

STRATIFIED STUDENTS, STRATIFIED TEACHERS: IDEOLOGICALLY INFORMED PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN EGYPT¹

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Abstract – *The study draws on focus group interviews with 12 teachers working in academic and commercial secondary schools in Egypt. Attention is given to these teachers' perspectives on the implications of a 1997 educational reform, which proposed to convert many vocational/commercial schools to academic schools and to reduce the need for extra-school, private tutoring. The interviews were conducted during the implementation of the first phase of the reform in 2001, a period of a public debate regarding the possible consequences of this reform for students as well as teachers. Of particular interest are teachers' perceptions of the reform's likely impact on: (a) the quality of secondary education and the post-secondary educational and occupational opportunities for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and (b) the social status and income for teachers working in different types of secondary schools. It is furthermore noted that teachers' views of the effects of the reform differ depending upon (1) whether they conceive of schooling as promoting social mobility or social reproduction and (2) whether their ideologically informed conceptions of professionalism emphasize remuneration or the service ideal.*

Introduction

In 1997 the Government of Egypt developed a twenty-year secondary education reform program. The first stage of this reform consists of a seven-year project (1999-2006), known as the Secondary Education Enhancement Project (SEEP) (see Megahed, 2002). The 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP were framed, at least in part, as a move to reduce inequities in education and society. For example, the reform sought more equitable access to higher education by converting 315 vocational/commercial secondary schools to academic (general) secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 1999; World Bank, 1999a).² This conversion, it was argued, would extend educational and economic opportunities for at least some of the students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families who disproportionately enrolled in vocational secondary schools; by attending academic secondary schools they would be in a better position to gain access to

higher education. Because they tended to score lower on the Basic Education Certificate Examination (which is used to determine admission to academic secondary schools) and because the quality of the education they received was considered (by themselves, their parents, and the society) to be ‘second-class’ (Richards, 1992), students enrolled in vocational secondary schools were viewed to be ‘losers’ (Sayed & Diehl, 2000). Moreover, graduates of vocational secondary schools were (and are) unlikely either to attend higher education or to find employment in the formal economy (Gill & Heyneman, 2000). In contrast, a majority of academic secondary school graduates have been guaranteed access to university or non-university higher education, which is seen to give them a better chance of getting a good job.

The 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP were also directed toward reducing the need for out-of-school, private tutoring provided by teachers (for a fee) to supplement the instruction that students received in public schools in regular classes or in ‘Reinforcing Study Groups’ sessions.³ This was to be achieved by (a) developing common core courses (Arabic, English, mathematics, science, and social sciences) for academic and vocational schools, (b) training teachers how to incorporate technology in their instructional activities, and (c) instituting a system of curriculum-based assessment and student report profiles (Ministry of Education, 1999; World Bank, 1999b). Out-of-school, private tutoring was considered necessary – at least prior to the reform initiative – because the teaching-learning processes in secondary schooling tended to be organized around infrequent, high-stakes exams, which required students to memorize material included in textbooks or teachers’ lectures (Program Planning & Monitoring Unit, 1998).

The ‘need’ for private tutoring in secondary education in Egypt – and other societies (see Bray, 1999; Chew & Leong, 1995) – introduces a strong source of socioeconomic bias in education, since families are not in equal positions to pay the tutoring fees.⁴ The Egyptian Ministry of Education has stated that the widespread practice of out-of-school, ‘private tutoring partly defeats the democratic purpose embedded in the constitutional provision of ‘free’ public education’ (Program Planning & Monitoring Unit, 1998, p. 5). While school attendance in Egypt has never really been free, in that parents have always ‘had to pay a tiny entry fee, buy a school uniform, provide a bite of food ... what is disastrous is the need for private tutoring’ (*Economist*, 1999, p.11). For example, in 1992-93 rural and urban families of students attending academic secondary schools spent on average 14.3% and 10.6%, respectively, of their annual incomes for tutoring and additional ‘required’ books. Indeed, because of the costs of private tutoring, families’ per-child expenditure on education is higher than the cost borne by the government, especially in grades 11 and 12 in academic secondary school (Fawzey, 1994).

While the discourse associated with the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP raised explicitly issues of (in)equity and social stratification in relation to students, the reform also could be seen to have implications for hierarchically differentiating the social and economic status of teachers. For instance, teachers of core academic subjects (Arabic, foreign language, science, mathematics, and social science) whose employing organization is converted from a commercial/vocational to an academic secondary school may experience both social and economic mobility. They could increase their social status because academic subjects and schools are more prestigious than vocational subjects and schools (Connell, 1985; Herrera, 2003; Lortie, 1975), because academic schools are more likely to prepare students for exam performances that lead to higher education (Hargreaves, 1997), and because of the more general hierarchical conception of mental versus manual labour (Fussell, 1983; Heeti & Brock, 1997; Willis, 1977). With respect to their economic status, it is important to note that academic school teachers have more opportunities for private tutoring than their vocational school counterparts, because vocational school students not only place less priority on exams but also are less likely to be from families that can afford to pay for tutoring. Thus, to the extent that private tutoring persists after the implementation of the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP, *some* academic teachers – those who are shifted from vocational to academic secondary schools – may be able to increase their income.

At the same time the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP may reduce the social and economic status of *some* teachers. Clearly, part of the prestige of academic school teachers has derived from them and their students being – or at least being perceived to be – a select group. By increasing the number and proportion of academic schools (as well as students and teachers) these reform initiatives may deflate the average social status of academic secondary school teachers. Also, to the extent that the need or demand for private tutoring is reduced as a result of these government initiatives, at least some academic school teachers may lose a significant source of income and, thus, suffer reduced economic status.

