Authoritarianism, education and the limits of political socialisation in Egypt

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Abstract

President al-Sisi has declared 2019 to be the 'Year of Education', whereby a National Project is to be launched to reform the education system. These proposed reforms are crucial, yet the politics driving them and their implications for al-Sisi's regime remain unclear. Discussions surrounding how education is political and can help protect authoritarian regimes have largely been understated in the existing literature. This paper's objective is to encourage a critical outlook through utilising a Gramscian approach that considers education to be a politically contested domain. This approach views education as a hegemonic apparatus capable of developing consent through politically socialising the populace into accepting certain knowledge, attitudes and behaviour conducive to the regimes in power. By analysing the education system under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, I illustrate the extent to which education has been politicised through its attempts to serve and legitimise their regimes and objectives, and outline the challenges that hindered their abilities to protect their hegemony and assume complete control over education. Questioning the political, economic and socio-cultural basis on which the Egyptian education system is premised can enable us to avoid reproducing its existing problems, and importantly, reconsider the relationship between politics and education under al-Sisi's Egypt.

Keywords

Authoritarianism, Egypt, political socialisation, politics of education, Gramsci, hegemony

Introduction

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has recently declared 2019 to be the Year of Education. This declaration was made during the Sixth National Youth congress which

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took place in July 2018, thereby launching the National Project for the Development of the New Education System. This new education system, al-Sisi argued, would 'work to develop [the Egyptian character] to keep up with our times', where such educational reform would entail a 'harsh, long trip that requires sacrifice from students, teachers and parents' (Akkawi, 2018). As it stands, Egypt ranks 133rd globally in terms of the quality of primary education (World Economic Forum, 2017), where 50% of students are functionally illiterate after five years of schooling (Curnow, 2018).

Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that issues surrounding educational reform have come to the fore. The proposed reforms presented in the National Project aim to: end rote memorisation by introducing an interdisciplinary curriculum that focuses on developing critical thinking skills; change secondary education assessment systems through introducing a GPA system that is not fully weighted to final exams; introduce electronic learning platforms and train 500,000 teachers (El Habachi, 2018). The new curriculum's content will be derived from the likes of *Pearson*, *Britannica* and *Discovery Education*, in addition to parts of the American curriculum itself (El Tawil, 2018). These reforms will be part-funded by the World Bank at a total cost of $2 billion (World Bank, 2018).

Undoubtedly, these appear to be crucial reforms that the Egyptian education system is in dire need of, yet the politics driving these reforms is unclear. Education is political and is capable of playing various political roles within society where politics and power are intimately entwined (Apple, 1995). These roles include, for example, socialising people into particular ideologies and beliefs, reproducing existing economic and social inequalities, maintaining regime legitimacy, as well as disseminating certain knowledge, attitudes and behaviour that are conducive to maintaining the status quo. This paper's key objective is to encourage a more critical outlook regarding debates surrounding education and its reform in Egypt. To do so, I utilise a Gramscian approach that considers education to be a politically contested domain, or rather, a site of hegemonic contestation.

It is important to note that the development of formal education in Egypt has passed through a number of political regimes (I specifically focus on Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak), each leading to significant changes and objectives, including attempts to politically socialise Egyptians through the pedagogical approaches adopted, the content of the textbooks developed, as well as the behaviour and attitudes encouraged within the classrooms. Political socialisation here entails a process where people learn the ways of a given society and how to function within it (Brennan, 1981: 13) potentially resulting in an 'unquestioning acceptance of the norms, attitudes and behaviour accepted by the ongoing political system' (Entwistle, 1971: 14). Or, in Gramscian terms, develop consent in order to protect the status quo and legitimise the regime in power.

By attempting to claim education's neutrality, the different regimes I consider have only made education a political affair that has been, and still is, continuously contested. By questioning the legitimacy of the prevailing orthodoxy and the political, economic and socio-cultural basis on which the Egyptian education system is arguably premised, we can avoid falling into a trap with regard to the latest proposals that attempt to depoliticise education and separate the technical/instrumental questions from the political ones. It is through taking into account such critical questions about any educational process that people can become truly capable of transforming education (Apple, 2015; Mayo, 1999), as well as envisioning alternatives.

This paper firstly starts by providing a brief overview of the state of education in Egypt through outlining its weaknesses as well as the existing scholarship's limitations.

