith, Fatin Adly, Kamal Maugith, Salwa Gadou, Shebl Badran, Elham Abdel Hamid and Linda Herrera. Carlos Alberto Torres served as an advisor to the group from the earliest stage and traveled to Egypt in December 2003 on the occasion of the formal dissemination of the group's Arabic findings. Among the other participants in various meetings of the group were the late Fayez Saad of the Jesuit Cultural Centre in Alexandria, Hassan al-Bialawi of the Ministry of Education, Salah Subiah of the adult education unit at CARITAS, the late Ahmed Abdallah, political scientist and director of The al-Jeel Center, and Maha Abdelrahman, sociologist at the American University in Cairo.

4. In their review of a sample of master's theses from education faculties in Palestinian universities, Khalil Nakhleh and Nader Wahbeh of the Al-Qattan Center for Educational Research and Development (QCERD) in Ramallah, took issue with the prevalence of quantitative research. They found the overwhelming majority of studies not only quantitative in design, but detached from any significant education reform efforts, and "uninformative, rarely insightful, redundant, and uninquisitive" (Nakhleh and Wahbeh 2005, 14).

5. The recently deceased French philosopher and member of the French Socialist party, Paul Ricoeur, so aptly called this transformation of consciousness the "hermeneutic of suspicion" (1986).

6. For a discussion of the notions of legitimation in capitalism, see the classic text of Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (1975). For a discussion of compensatory legitimation in educational policy, see Raymond Allen Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Social Theory and Education. A Critique of Theories of Social and Cultural Reproduction* (1995).

7. Two examples of school ethnographies from the Arab region in English are Linda Herrera's, *Scenes of Schooling: Inside a Girls' School in Cairo* (1992), and Orit Ichilov and André Elias Mazawi's, *Between Church and State:*

*Life-History of a French Catholic School in Jaffa* (1996). A number of excellent anthropological studies have been published on aspects of educational culture and social change in the Arab region such as Dale F. Eickelman's *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* (1985), Hamed Ammar's *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village* (1954), and Gregory Starrett's *Putting Islam to Work* (1998) to name just a few. These works, while they deal with aspects of formal schooling, cannot be characterized particularly as school ethnographies.

8. The concept of *mufakir* in the Arab world resembles that of the *pensador* in the Latin American tradition, a notion that goes back to the nineteenth century and linked to debates and struggles to organize the new postcolonial societies and nations. As Carlos Alberto Torres has argued in a previous work, the *pensador* emerged in Latin America as a synthesizer of new models of social consciousness and eventually of a new common sense. They were partisan to the degree that they charted new territories trying to create new intellectual spaces, hence they could not claim neutrality of any kind, and they adopted an engaged reflexivity that took many of them to exile because "Governments fear the effect of their hortatory presence on the internal political process and the influence of their voice upon students and professor partisanships" (Torres 1994, 16).

9. Just to document this fact, the recent report in several U.S. newspapers of an ongoing campaign by conservative groups to train Congress staffers—many of whom work in Congress because they themselves wish to pursue a career of politics in the future—through workshops at lunch in which the word of God, as prescribed in the Bible, is interpreted as a commanding call of higher order to answer pressing political issues. There is no question that this project puts the notion of democratic representation at serious risk.

10. The concept of "diffusion" relates to how change penetrates from the locale of a particular setting to other aspects of society. As Zaalouk posits, "change is an organic, not a mechanical, process. It does not occur sequentially or as the result of an act of legislation. Nor does change occur at an equal pace in all parts of a system. . . . Normally once a movement has developed into a critical mass it will work its way to other parts of the system" (2004, 148).

11. Different versions of chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 of this book were published in the Arabic volume, *Qiyam! Julus! Thaqafat al-Ta'alim fi Misr* [Stand Up! Sit Down! Cultures of Education in Egypt, edited by Linda Herrera (2003)]. This volume is available by request to the Population Council's West Asia and North Africa office based in Cairo, Egypt.

12. The editors would like to offer a word of caution in the use of the concept despotism. Unlike the notion of "Oriental despotism" which has taken on an ahistoric and essentializing understanding, despotism as described in these

works, relates to real social and political-economic contexts—contexts that are mutable—and not to some innate civilizational trait. The words of political scientist and anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani forcefully cautions against “civilizational” discourse. He posits: “There is reason to be hugely skeptical of claims that describe civilizations discretely and identify civilization histories with particular geographies and polities. One has to distinguish between civilization and power” (2004, 32–33).