Finally, commercial teachers of specialization subjects (i.e., accounting, basics of commerce, statistics, and insurance law) may be employed in another commercial school or work in an administrative staff position in the converted schools; neither of these options would significantly improve their social status or income.

Because the 1997 educational reform and the 1999 SEEP are likely to have different effects on different groups of students⁵ and teachers, we assume that the reform may be perceived differently by different teachers who were employed in academic and commercial schools prior to the reform. Teachers may celebrate or criticize the reform depending on whether or not they view the reform as

expanding educational opportunities for their own or other students from various social class backgrounds. Their appraisal of the reform may also be related to how they perceive it to affect their own and other teachers' social status and income. Moreover, their analysis and evaluation of these government initiatives may vary depending on the ideologically informed perspectives through which they view educational and societal dynamics.

Conceptions of social stratification and education

Existing literature concerning the causes and effects of educational reform offers varying explanations of the relationship between schooling and social inequality. For functionalists, educational reforms are initiated when there is a need to realign the system to better match the requirements of the changing economy, with changes in the economy and in education seen as benefiting the society generally (see Ginsburg *et al.*, 1991; Sedere, 2000). In contrast from a conflict perspective, educational reform is undertaken in order to protect or increase the educational, political, and economic benefits that certain groups enjoy at the expense of other groups (see Ginsburg *et al.*, 1991).

These contrasting views of educational reform derive from two major theoretical perspectives on social stratification and education. At the core of both perspectives on 'stratification is...the notion of inequality' (Arum & Beattie, 2000, p. 6), but the two perspectives differ in whether they interpret extant inequalities in wealth, power, and status in society, respectively, as meeting the needs of the entire society (e.g., Parsons, 1959) or as serving the interest of elites (e.g. Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Both perspectives also view educational systems as being stratified, in the sense that different schools or tracks/programs (e.g., academic versus vocational or honours versus regular) provide different content and processes related to differences in students' abilities and predicted future educational, occupational, and income attainments; however, the two perspectives differ in whether they primarily view such inequalities in education, respectively, as merit-based or as class-biased (see de Marrais & LeCompte, 1995; Hurn, 1978).

From a functionalist perspective social stratification exists because 'there is a generally fixed set of positions, whose various requirements the labour force must satisfy ... [in order to meet] the needs of society' (Collins, 2000, p.98). Thus, educational stratification is functional because it serves to differentiate and prepare individuals who have different native abilities and/or levels of motivation necessary for the performance of the given, hierarchically organized occupational roles (Arum & Beattie, 2000; Sorokin, 2000). From this viewpoint,

schooling provides a meritocratic mechanism for allocating individuals to occupations, allowing for upward social mobility of capable, motivated children of parents with lower socioeconomic status groups (Collins, 2000; see Amin, 2000). For example, some Egyptian scholars emphasize the importance of stratifying secondary schools into different tracks, arguing that admission to secondary schools should be based on student abilities and that the division between academic and vocational schools is necessary in order to meet the requirements of the economy specifically and the society generally (see Shaban, 1981).

In contrast, conflict theorists highlight that existing inequalities in wealth and power among social classes (or socioeconomic groups) primarily serve the interests of elites. Furthermore, such inequalities are reproduced – perpetuated and legitimated – through schooling (Morrow & Torres, 1995). The content and process of schooling are biased in favour/against those with different levels of economic capital and/or those with different forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). As Arum & Beattie (2000, p. 4) observe: ‘Privileged members of society...[are] rewarded by both school personnel and employers, who code these [members] as being more worthy and deserving... [And this leads to] inequality in educational achievement and related occupational attainment.’ Ability measures that are employed to track students into stratified programs and schools are viewed to be culturally biased in favour of higher and middle class students and against lower class students (Hallinan, 2000; Oakes, 1985). For instance, in Egypt a strong, significant correlation has been found between a student’s track placement into an academic or a vocational secondary school and her/his father’s occupational status (El-Shikhaby, 1983) and some Egyptian scholars criticize strongly the tracking system in secondary schools, arguing that the stratification within public schools contradicts the ideal of equal educational opportunities, which the government has promoted at least rhetorically since the 1952 revolution (Ali, 1989).

It is not only scholars who differ in their perspectives in analyzing schooling and educational reform. Teachers also vary in viewing schooling as promoting social mobility or social reproduction, while at the same time they differ in their personal and professional ideologies and occupational statuses (Connell, 1985; Ginsburg, 1988; Ginsburg, Meyenn, & Miller, 1980). Because teachers are key actors in the implementation or ‘appropriation’ (Levinson & Sutton, 2001) of educational reforms, it is important to understand how they perceive reforms in terms of their consequences for students and educators, because such perceptions may shape their strategies for coping with or responding to educational reforms.