Secondly, I develop the Gramscian approach that will be utilised to analyse the political roles played by the education system, followed by an in-depth discussion of how this has materialised under the regimes of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. Finally, I draw tentative conclusions regarding the educational reforms proposed by al-Sisi's regime and the potentiality of thinking about alternatives to the existing system.

Failure to provide the basics

Egyptian education has attracted scholarly interest that has focused on its establishment, administration, its weaknesses and the efforts exerted to reform it (Browne, 2012; Cochran, 2012, 2008; Herrera and Torres, 2006; Hyde, 1978; Loveluck, 2012). As established earlier, Egyptian education has been in a state of disrepair with it receiving a meagre 4% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in investments (Curnow, 2018). This is not enough to cover basic expenses and salaries, which means that teachers end up suffering from low salaries and poor living conditions (Naguib, 2006). As a result, teachers have to increasingly rely on providing private tutoring services to supplement their low incomes, whereby an estimated 1.6% of Egypt's GDP is spent by households to fund private tutoring (Curnow, 2018; Ille, 2015). This serves to expand a parallel education system that hampers household incomes and maintains inequalities (Tadros, 2006). Other detrimental issues include: the excessive use of corporal punishment to discipline students (Naguib, 2006; Saad, 2006), unqualified teachers relying on outdated and rigid teaching methods (Johnson et al., 2000) and the failure to fulfil basic infrastructural requirements, such as well-constructed school buildings (Herrera, 2003).

However, discussions surrounding how education is political and how educational institutions could play various political roles (in supporting and resisting regimes) have largely been neglected in the literature on Egypt. Discussions focusing on the links between education and power have mostly been separate from research conducted on the Global South (Herrera and Torres, 2006; Morrow and Torres, 1995). This is magnified when considering the Middle East and Egypt, where Mazawi (1999: 332) maintains that research on education tends to be preoccupied with the 'systemic and formal processes of educational provision and expansion', with less effort exerted in understanding how the expansion of public schools could help mediate conflicts, contestations and power struggles. Furthermore, Mazawi criticises the weak efforts undertaken by researchers in terms of theoretical elaboration and conceptual refinement. He argues that this weakness 'marginalises the importance of exploring dissent and conflict as useful conceptual tools in the broader study of education in the specific context of the Arab state' (Mazawi, 1999: 332).

As a result, Arab researchers have de facto contributed to the preservation of the 'illusory status of an impotent, state-controlled school system', overemphasising the elite's power and neglecting resistance-related processes and their effects on policies and outcomes (Mazawi, 1999: 351–352). It is therefore pertinent to view education as a contested domain through which disagreements could arise, and where knowledge and power are intimately linked (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2012). Additionally, conducting a critical analysis of education aims to expose the methods used to represent certain phenomena as natural and neutral. Such phenomena could be viewed as constructed with the aim of serving specific interests and objectives (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2012: 33). This analysis can be conducted through employing a Gramscian approach which considers hegemony and education to be intertwined.

Hegemony as an educational relationship

A Gramscian approach encourages a nuanced understanding of how education can play various roles in developing and reproducing a ruling regime's power. The state, for Gramsci, is not solely an administrative and coercive apparatus, but importantly, an educative one as well (Hall, 1996). His concept of hegemony entails a combination of both coercion and consent, where the prevalence of the state is maintained through coercion, and preserved through developing a populace's consent (Gramsci, 1971: 12–13). In other words, hegemony is viewed as

> the predominance obtained by consent rather than force of one class or group over other classes; and it is attained through the myriad ways in which the institutions of civil society operate to shape, directly or indirectly, the cognitive and affective structures. (Femia, 1975: 31)

Gramsci believed that every relationship of hegemony is an educational relationship (Gramsci, 1971: 350) where discussions of hegemony have to consider the role played by education in its formation (Morrow and Torres, 1995). Gramsci viewed schools as 'privileged instruments of socialisation' for the hegemonic culture and the ruling elite (Gramsci, 1971: 254). Furthermore, he did not consider education to be politically neutral, but instead, he regarded schools as being a key apparatus that reinforces people's subordinate positions within society and that helps secure consent for the ruling elite (Butko, 2004; Mayo, 1999; Reed, 2013). Political socialisation, therefore, can end up legitimising and protecting regimes by encouraging the unquestioning acceptance of the norms, attitudes and behaviour required under the existing political system (Entwistle, 1971). Nonetheless, a Gramscian understanding also entails that hegemony can never be complete, but is always challenged, especially in education as I argue throughout.