13. Religious extremist, or “fundamentalist” movements have been defined as being “infused with the spirit of religious bigotry and political authoritarianism” (Postman, 1994 147)—a definition, incidentally, that refers to Christian fundamentalism in the United States.

14. Two elements radically condition the formulation of public policy: privatization and the reduction of public spending. These two policies are highly compatible, and in fact, privatization can be considered an important strategy for achieving reductions in public spending. The privatization policies require additional explanation. These policies are crucial elements of the reforms oriented towards promoting markets and as such, they are an important policy tool of neoliberalism. On the one hand, the pressure of fiscal spending is reduced by the privatization of public sector enterprises. On the other, privatization is also a powerful instrument for depoliticizing the regulatory practices of the state in the area of public policy formation. That is, privatization plays a pivotal role in the neoconservative and neoliberal models because “purchase of service contracting is both an administrative mechanism for addressing the particular issues of the social legitimacy of the state involved in direct social services and an attempt to borrow from the managerial ethos of private enterprise and (entrepreneurial development), systems of cost-benefit analysis and management by objectives” (Culpitt 1992, 94).

Neoliberals and neoconservatives have argued that the state and the market are two social systems that are diametrically opposed and that both are considered as real options for providing specific services (Moran and Wright 1991). Why then does there appear to be a preference for the market over the state? Neoliberals and neoconservatives consider that markets are more versatile and efficient than the bureaucratic structures of the state for numerous reasons. Markets respond more rapidly to technological changes and social demand than the state. Markets are seen as more efficient and cost-effective than the public sector in the provision of services. Finally, market competition will produce more accountability for social investments than bureaucratic policies.

15. See, for example, research findings in six countries by Carlos Alberto Torres, Seewha Cho, Jerry Kachur, Aurora Loyo, Marcela Mollis, Akio Nagao and Julie Thompson, “Political Capital, Teachers’ Unions and the State. Value

Conflicts and Collaborative Strategies in Educational Reform in the United States, Canada, Japan, Korea, Mexico, and Argentina.” Los Angeles, UCLA, manuscript. This study has been supported by a grant from the Pacific Basin Research Center-Soka University, a grant from the Pacific Rim Center of the University of California, and a grant from the Spencer Foundation. Research currently being undertaken in fourteen countries, investigating the impacts of globalization on teachers’ and students’ lives and curriculum, offers some glimpses of dissatisfaction with school cultures that resemble our findings in Egypt (Carlos Alberto Torres with the collaboration of Liliana Olmos and Roberth Rhoads). *Globalization and Educational Reform: K-12 and Higher Education Reform in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, United States, Canada, Egypt, South Africa, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, China, Portugal, Italy and Spain*. Paper prepared for a conference at UCLA, August 4–9, 2003, mimeographed.

## References

- Abdalla, Ahmed. n.d. *Democratization in Egypt*. Institute for Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, Visiting Research Monographs.
- Al-Ahram Weekly*. 2004. To keep thought alive (by Fatemah Farag). March, Issue no. 681, 11–17.
- Al-Ahram Weekly*. 2005. University staff joins protests (by Gihan Shanine). 26 May–1 June, Issue no. 744.
- Al-Bialawi, Hassan. 1993. *Fi’Ilm Ijtima` al-Madrasa* [Of a Sociology of the School]. Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Qawmi lil-bahuth al-tarbawiyya wa al-ta`limiyya. [in Arabic].
- Ammar, Hamed. 1954. *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village: Silwa, Province of Aswan*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Apple, Michael W. 1982. *Education and Power*. Boston and London: Routledge.
- . 1986. *Teachers and Texts; A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education*. New York and London: Routledge.
- . 1993. *Official Knowledge. Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Culpitt, Ian. 1992. *Welfare and Citizenship. Beyond the Crisis of the Welfare State?* London, Newbury Park and New Delhi: Sage.