Conceptions of professionalism in relation to teaching

The status, power, and income of teachers differ from those of other occupational groups but also vary over time; such differences and variations can be understood in relation to the concept of *profession* (see Abdal-Haqq, 2001; Ginsburg, 1996; Kale, 1970; Legatt, 1970; Lortie, 1975; Nagwu, 1981; White, 1981).⁶ Historical changes in teachers' work may be conceived as the result of struggles between teachers, state elites, and other groups, and have been described in terms of *professionalization* versus *deprofessionalization* or *proletarianization*⁷ of teaching as an occupation (Dove, 1986; Filson, 1988; Ginsburg & Spatig, 1988; Grace, 1987; Laudner & Yee, 1987; Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Reid, 1974).⁸ In this context organized teachers and other groups have sought to support their claims and demands by drawing upon what some have term the ideology of *professionalism* (Ozga, 1988). And on a daily basis individual teachers make use of different versions of this ideology to interpret and articulate their work and lives (Ginsburg, 1987; Ginsburg & Chaturvedi, 1988; Ginsburg, Meyenn, & Miller, 1980; Hargreaves, 1980; Wright & Bottery, 1997).

According to Larson (1977, p. xviii), professionalism 'has become an ideology – not only an image which consciously inspires collective or individual efforts but a mystification which ... obscures [or only partially represents] real social structures;' this is because despite the fact that 'the conditions of professional work have changed,' we still witness '[t]he persistence of profession as a category of social practice ... [framed in reference to] the model constituted by the first movements of professionalization.' There are a number of elements of the ideology – or, more accurately, ideologies – of professionalism, some of which appear to be contradictory. Most relevant to the current study of secondary school teachers in Egypt is the apparent contradiction between the element of professionalism that highlights (a) that professions deserve high levels of pay or *remuneration* and (b) that the activities of members of professions are motivated primarily by an *ideal of service* to clients and society.⁹

Intra-occupational stratification within teaching

Teaching, like other occupations, is stratified with respect to status, working conditions, and material rewards, and such differences in their work and lives have implications for how teachers experience and evaluate educational reforms (see Ginsburg, 1991 and 1995). For example, Pritchard (1993, p. 355) notes the 'strongly-marked prestige hierarchy' among school teachers in Germany, with the highest status assigned to teachers in *gymnasien* (i.e., academic secondary schools); Hargreaves (1978, p. 129) points to status differences among teachers in

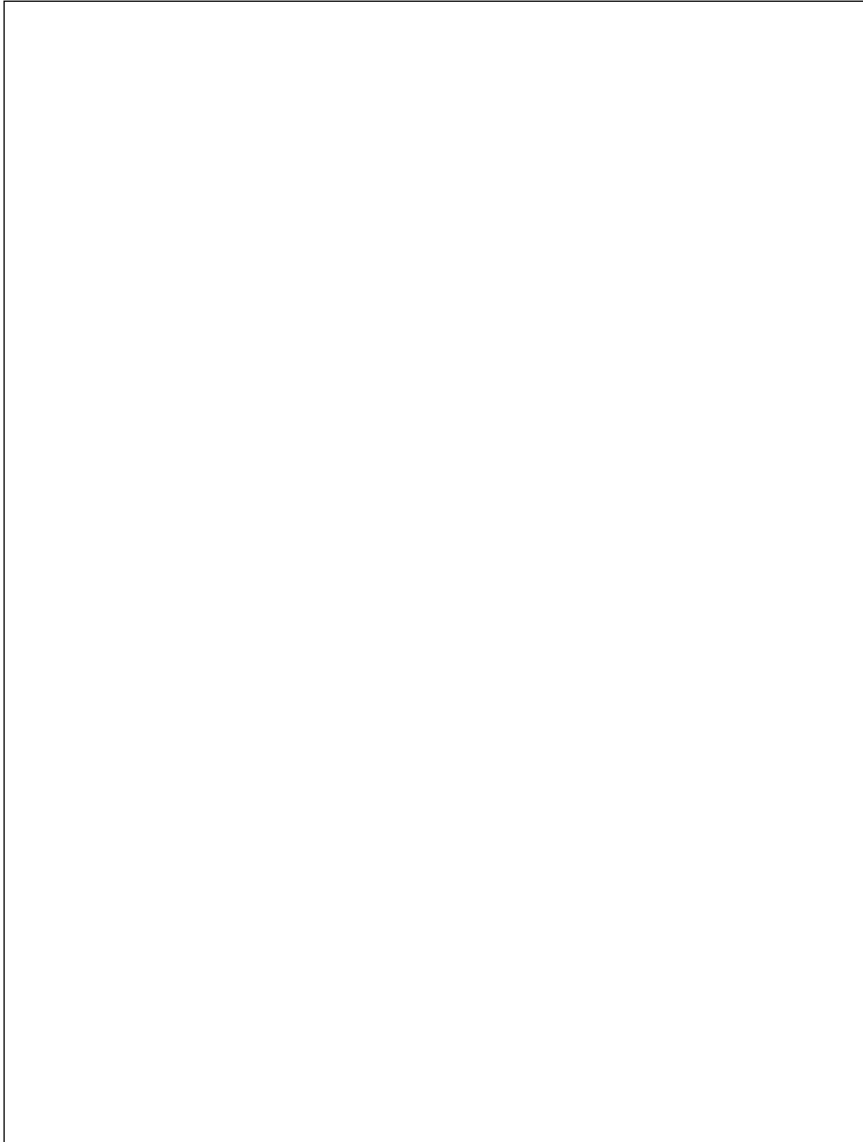
England, at least during the existence of the ‘tripartite system’ in England (1944-1970s), with the highest status accorded to ‘grammar’ (i.e., academic secondary) school versus ‘secondary modern’ (i.e., non-university preparation oriented) teachers; and Connell (1985, pp. 163-67) observes that as a result of the ‘politics of the curriculum’ in Australia academic secondary school teachers are seen to be ranked above non-academic (especially vocational subject) teachers. Similarly, Herrera (2003, pp. 192-93) detects that in Egypt ‘vocational teachers, holders of diplomas from technical secondary schools rather than universities, and teachers of technical, as opposed to the core academic, subjects occupy the lowest professional strata of teachers and receive the lowest salary.’