The remaining sections will analyse how Egyptian education has attempted to legitimise the regimes in power, demonstrating how it is, and always has been, political despite efforts claiming its neutrality. To reiterate, just as schools play a key role in manufacturing consent for Gramsci, they also offer spaces, whereby these efforts are always mediated and contested. I particularly focus on education under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak since it was under those regimes that the education system became visibly politicised.

Formal education under Nasser

El-Koussy (quoted in Hyde, 1978: xix) argued that 'great political movements are usually accompanied by radical educational changes that help solidify and support the new regime'. Such was the case under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956–1970), where education not only served to modernise and industrialise Egypt, but importantly, played an influential role in supporting and legitimising the Free Officers' coup d'état of 1952. By focusing on Nasser's regime, I highlight how the interlinkages between politics and education were apparent, where education (both schooling and higher education) played multiple regime-supportive and socialising roles to develop consent and safeguard Nasser's regime (Starrett, 1998; Warschauer, 2003).

Badran (2008) argues that education constituted an important component of Nasser's political discourse which represented the interests of the middle and lower middle classes (where the majority of the Free Officers hailed from). This is unsurprising given how prior to

the coup, Egypt was suffering from extreme poverty, social inequalities, a traditional peripheral economy and a 75% illiteracy rate (Hyde, 1978). The expansion and reformation of the education system therefore became one of the 'revolutionary' regime's urgent objectives (Cochran, 2008). As a result, education under Nasser was expanded and made free for Egyptians in 1962, where it was also centralised making state supervision become more visible and stringent (Moursi, 1974). Furthermore, foreign schools were nationalised, girls were offered more opportunities to enrol, and secondary education was reorganised to emphasise technical education as a core requirement of Egypt's efforts to industrialise (Abdalla, 2007).

This expansion provided opportunities for social mobility, poverty alleviation and access to higher education. Although education was made free for Egyptians, it still ended up serving a limited number of people who could afford private tuition (Abdalla, 2007), thus helping maintain the existing social and economic disparities that the regime was posed to eradicate (Badran, 2008). Furthermore, since success was solely measured through exams, the education system encouraged a culture of memorisation which offered students no opportunities to discuss, debate or ask questions (Szyliowicz, 1973). This preoccupation with exam success consequently encouraged the upsurge of the 'official textbook' phenomenon, whereby textbooks developed by the government were to be faithfully followed, memorised and never questioned (Abdalla, 2007: 206; Badran, 2008). This, I argue later, has had many implications on the education system especially under Mubarak.

Egypt's educational policies underwent three stages under Nasser (Badran, 2008). The first took place between 1952 and 1956, which witnessed the Egyptian state assume control over the educational apparatus, including al-Azhar (Egypt's oldest university and a pinnacle of Sunni Islamic education). The main objective at that stage was to spread the regime's ideas and philosophy to obtain the support of middle and lower middle classes as indicated above. The second stage took place between 1957 and 1961, where Egypt's economic development and industrialisation were prevalent and emphasised in the education system. Finally, between 1962 and 1967, during Egypt's 'Period of Socialist Transformation', the educational policy took a more political turn by promoting the role of Nasser's regime in developing and protecting the nation. It was during that period that education, especially higher education, became a central component of the state (Najjar, 1976).

In order to understand education under Nasser more politically, three issues are highlighted: its emphasis on scientific and technical education, Nasser's ideology featuring prominently in the curriculum and education safeguarding Nasser's regime. Since one of the regime's main objectives was to modernise and industrialise Egypt, technical and scientific education was consequently given more attention over the humanities (Awad, 1974). This distinction, Awad (1963: 40–41) argued was 'oppressing the minds of Egyptians' since students were forced to study engineering, medicine or chemistry as opposed to other subjects in the humanities. He further contends that:

> Today's youth are being fortified against history ... Why? Because history books in our schools are no longer concerned with history, but are purely political books ... this is how Egyptian youth have lost their sense of history, and those who lose their sense of history also lose their sense of politics. (Quoted in Abdalla, 2007: 209)

What is interesting about this separation is that Gramsci himself criticised the denial of humanistic education since he encouraged an educational system that was open to everyone,

whereby students were allowed to 'acquire those general features that serve to develop character . . . a school that does not force the child's will, his intelligence and growing awareness to run along the tracks to a pre-determined station' (Gramsci, 1978: 26). It is through separating the humanities from technical and scientific education, and encouraging one over the other, that the development of critical thinking and political consciousness becomes discouraged (Entwistle, 1979: 93).