- Eickelman, Dale F. 1985. *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fergany, Nader. 2005. Freedom, Justice, and Good Governance in Arab Countries. *ISIM Review*, no. 16: 32–33.
- Freire, Paulo. 1994. in *Paulo Freire on Higher Education. A Dialogue at the National University of Mexico*. In Miguel Escobar, Alfredo L. Fernández, and Gilberto Guevara-Niebla with Paulo Freire. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 1998b. *Teachers as Cultural Workers*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- . 1998. *Politics and Education*. Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1975. *Legitimation Crisis*. Trans. by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon.
- Hammersley and Atkinson. 1995. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Herrera, Linda. 1992. Scenes of Schooling: Inside a Girls' School in Cairo. *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 15 (Monograph 1).
- . 2003. *Qiyam! Julus! Thaqafat al-Ta'alim fi Misr* [(Stand Up! Sit Down! Cultures of Education in Egypt)]. New York and Cairo: Population Council [(in Arabic)].
- . 2006. Higher Education in the Arab World. In *International Handbook of Higher Education*, ed. James J. F. Forest and Philip Altbach, 409–421. Springer.
- Human Rights Watch. 2005. Reading between the “Red Lines”: The Repression of Academic Freedom in Egyptian Universities. Vol. 17, no. 6.
- Ichilov, Orit, and André Mazawi. 1996. *Between Church and State: Life-History of a French-Catholic School in Jaffa*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Jordan, Steve. 2003. Critical Ethnography and the Sociology of Education. In *The International Handbook on the Sociology of Education. An International Assessment of New Research and Theory*, ed. Carlos Alberto Torres and Ari Antikainen. Lanham and Boulder: Rowman and Littlefields.
- Levinson, Bradley, and Dorothy Holland. 1996. The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: An Introduction. In *The Cultural Production of the*

- Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*, ed. Bradley Levinson, Douglas Foley, and Dorothy Holland, 1–54. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 2004. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Mazawi, André Elias. 2005. Contrasting Perspectives on Higher Education Governance in the Arab States. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, ed. J.C. Smart, Vol. XX, 133-189. London: Springer.
- Monsivais, Carlos. 1997. *Los rituales del caos*. Mexico: ERA.
- Moran, Michael, and Maurice Wright. 1991. *The Market and the State: Studies in Interdependence*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Morrow, Raymond Allen, and David D. Brown. 1994. *Critical Theory and Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage .
- Morrow, Raymond Allen and Carlos Alberto Torres. 1995. *Social Theory and Education. A Critique of Theories of Social and Cultural Reproduction*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Nakhlen Khalil, and Nader Wahbeh. 2005. Doing Research on Improving the Quality of Basic Education in Palestine. Paper submitted to the “Global Conference on Education Research in Developing Countries,” sponsored by Global Development Network. Held in Prague, Czech Republic, 31 March–2 April.
- Postman, Neil. 1994. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1986. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. Ed. George H. Taylor. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Romão, Jose Eustáquio. Forthcoming. Pedagogia Sociológica ou Sociologia Pedagógica. Paulo Freire e a Sociologia da Educação. In *Educação Crítica and Utopia. Perspectivas Emergentes Para o Século XXI*, ed. António Teodoro and Carlos Alberto Torres. Porto: Afruntamento.
- Samoff, Joel, and Bidemi Carrol. 2003. From Manpower Planning to the Knowledge Era: World Bank Policies on Higher Education in Africa. *Prepared for the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge*, 15 July.
- Scott, Joan W. 1992. Multiculturalism and the politics of identity. *October* 61, (Summer): 12–19.

- Starrett, Gregory. 1998. *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Torres, Carlos Alberto. 1994. Introduction. In *Paulo Freire on Higher Education: A Dialogue at the National University of Mexico*, ed. Miguel Escobar, Alfredo L. Fernández, and Gilberto Buevara-Niebla with Paulo Friere. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 1999. Critical Theory and Political Sociology of Education: Arguments. In *Critical Theory in Educational Discourse*, ed. T. J. Popkewitz and L. Fendler. New York: Routledge.
- . 2002. Expert Knowledge, External Assistance and Educational Reform in the Age of Neoliberalism: A Focus on the World Bank and the Question of Moral Responsibilities in Third World Educational Reform. Paper prepared for the meeting “Extending the Boundaries of Democracy: Two Decades of Education Reform and Inclusion Policies.” December 9<sup>th</sup>—December 13<sup>th</sup> 2002, Bellagio, Italy.
- . 2003. Paulo Freire, Education and Transformative Social Justice Learning. Paper prepared for the Fifth International Conference on Transformative Learning. Teachers College, Columbia University. New York, October 20–22.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP). 2002. *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*. New York: United Nations Publications.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP). 2003. *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*. New York: United Nations Publications.
- Wagner, Daniel A. 1993. *Literacy, Culture, and Development: Becoming Literate in Morocco*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wahbeh, Nader Atallah. 2003. Teaching and learning science in Palestine: Dealing with the New Palestinian Science Curriculum. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* 8 (1): 135–159.
- Warschauer, Mark. 2004. The rhetoric and reality of aid: Promoting educational technology in Egypt. *Globalization, Societies, and Education* (2)3, 377–390.
- Zaalouk, Malak. (2004) *The Pedagogy of Empowerment: Community Schools as a Social Movement in Egypt*. Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press.