The above-discussed dimensions of stratification among teachers – and the hierarchical relations between teachers and administrators – are related to differences in gender and social class backgrounds of educators (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002; Connell, 1985; Ginsburg, 1988; Grace, 1978; Herrera, 2003; Schmuck, 1987; Strober and Tyack, 1980). Such differences have implications not only for teachers’ situations in the workplace but also for their experiences in family and community contexts, and thus need to be considered when examining how teachers interpret and respond to educational reforms. For example, given that the dominant gender roles in most societies emphasizes women’s domestic (versus career/income) responsibilities (Hochschild & Machung, 1996; Mackintosh, 1988; Reskin & Padavic, 1994; Walby, 1986), we might expect that women teachers would be more likely than their male counterparts to draw upon the service ideal (versus the remuneration) element of the ideology of professionalism as they analyze the (potential) impact that an educational reform may have for teachers’ work.

Method

In this study, 12 teachers, having five to more than twenty years of experience working in academic and/or commercial secondary schools, were interviewed in Cairo, Egypt in August 2001. The interviewees were selected to represent cases of core/academic subject teachers working in both types of secondary schools as well as commercial/specialization subject teachers employed in commercial schools. The study included three interviewee groups:¹⁰ (a) five teachers of Arabic, Chemistry, Philosophy and Sociology, Social Sciences, and Biology courses who had always worked in an academic secondary school; (b) three teachers of English, Mathematics, and Arabic who previously taught these courses in commercial secondary schools before getting positions in an academic secondary school;¹¹ and (c) four teachers, including two teachers of Commercial Studies and two teachers of Computer Science who were working in a commercial secondary school (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Interviewees by Gender, Subject, Experience, and Type of Schools



* Teachers are identified by a letter and a number, indicating a specific teacher (1-5) who have a particular employment history: academic teachers continuing to work in an academic secondary school (A), academic teachers who worked in commercial schools before becoming employed in an academic school (AC), and commercial teachers continuing to work in a commercial/vocational school (C).

The interviews were conducted in August 2001, just prior to the first 100 commercial schools (out of the 315) beginning the process of being converted to academic schools in the school year 2001–2002, which constitutes the first phase of implementing the 1999 SEEP. A ‘standardized open-ended interview’ (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand, 1999) was designed and used to conduct the tape-recorded group interviews of two-to-five participants each. Two group interviews were conducted in ‘Shopra al-Thanawiyya al-Aama,’ public academic secondary school. The first group included five participants (A1 – A5) and the second included three participants (AC1 – AC3). In addition, two group interviews were conducted in ‘Shopra al-Thanawiyya al-Tijariyya,’ public commercial secondary school; each group included two participants (C1, C2 and C3, C4). Both academic and commercial schools are located in north Cairo in the ‘al-Sahel’ district and surrounded by urban, suburban and rural areas, from which their students are drawn.

Interviewees were asked to describe and evaluate how, if at all, the following might be affected by the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP: (1) the secondary and postsecondary educational and occupational opportunities for students in their own and other schools, (2) the quality of secondary education provided to students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and (3) their own and the teacher colleagues’ social status and income. Data were analyzed following a qualitative approach through which the transcribed interviews were read carefully, coded systematically, and interpreted in relation to extant theoretical and grounded theory concepts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Teachers’ perceptions of the reform

The findings of the study are organized into four sections focusing on (1) teachers’ perceptions of the reform’s impact on the quality and equity of education provided for academic and commercial secondary school students, (2) explanations teachers’ perceptions: work situation and ideologies of social mobility/reproduction, (3) teachers’ views of the impact of the reform on the social and economic status of academic and commercial secondary school teachers, (4) explanations of teachers’ views: ideologies of professionalism.

Perceptions of the impact of the reform on educational quality and equality for different students

How do these academic and commercial/vocational teachers in Egypt interpret the 1997 educational reform and the 1999 SEEP, especially with respect to its likely impact on the quality of education provided to students of different socioeconomic background attending different types of secondary schools? Do

they agree or disagree with the Egyptian government's claim that this reform will enhance and equalize educational opportunities for all students?

In general, the academic and commercial school teachers interviewed considered the proposed reform initiative as not being sufficient to achieve educational equity for their own or for other students. The academic teachers who had previously worked in commercial schools did not have much faith that the rhetoric of the proposed reform would become a reality, doubting that any real changes in educational quality or equality of educational opportunities would occur. The others (Teachers AC2 and AC3) agreed with the cynical statement of their colleague (Teacher AC1) that the reform is 'an old song, which no longer excites teachers or their students.' These teachers viewed the reform as superficial or cosmetic, in that it would not fundamentally redesign curriculum content, instructional strategies, and assessment methods; reduce the importance of being able to pay for private, out-of-school tutoring; or open up more places for students wishing to pursue higher education. Thus, they believed that educational opportunities for students from poor and rich families would continue to be unequal under the reform. According to these teachers, who were working in an academic secondary school but had previously taught in commercial secondary schools:

'The reform should combine a substantial modification in the current education system, focusing primarily on the curriculum and assessment methods. The curriculum should develop and measure different learning skills [i.e., problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, etc.] and not only memorization. Otherwise, any [projected impact of the] reform on educational equity and quality will be an illusion.' (Teacher AC1)