In addition to the issues arising from this distinction, curricular reforms under Nasser have overwhelmingly reflected his philosophy and the importance of Egypt's military leadership (Cochran, 1986: 43). This was noticeable in the history curriculum, where Egypt's history prior to 1952 was largely either ignored or criticised (Abdalla, 2007: 210). The extent of education's politicisation under Nasser was commented upon by Faksh (1980: 51) who argued that:

> Under the revolutionary regime the essential socialisation role played by the existing educational system in Egypt supports this pattern of passive, non-participatory political life among the educated Egyptians. In general, educational practice still emphasises the authority of the teacher, memorisation, formal curricula, strict conformity, discipline and routine . . . strong efforts are directed towards developing a strong loyalty to the regime.

Education under Nasser was thus unique in that, although it attempted to provide Egyptians with the necessary skills to take part in political life (Aly, 1986: 259–260; Hyde, 1978), Egypt's political life was itself repressed (Ayubi, 1995; Gerges, 2018). Teaching Egyptians about politics became a socialisation process that took the form of 'advanced ideological indoctrination' (Faksh, 1980: 52). Nasser's regime crucially aimed to politically and administratively control education, particularly universities, to safeguard the regime (Abdalla, 2007; Najjar, 1976). Although Egypt had a rich history of student activism since the early 20th century that continued through to the early 1950s (Abdalla, 2007: 83–110), it suffered under Nasser's crackdowns in 1954 (Gerges, 2018). This implied that universities became represented by students who supported the regime's political and social reforms, whereas those who failed to accommodate to the new regime withdrew from politics altogether (Abdalla, 2007: 218).

Nonetheless, Nasser's efforts to assume almost complete hegemonic control over the Egyptian public sphere, and especially education, failed in many respects. Despite being expanded and relatively improved, education still failed to meet the aspirations of many Egyptians and contributed to the emergence of ailments that still affect Egyptian education to this day. Furthermore, Nasser, especially during his 'Period of Socialist Transformation', faced opposition arising from ideological and socio-economic differences between his officials, and university professors and administrators (Najjar, 1976). His regime's attempts to involve universities in Egypt's efforts to economically develop and achieve social change generated acute political crisis:

> In developing countries, the military elite seem to be the driving force behind modernisation. Their style, however, does not appeal to a large segment among the intellectuals who come from the traditional elite and, therefore, entertain a different conception of the question of social change. The university in Egypt has been caught up in this dilemma. While we may question the motives of the academicians in opposing government regulations, we have to concede their

> fundamental argument that once the university becomes an arm of the government, this can only result in a tragic diminution of its special functions. (Najjar, 1976: 87)

In Gramscian terms, Nasser was not able to obtain the consent and approval of a large segment of Egyptians, particularly intellectuals and students opposed to his rule hence severing his hegemony. This was further exacerbated by Egypt's defeat in the Six Day War in 1967, whereby one consequence was the student uprisings of 1968 which called for democracy and the prosecution of those responsible for the defeat (Abdalla, 2007). In short, despite all the efforts to influence the education system, Nasser failed to achieve absolute control, or have his ideology imposed without contestation. Two final points need to be outlined regarding education under Nasser.

First, formal education played a number of roles that ranged from aiding his regime's quest for modernisation and industrialisation, to helping maintain his regime's legitimacy by attempting to socialise Egyptians into its philosophy and objectives. This role was evident in how the curriculum was rewritten and how the education system was organised. Importantly, it was under Nasser that education's tight relations to the security apparatus were established, a legacy that continues to this day. Education aimed to provide Egyptians with the political skills necessary to function under an already restricted political life. To survive under these conditions, Egyptians had to consent to the existing political system, as opposed to developing critical thinking skills, or even envision alternatives to such a system.

Second, education comprised an important component of Nasser's social contract with Egyptians where their political rights were exchanged for socio-economic rights (Ayubi, 1995: 410). This contract was successful to a certain degree during Nasser's early attempts at consolidating his power. However, and as abovementioned, this contract did not suffice to enable Nasser obtain absolute control over Egyptian society and education. The next section focuses on Sadat and education's role in serving his plans for economic liberalisation, as well as safeguarding his regime from left-wing and Islamist opposition through disseminating the 'correct' version of Islam.

Formal education under Sadat

After Nasser's death in 1970, his Vice President and fellow Free Officer Anwar Sadat (1970–1981) came into power, inheriting Egypt with a set of political and economic challenges including the occupation of the Sinai Peninsula after the Six Day War. As a result, Sadat wanted Egypt to undergo a 'corrective revolution' to regain Sinai, achieve economic development and overcome Nasser's legacy. This was to be proven a thankless task given how Sadat faced opposition ranging from Nasserists who wanted to maintain their control over the bureaucratic apparatus and the economy, to the Left as well as segments of the Islamists (Ayubi, 1995). The education system constituted a vital part of these power struggles, as well as an apparatus that reflected, to a certain extent, the political, economic and socio-cultural transformations taking place under Sadat.

A central transformation was to take place economically through the Open Door Policy, or *infitah*, introduced in 1974. This policy aimed to liberalise the Egyptian economy and connect it to the globalising capitalist system. Although Sadat's plans for economic liberalisation were never implemented properly (Ayubi, 1995; Kienle, 2001), its effects witnessed in the education system were undeniable. Gramsci's insights are pertinent here, since he

maintained that any economic system created terrains that were more favourable to the dissemination of certain ways of thinking, posing and resolving questions (Gramsci, 1971: 184). This was noticeable in the education system under Sadat which aimed to represent his liberalisation ideology. Students were not only required to develop the skills necessary to take part in a globalising capitalist economy but to also provide support for the regime's objectives which differed significantly from Nasser's. This implied that Sadat faced numerous challenges in obtaining consent for his regime and its reforms as I discuss later.

Badran (2008: 238–243) analysed how Sadat's economic and political reforms were reflected in the education system. In his review of Salem's (1983) study on school textbooks, it was found that the curriculum had begun to emphasise Egyptian nationalism, as opposed to Arab patriotism (pan-Arabism was influential under Nasser). Moreover, authority, as defined in the textbooks, mostly alluded to governmental authority and power as opposed to citizen power. The responsibilities of the government towards its citizens were also emphasised alongside the citizens' own responsibilities towards *protecting* the existing political system.

Abdel Mo'ti (1984) argued that the social studies curriculum 'glorified the dominant political discourse, the role of the leader, and the importance of the ruling classes' (quoted in Badran, 2008: 242–243). Furthermore, the textbooks emphasised patriarchy, the importance of Sadat's *infitah* policy, as well as the notions of social peace and harmony (Aly, 1986; Cochran, 1986, 2008). One could therefore argue that the education system still performed socialising functions under Sadat such as encouraging patriotism, glorifying the ruling regime and attempting to disseminate its ideology and objectives.

Importantly, education played a key politico-religious role where it aimed to disseminate the 'correct' definition of Islam within schools in order to challenge the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Starrett (1998) argues that Islam was 'functionalised' to service Sadat's regime. Functionalisation concerns the utilisation of an Islamic discourse to serve the ruling regime's strategic and utilitarian needs, or in other words, to use Islam as a signifier of the regime's legitimacy (Starrett, 1998: 9). This served Sadat personally by depicting him as a pious leader, and politically by counter-weighing the Islamic Fundamentalists.

Despite the regime's efforts to reform education, it still failed many Egyptians. Sadat had inherited Egypt with numerous educational challenges that were further exacerbated when foreign and private schools were allowed to legally function. This aggravated social inequalities between those who could afford private (and arguably better) education, and those who had to rely on the government's education (Badran, 2008; Cochran, 2008). Moreover, Sadat's efforts to functionalise and maintain control over education were contested through the growing activism found within the student and labour movements which culminated in the student uprisings of 1972 (Abdalla, 2007: 319–362), and the 'Bread Riots' of 1977. Ominously, the Islamic fundamentalists, that Sadat aimed to defeat (through the functionalisation of education amongst other more coercive methods) and appease throughout his career, assassinated him in 1981.