'[T]he curriculum depends on textbooks and memorization-based assessment method. Reclassifying academic courses in both types of secondary schools or using technology in the classroom practice will not improve educational quality or reduce students' reliance on tutoring.' (Teacher AC2)

'Even if some students from lower class families enroll in academic school, they will not be able to compete for a place in the university, because the majority of students in academic schools need [private, out-of-school] tutoring to obtain high grades and because there are limited places available at the university.' (Teacher AC3)

Commercial teachers also did not perceive that the reform initiative would equalize educational opportunities for all students. While they speculated that some students, who otherwise would have attended vocational schools, might

increase their chances of enrolling in higher education because they would attend academic schools, these teachers were not convinced that this would open up real opportunities for many students. Moreover, they believed that the consequence of converting some commercial schools to academic schools would actually exacerbate the inequalities in educational and socioeconomic opportunities for students who would continue to enrol in commercial schools, because the reform would reinforce the negative view of the commercial/vocational school as occupying the bottom tier of a stratified secondary education system. As can be seen in their comments below, these four commercial teachers recommended providing equal access to higher education for both vocational and academic graduates and/or restructuring secondary education into a comprehensive system:¹²

‘Though the reform may promote a kind of equality, it will not change the social perception of vocational [commercial] school as a second-class education. To be realistic, educational equity and quality within and between academic and vocational schools would be achieved through restructuring secondary education and changing its admission policy. It is not enough to just increase the enrolment in academic schools or integrate the use of technology [in instruction and assessment activities].’ (Teacher C1)

‘The reform does not include any changes in [upper secondary school] admissions policy. Even under the reform students with the lowest grades will enrol in vocational schools. The 50% of graduates from preparatory school, who under the reform enrolled in vocational schools – and particularly commercial schools, will continue to be the poorest students, both academically and economically.’ (Teacher C3)

‘Secondary education should be restructured. The Ministry of Education should change this tracking system, involving academic versus vocational schools, [and develop] a comprehensive education system.’ (Teacher C4)

‘Graduates of the four types of secondary schools [academic, industrial, agricultural, and commercial] should have equal access to (university and non-university) higher education ... based on each type of school’s specializations. But to make the academic school the major gate for entering the university and increase its enrollment ... merely re-emphasizes the low [status] ... of vocational schools, especially [those offering] the commercial program.’ (Teacher C2)

Academic school teachers, who have never taught in a commercial school, share their other colleagues’ disbelief that the 1997 reform and 1999 SEEP would expand significantly educational opportunities for students from lower

socioeconomic status background and/or students who have previously been identified as having lower academic abilities. From their perspective the main result of the reform's would be to reduce the quality of academic schools, because they believe that the only way that the proportion of students enrolled in academic schools could be increased is by decreasing the score required on the final preparatory level examination that is required for entering academic schools.¹³ Indeed, as the following remarks indicate, these educators seemed more concerned about the status or quality reputation of the type of schools in which they worked than they were about the limited opportunities for certain types of students:

'In most cases the reform will decrease the quality of academic schools by increasing enrolment [by] ...lowering the final grade at the preparatory level that would be required to attend academic schools.' (Teacher A4)

'Increasing the enrolment in academic schools means accepting students with poorer learning skills and abilities. These students will not be able to obtain high grades or compete [successfully] for a place at the university. This definitely will reduce the quality of academic schools.' (Teacher A1)

'More than 20% of academic students are weak academically; this percentage will increase under the Reform, [and this] will affect negatively the quality of academic schools.' (Teacher A2)

'In my school, the majority of lower class students usually obtains poor grades, drop out, or transfer to one of the vocational schools. Increasing the proportion [of such students in academic schools by converting commercial schools] will not change these facts; rather it will put [more of] such students under pressure by admitting them to a type of education that is not appropriate for their learning ability.' (Teacher A3)

Explaining the differences in teachers' perceptions: work situation and ideologies of social mobility/reproduction

The discussion above indicates that all academic and commercial secondary teachers interviewed doubted that the 1997 educational reform and the 1999 SEEP would equalize educational opportunities in Egypt. However, the different groups of teachers articulated their dubiousness in different ways. Part of the differences can be explained in terms of the type of institutions in which they work and the perceived background and ability of the students with whom they interact. For example, academic secondary school teachers perceived that on average 70.7% of their students were from 'upper class,' 'upper middle class,' or 'middle class' families, while commercial secondary school teachers reported that on average

85% of their students were from ‘lower middle class’ or ‘lower class’ families (see Table 2).¹⁴ With respect to academic ability, academic school teachers on average characterized 67.5% of their students as being ‘outstanding,’ ‘above average,’ or ‘average,’ while commercial school teachers on average categorized 80% of their students as being ‘below average’ or ‘weak’ (see Table 3).

However, such differences in perceptions of (or even actual differences in) socioeconomic status backgrounds and academic abilities of their students cannot account for the differences in views expressed, particularly between those academic school teachers who had previously taught in commercial schools and those who had not. What seems to be an important source of explanation in how different categories of teachers analyzed the impact of the proposed reform are the differences in their ideologically informed views about the functioning of the education system in terms of promoting social mobility or social reproduction.