A significant outcome of Sadat's time as Egypt's president is the relative erosion of the social contract developed under Nasser. Sadat's *infitah* and flirtations with neoliberalism encouraged the state to start withdrawing from providing basic services previously guaranteed such as health care and education. In short, the state started becoming incapable of providing its services efficiently and effectively, thereby adversely affecting many Egyptians by compounding poverty and unemployment rates, as well as economic and educational inequalities (Amin, 2011; Badran, 2008; Farah, 2009). In turn, this had implications in terms of education's abilities to: politically socialise students, to provide them

with the skills and knowledge required to participate in the labour market and political life and to protect Sadat's regime. From a Gramscian perspective, this gradual dismantling of the social contract developed under Nasser arguably weakened Sadat's hegemony, whereby even the education system itself could not fulfil its responsibilities towards either Egyptians or Sadat. As I will argue later, this erosion continued under Mubarak contributing to his downfall in 2011.

Formal education under Mubarak

Although Nasser and Sadat had their own visions regarding Egypt, Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), on the other hand, did not have a 'grand vision' of his own as he was content with following the same path undertaken by Sadat (Amin, 2011: 16). Nonetheless, Mubarak did display an interest in reforming education early in his tenure, as he consistently called for an education system that could develop creative and ethical students capable of taking part in Egypt's social, economic and political life (Browne, 2012; Lippman, 1989). Mubarak's efforts to reform education were commended by the World Bank who considered Egypt to have shown the most commitment to improving its education compared to other developing countries (World Bank, 2002). According to Badran (2008), this was not surprising given how these reforms were developed in concurrence with the recommendations issued by the World Bank itself.

Regarding the political role played by education, Browne (2012) and Spring (2006) considered Egypt to be an educational security state where its economic interests and military needs were prioritised, and strict controls over education were in place. This was indeed the case under Mubarak as education under his regime was considered to be an 'issue of national security' (Bahaa Eddin, 1997: 84). Darraj (1992) argues that attempting to strictly control curricula, textbooks, teachers and students, ends up discouraging independent and critical thinking as well as inculcating principles of submission and political passivity. Furthermore, requiring students to memorise, submit to authority and become uncritically obedient was labelled by Sharabi (1999) as acts of educational terrorism. Under Mubarak, attempts to inculcate such principles of submission and political passivity were not always the result of deliberate efforts initiated by the state, but also occurred indirectly as a result of how the education system itself was organised.

Taking the governmental school structure as an example, we find that it is organised based on hierarchical structures that inhibit possibilities of teaching people how to participate or take part in managing and improving the education system. Naguib (2006) argues that most schools in Egypt are organised based on pyramidal and authoritarian hierarchies which tend to reproduce symbols of authority and relations of control and submission. These hierarchical structures are divided into smaller and larger pyramids emphasising the relationship between the upper echelons (Ministry of Education, regional and local administrations) and the lower echelons (school principals, teachers and students). These relationships tend to be top-down, based on coercion, suppression and at times, violence (Naguib, 2006: 60). This arguably tends to reproduce the logic of authoritarianism existing within Egyptian socio-political life, whereby classrooms become mirrors of the dominant authoritarian relations (Maugith, 2006). However, as I argue later, such relations and reflections are never straightforward, but are always contested.

As mentioned at the start of the paper, one of the proposed reforms' objectives is to eliminate rote-learning and memorisation. This is a major pedagogical limitation; however,

it also contains political implications, as Spring (2006: 162) argues that such forms of education could lead to 'an authoritarian style of learning' which encourages the development of politically passive students. Notwithstanding the above structural and pedagogical weaknesses widespread under Mubarak, the state's control over textbooks and its preoccupation with authoring and distributing official textbooks (a legacy of Nasser's) constitutes in itself an excellent illustration of the politicisation of education.

Saad (2006) argues that textbooks tend to not be criticised but considered as comprising the absolute truth. In other words, textbooks are standardised to 'have the universal effect of flattening controversy and rigidifying current understandings of open questions as indisputable facts' (Starrett, 1998: 128). Moreover, textbooks, particularly of subjects such as national and citizenship studies, history, human rights and even Arabic, are the first line of reference for developing students' political and citizenship skills (Baraka, 2008). These textbooks aim to provide the 'acceptable' knowledge about the political system and how to function within it (Browne, 2012), and, as has been the case since Nasser: to build students' sense of nationalism and patriotism in order to ultimately develop loyal citizens capable of 'accepting their duties of respect, obedience to authority and the social values of society' (Aly, 1986: 361).