Some teachers viewed the stratification within the education system (i.e., the hierarchical arrangement of academic and vocational/commercial schools) as necessary because there are real – and significant – differences among students with respect to learning abilities. From their ‘functionalist’ perspective, they viewed (a) schools as institutions through which upward or downward social mobility occurred depending on students’ ability and effort and (b) students in the academic secondary schools as having higher levels of ability and exerting more effort than their commercial school peers. Note that the following statements representing this perspective – and similar statements not quoted here (by Teacher A3 and Teacher A5) – are all made by academic school teachers who have no experience working in commercial schools:

‘Students in vocational school [generally] do not have the learning skills that would qualify them to enter an academic school or to continue into post-secondary education.’ (Teacher A2)

‘Most students in vocational school are careless about their educational progress. They have not concentrated on their schoolwork from the time they were in the preparatory school; therefore, they did not enrol in academic [secondary] school. [In contrast,] most students in academic school are more responsible for their school work, concerned about their future, and eager to enter the university.’ (Teacher A1)

‘Students in vocational schools have poor academic standards. They do not value education, especially the academic subjects, and maybe this is why many of them are not able to enter the university.’ (Teacher A4)

In contrast, all other teachers in the study perceived the educational system as structured in ways that basically insure that inequalities in students’

socioeconomic background are reproduced as disparities in educational and occupational attainment. They saw family socioeconomic status, more than student ability, as the primary determiner of a student's success. This is especially the case, they argued, because the strong emphasis on exam performance for entry into academic secondary school and into higher education institutions make private, out-of-school tutoring (and being able to pay for it) a requirement for academic success.¹⁵ The following statements represent the ideas expressed by all of the former and current commercial school teachers:

'The curriculum [and the assessment system] promote inequality. ... Beginning in preparatory school [grades 7 to 9], students realize that without [private, out-of-school] tutoring they cannot compete for a place in the academic secondary school and (then) in the university. Free education does not really exist. Students of parents with higher socioeconomic status are able to enroll in academic schools and (then) universities ... not only because they have [better] learning ability but also because their parents have the ability to pay [for] ... tutoring fees.' (Teacher AC2)

'Most students in commercial/vocational school work ... after school ... to improve their own and their families' income. They do not have the time or the money to spend on [private, out-of-school] tutoring or the Reinforcing Study Group program. ... In contrast, ... academic school students[, who tend to come from higher socioeconomic status families,] ... do not work at all; [instead] ... they spend their time in ... [private, out-of-school] tutoring so they can continue their education after secondary school, [preferably attending] ... the university.' (Teacher AC1)

'Students in my [commercial] schools ... [who] need tutoring, ... cannot pay for it. ... [In part because of the economic challenges they face], exam performance and tutoring are not high priorities among students in commercial schools.' (Teacher C2)

'Students from lower income families cannot pay for tutoring, improve their exam performance, and get good grades. Consequently, they are not qualified academically or economically for academic [secondary] schools and, of course, the university.' (Teacher C3)

Teachers' views of the reform's impact on teachers' socioeconomic status

Teachers were asked about the likely effect of the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP on teachers' socioeconomic status. In general, academic school teachers, regardless of whether they had previously taught in commercial schools, were not

optimistic about witnessing any significant or widespread improvements in this regard:

‘[G]enerally, it seems improving teachers’ social and economic status was a missing element [in] ... the reform. The in-service training program is important to enhance my performance as teacher, but I need a suitable payment for my experience, efforts, qualifications and basic needs.’ (Teacher AC1)

‘[T]he reform [does not] include any improvement in teachers’ salaries. ... The increase in enrolment in academic schools should [have been associated with] increasing teachers’ wages.’ (Teacher A1)

In contrast, at least one commercial school teacher anticipated that the reform could have a positive impact on her and other commercial school teachers’ economic and social status:¹⁶

‘I do not expect any problem with shifting teachers from a commercial school to another. I was among the last group of teachers who were hired by the Ministry of Education in 1994. Since this time, there have been no employment opportunities in commercial schools except for computer science teachers.’ (Teacher C2)

And a former commercial school teacher also mentioned the potential benefits for ‘academic teachers who would work in the converted commercial schools [noting that they] will have higher social prestige and obtain higher incomes through increasing their opportunities for tutoring when they work in academic schools.’ (Teacher AC1)

Explaining teachers’ views: ideologies of professionalism

Academic and commercial school teachers are seriously concerned about salary increases and opportunities for private, out-of-school tutoring because of their low salaries. Said to be among the lowest paid public sector workers in Egypt, teachers’ monthly salary starts at LE120 and increases gradually to LE430 after twenty years of service.¹⁷ Not only do low salaries undermine the status of teaching as an occupation,¹⁸ but ‘teachers’ low salaries constitute a pressure for practicing [private, out-of-school] tutoring as a way to improve their income and provide for their own basic needs’ (Fawzey, 1994, p. 32). Indeed, most academic school teachers interviewed have been involved in private tutoring,¹⁹ whereas teachers in commercial schools have had to depend on family resources or work

at another (non-teaching) job.²⁰ The monthly income from private tutoring among the academic school teachers in the study varied from LE1,425 to LE3,325, while the external monthly income of commercial school teachers in the sample varied from LE150 to LE350.²¹

Thus, academic school teachers (at least) were generally critical of the government's rhetoric and action directed at limiting or curtailing the practice of private, out-of-school tutoring. However, teachers appeared to ground their criticisms in what can be seen as different elements in the ideology of professionalism. For instance, some teachers (all males) argue in favor of tutoring because of the financial benefits that accrue to teachers, framing their argument with reference to the notion that professionals deserve a high level of remuneration:

'The Ministry of Education should respect teachers' efforts to improve their income and should stop its campaign against [private tutoring] ... because it cannot pay [teachers] the salary they deserve.' (Teacher A4)