In a recent study, Sobhy (2015) argues that educational discourses under Mubarak tended to utilise Islamic frames of reference (a legacy of Sadat's) as well as global discourses of active entrepreneurial citizenship, to legitimise the neoliberal reforms undertaken under Mubarak and to mask the failure of the state's institutions in providing basic services. (I outline the implications of such neoliberal reforms below.) The textbooks reflected a 'global trend in terms of the construction of an ideal neoliberal citizen' who was not entitled to economic and social rights from the state (Sobhy, 2015: 807). In her review of secondary education national studies and Arabic textbooks, Sobhy (2015) maintains that the textbooks 'delineated the acceptable parameters of citizen rights', whereby protest, as a mode of political expression, was eliminated from historical discussions (813–814).

Additionally, the role played by both Islam and Mubarak's regime in supporting democracy was emphasised within the textbooks, where sacrifice, piety, charity and entrepreneurship were all considered desirable skills, thus neglecting the significance of social, economic and political rights. Most importantly, history textbooks tended to present a 'simplistic and narrow vision of human history' where difference, hierarchy, division and struggles were meticulously depoliticised (Sobhy, 2015: 816). This is supported by Attalah and Makar (2014) who argue that history and national studies textbooks tend to homogenise Egyptians by downplaying their differences, struggles and resistances, thereby developing a dichotomy between what such subjects and their textbooks advocate, and what the students actually witness and practice in their everyday experiences (Faour, 2013).

It is important to highlight a number of key issues in terms of education under Mubarak, and the period immediately following his downfall. The first, in spite of incessant claims about education's neutrality, it was politicised in such a way that it had various political implications as was arguably the case under Nasser and Sadat. Regarding this tendency to view education as being neutral, Brennan (1981: 73) argues:

> Whenever someone utters the plea that this or that issue 'should be taken out of politics'... what he or she really means is that no action should be taken which is prejudicial to his or her own highly political point of view. 'Keeping politics out of school' in reality expresses the conviction

that the existing situation, in which the 'hidden curriculum' encourages either passive acceptance of the status quo or regrettable withdrawal strategies, should be maintained.

Claims of education's neutrality should be expected to continue in discussions surrounding the proposed reforms under al-Sisi. As Ghoneim (2005) argues, the Egyptian state has been constantly engaged in efforts to *systematically depoliticise* the public sphere and education in order to maintain its power and protect the status quo. This was surely the case when al-Sisi assumed power in 2014. For example, at the start of the 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 academic years, the media, instead of reporting on the academic and administrative preparations of schools and universities, focused on the security-related preparations undertaken to ban any political activity or discussions in educational institutions across Egypt (Abo-Elenin, 2014; Elwan, 2014).

In an interview, the former Minister of Education, Mahmoud Abu el-Nasr, asserted that there was 'no democracy without education, and there is no politics in education. As a good role model, I am banning any discussions about politics. Politics should not be involved in education' (Zaytoun, 2013). His assertions are not only contradictory, but also convey the underlying efforts of the state and the Ministry of Education to vacate education of its progressive potentialities. This tendency can already be witnessed in how discussions surrounding the proposed education reforms lack any meaningful discussions about their perceived outcomes, their effects on the persistence of inequalities, the conditions of teachers, the 'acceptable' content to be taught, the consequences resulting from the World Bank funding the reforms, and crucially, how these reforms will service al-Sisi's regime *politically*.

The second issue is how the curriculum and its textbooks' official representations of nationalism, patriotism and the ideal citizen were not straightforwardly adopted by students or teachers; instead, they were contested and challenged as succinctly argued by Sobhy (2012). This was exacerbated by Mubarak's increasingly fractured hegemony resulting from the rise of an elite business class (representing a capitalist oligarchy) that failed to develop a social alliance with either members of the existing ruling regime, or more importantly, with the rest of Egyptian society (Roccu, 2013). Developing a strong social alliance becomes a prerequisite for carrying out reforms that will have long-ranging and adverse effects on society (Soliman, 2011). However, Mubarak and this new class of business elite, affiliated with his son Gamal, were not successful in establishing such an alliance, or even in obtaining consent, which ultimately weakened their hegemony. As Roccu (2013: 90) argues:

> As it created deeper divisions with the ruling bloc, the translation of neoliberalism into a practical political project also failed to win much support in most of Egyptian society...if the Nasserist hegemony was limited to begin with, and had been gradually dismantled by both Sadat and Mubarak, the version of neoliberalism proposed by the capitalist oligarchy had clearly failed in providing the discursive and practical basis for hegemony on the national scale.

Relating this back to education, Mubarak's regime's discourse on neoliberal citizenship, as widely represented in the curriculum, arguably became its 'most delegitimising element... which could not obscure the deficit of legal, social, economic and political citizenship rights' (Sobhy, 2015: 819). To summarise, the neoliberal reforms introduced under Sadat and intensified under Mubarak not only inhibited the state's abilities to fulfil its basic welfare responsibilities, but it also contributed to the weakening of Mubarak's hegemony culminating in his regime having to increasingly rely on force, as opposed to maintaining consent, to

protect its power which eventually led to his fall in 2011 (Ayubi, 1995; Roccu, 2013; Soliman, 2011).

   This implied that the education system, was not only unable to perform its political socialisation roles effectively, but it also failed in achieving its basic objectives of developing a politically conscious populace having the required skills and knowledge to contribute to Egyptian society politically, economically, culturally and socially. Consequently, we should not assume that any educational reform and attempts at political socialisation will always be accepted and implemented straightforwardly. As witnessed under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, the education system was politicised and aimed to serve their regimes in various ways to variable degrees of success. Nonetheless, it was, alongside other aspects of their regimes, continuously contested and challenged further outlining how education must be considered as a terrain of hegemonic contestation.

Conclusion

The Egyptian education system is in crucial need to be reformed. The 'National Project' proposed under President al-Sisi offers a potential opportunity to transform education; however, the politics surrounding these reforms remains unclear, thereby risking reproducing the same issues that have been inflicting Egyptian education. Discussions surrounding how education is political and how educational institutions can be utilised to support regimes and help maintain the status quo have largely been neglected in the existing literature on education in Egypt. As a result, this paper's key objective was to encourage a more critical outlook through utilising a Gramscian approach that considers education to be a politically contested domain. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of how education constitutes a key hegemonic apparatus capable of developing consent through encouraging the acceptance of certain knowledge, attitudes and behaviour conducive to the regimes in power. Moreover, this understanding critically infers that hegemony can never be absolute, but is always contested.

   I analysed the education system under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak so as to demonstrate the extent to which it has been politicised through the roles it played to support their regimes. For instance, under Nasser, education served to legitimise his 'revolutionary' regime and represented an aspect of his social contract; under Sadat, it aimed to functionalise Islam and prepare Egyptians for economic liberalisation and under Mubarak, it represented a national security concern that intended to legitimise neoliberal reforms. Education aimed to support the three regimes in different ways based on each's political, economic and socio-cultural objectives; nonetheless, it was incapable of fully protecting their hegemony. As argued throughout the paper, each regime faced a number of challenges that hindered their abilities to assume complete control over the Egyptian public sphere, and particularly the education system. This necessarily demonstrates the need to think of education as being a site of hegemonic contestation and as a component of any political process (in both supporting and resisting it).

   In order to draw tentative conclusions regarding the educational reforms proposed by al-Sisi, two implications need to be highlighted. First, instead of downplaying how education is a politically contested domain, we must, instead, view politics and education as being intimately connected. By consistently questioning the legitimacy of the prevailing orthodoxy and the political, economic and socio-cultural basis on which the Egyptian education system is premised, we can avoid falling into a trap that, erroneously, claims education's neutrality

and which separates the technical/instrumental questions from the political ones. Maintaining a critical angle when viewing Egyptian education will not only enable us to avoid reproducing the same issues and limitations but also enable us to envision alternatives to the existing system.

Secondly, as a consequence of the Egyptian state's inability to provide basic services such as education, there has been a growth in Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) who work on filling in these gaps. The educational spaces found within such CSOs, as explored in Mirshak (2019), have contributed to the development of alternative forms of education that go beyond the confinements of formal education, and that utilise a range of pedagogical methods aiming to develop critical thinking skills and political consciousness. In other words, the education offered by these CSOs aims to challenge the taken-for-granted political, economic and socio-cultural basis on which the Egyptian education system is premised (i.e. offers a counter-hegemonic education). To envision alternatives, it is plausible to consider education in a broader sense that goes beyond formal schooling, as Gramsci himself believed (Mayo, 1999; 2016). Perhaps, it is through such alternative educational spaces that we could start reconsidering the relationship between politics and education under al-Sisi's Egypt and truly transform Egyptian society.

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