'The government uses all its power against tutoring. At the same time it does not provide any substitute, which would improve teachers' socioeconomic status. ... I believe this is a legal and honest thing to do, since I do not force my students for tutoring. ... As a teacher, I'm equal to any professional: I'm able to do my duties at school time and give private tutoring after school.' (Teacher AC1)

Other teachers (all females) appeared to frame their argument in favour of private, out-of-school tutoring in relation to the service ideal element of the ideology of professionalism. As evidenced below, they state that tutoring is a form of 'external academic assistance for their students' [Teacher A5], especially for those who are unable to comprehend the subject matter in the classroom:²²

'Students have different learning abilities [and] many students ask me for tutoring so they can obtain better grades and make progress. What is wrong with being paid for my efforts? I give them my time, knowledge, and the help they need... Why is it viewed as ... against the law?²³ Since this occurs without pressure [from me as a teacher] and as a result of students' [and families'] choice and request, I consider tutoring an honourable form of work.' (Teacher A3)

'Private tutoring in Egypt became a social phenomenon that is constructed under the pressure of educational competition. ... Even outstanding students ask for tutoring, not because they need it to understand the material but to ensure that they perform at least as well on exams as their classmates. ... Students and their parents take pride in being able to pay for the private tutoring.' (Teacher A2)

For some women teachers the emphasis on the service ideal is articulated in gendered terms, that is, they state that they are not primarily responsible for their standard of living, because they believe that this responsibility rests with their husbands or their fathers:

‘I define my socioeconomic status in the upper-middle class because of my husband’s high income; otherwise, I would be economically in the lower class. My salary alone cannot provide for the basic needs of my family, but as a woman I’m not responsible for [supporting financially] ... my family. This is my husband’s responsibility. Therefore, I’m practicing tutoring just because my students ask for and need my help.’ (Teacher A2)

‘I’m not married and my salary is not enough for my personal expenses. I always get money from my father at the end of the month... I do tutoring for free because I know that my students need extra help and they cannot pay for tutoring. I’m willing to help my students obtain high grades in order to enable them to compete for a place at the university and continue their education.’ (Teacher C2)

Finally, two male teachers, both academic school teachers who previously taught in commercial schools, draw upon both the ‘remuneration’ and the ‘service ideal’ elements of the ideology of professionalism in framing their argument against the government’s attack on private, out-of-school tutoring:

‘The government thinks teachers are responsible for the tutoring. This is not true. ... If the government increases my salary, I’ll refrain from being a tutor. But will that stop students’ needs for tutoring? Teacher’s low income is a reason for tutoring but it is not the only reason.’ (Teacher AC3)

‘I am not a criminal and I should not be punished because I improve my low income by helping my students obtaining a high grade. Both students and I are victims of a barren education system and rote learning at all levels. ... I do tutoring because it improves my income, but even if I’m rich and some students ask me to tutor them, I will agree for [their] ... benefit.’ (Teacher AC2)

Conclusion

During a period of implementing the first phase of the 1997 educational reform and the 1999 SEEP neither teachers in academic and nor teachers in commercial schools were optimistic that the reform would enhance the quality of education or would provide equal educational opportunities for students. Their explanations for their pessimism varied, however, and such differences in

teachers' perspectives were associated, at least in part, with whether they primarily conceived of schooling as promoting social mobility or as reproducing social inequalities.

All five teachers who had only worked in academic secondary schools seemed to draw upon a functionalist perspective, highlighting that schooling provides a meritocratic mechanism for allocating individuals to occupations and allows for upward social mobility of capable, motivated children of parents with lower socioeconomic statuses. For these teachers stratification within the education system (i.e., the hierarchical arrangement of academic and vocational/commercial tracks) is viewed to be a necessity because not all students have the same level of learning abilities. In contrast, three academic teachers, who had previously worked in commercial schools, and three commercial teachers seemed to draw upon a conflict perspective, emphasizing that inequalities in wealth and power among social classes are reproduced through schooling (e.g., tracking, curriculum differentiation, and testing). For these teachers, the stratified secondary school system, which hierarchically differentiates academic and secondary school programs and makes it more likely that academic school students who can pay for private, out-of-school tutoring can succeed on high stakes exams, perpetuates and legitimates social inequalities through schooling.

This finding – that teachers who previously taught or who were teaching in commercial schools tended to have views that were more in line with a conflict perspective, while teachers whose experience was limited to academic schools articulated more functionalist inspired viewpoints – is interesting. It raises the question of whether the type of students one teaches influences one's conception of schooling and society or whether individuals with certain conceptions are more likely to pursue teaching in certain types of institutions.

Teachers also varied in their views of the reform's impact on their and their colleagues' socioeconomic status. These differences in views were linked to their occupational status (commercial or academic secondary school employee), their gender (male or female), and the version of the ideology of professionalism (remuneration or service ideal) they highlighted. Interestingly, male academic teachers accorded more importance to economic benefits of being a teacher and engaging in out-of-school, private tutoring, while female academic and commercial teachers frame their lives as school teachers and tutors in line with an ideal of service. Such gender differences in teachers' ideologically informed views are likely due to the fact that in Egypt, as well as in other societies, males are generally viewed to be 'responsible' for families' income, even if women (wives or daughters) are employed outside the home. Although increasingly females' economic participation has become a more important, if not essential, contribution

to families' income, culturally such participating and contribution are viewed as an option.

Examining this small sample of teachers' perceptions of the potential impact of educational reform on students and on teachers enables us to see some interesting combinations of viewpoints. For example, male academic school teachers tended to filter their interpretations of the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP through lenses that emphasize schooling as an avenue for social mobility and professionals as deserving high levels of remuneration. These lenses seem to fit well together in that they both provide a focus on individuals being rewarded for their ability and effort. For female academic teachers, however, they combined the lens that emphasizes schooling as an avenue for mobility with one that highlights the service ideal of professionalism. The seemingly poor fit between the lenses used by female academic teachers – students are to be rewarded for ability and effort in their studies but teachers should not be primarily motivated by material rewards to excel and work hard as tutors – is smoothed over by reference to the special role played by (some) women: serving others' social needs, while depending on males to obtain material resources. It is also worth noting that two of the academic school teachers (both males) who had previously worked in commercial schools combined a lens that emphasized schooling as a mechanism for social reproduction and one that highlights both the remuneration and service ideal elements of professionalism. One might speculate that this particular combination of lenses is 'grounded' in their experiences of working with different groups of students (in terms of socioeconomic status and 'ability') in institutions that occupy different levels of the stratified secondary school system.

Nevertheless, we should note that whether they legitimated their (and other teachers') involvement in out-of-school, private tutoring by drawing on the remuneration and/or service ideal elements of the ideology of professionalism, academic school teachers who previously taught in commercial schools seemed to contradict themselves in that they also criticized such tutoring as contributing to social reproduction (in favour of the more economically advantaged students). This contradiction, though, arises because of the difference consequences that private tutoring has for different groups of students and for different groups of teachers. It tends to aid the academic achievement and educational attainment of middle and upper socioeconomic status students (who populate academic schools) more so than lower socioeconomic students (who populate commercial schools), while it tends to provide 'needed' material benefits for (at least some) academic subject teachers working in academic schools to a much greater extent than is the case for academic and vocational subject teachers working in vocational/commercial schools.

In any case, we suspect that teachers' perceptions and reactions to the 1997 educational reform and the 1999 SEEP will be even more complex – and more important to investigate – as the initiative moves from the stage of anticipation to the stage of implementation.

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Notes

- ¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Comparative and International Educational Society conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, 12-16 March 2003. We would like to thank the twelve teachers who participated in this study and the two anonymous colleagues who reviewed and provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.
- ² In the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP commercial schools, rather than the other two types of vocational secondary schools (agricultural and industrial), were targeted for conversion because it was argued that there was less demand for commercial school graduates (i.e., service workers) and there was a greater supply of public and private commercial schools in Egypt. In contrast to these reform initiatives in the late-1990s, the Egyptian government's educational reforms during the 1980s and early-1990s sought to increase the proportion of vocational versus academic schools, based on the assumption of an increased demand for skilled workers stemming from the economic transition toward privatization. Under the system in place before 1997, approximately 65% and 35% of students at the end of the preparatory level (grades 7 to 9) were streamed into vocational and academic secondary schools, respectively, while the goal of the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP was for 50% of the students to attend each type of secondary school (Ministry of Education, 1999 & 2000; Megahed, 2002).
- ³ According to Fawzey (1994), the Egyptian Ministry of Education began in 1968 to organize additional classes known as 'Reinforcing Study Groups' for students from low-income families who needed extra help but could not easily afford to pay for private tutoring. Initially, these classes were free, but beginning in the 1970-71 school year a small fee was charged. Fee increases continued, so that by the early-1990s many students from low-income families could not afford to pay either for either private tutoring or Reinforcing Study Groups sessions (Fawzey, 1994). In effect, private tutoring became a 'parallel school' (Fawzey, 1994, p. 22) that operates outside and inside the walls of the public school.
- ⁴ A possible indication of the biasing effect of private tutoring is that 80% of students from lower socioeconomic status families, compared to approximately 50% from upper and middle socioeconomic status families, got low scores on the Academic Secondary Certificate Examination, which determines access to university education (World Bank, 1991, p. 76).
- ⁵ Although the discussion above focused on how the social, educational, and economic opportunities could be increased for students who shift from vocational to academic schools, we

should keep in mind that the implications of the 1997 reform and the 1999 SEEP might be less than positive for those students who remain in the reduced number of commercial/vocational schools.

- ⁶ Rather than being neutral concepts, 'the words 'profession,' 'professional,' and 'professionalization' are [usually] charged with laudatory meaning' (Metzger, 1987, p. 10); the 'term professional [is] ... an honorific one in our society today' (Sykes, 1987, p. 10).
- ⁷ Some scholars (e.g., Friedson, 1973; Halmos, 1975; Jackson, 1970; Toren, 1973; Vollmer & Mills, 1966), working within a Weberian tradition, use the term *deprofessionalization*, which 'constitutes an opposite movement to professionalization through which workers remuneration, status, and power/autonomy are diminished relative to other groups of workers as well as managers, employers, and state elites;' other scholars (e.g., Braverman, 1974; Derber, 1983; Johnson, 1977; Larson, 1980; Oppenheimer, 1973), adopting a Marxist perspective, employ the term, *proletarianization*, which involves '(1) separating conception from execution of work tasks, 2) standardizing and routinizing work tasks, 3) intensifying the demands of work, and 4) reducing the costs (salaries, benefits, training, etc.) of workers' (Ginsburg, 1996, p. 134).
- ⁸ Reid (1974, p. 25) observes that, historically, the 'professions in Egypt had three distinct branches, one dominated by Europeans, another by Egyptians with a modern education, and a third by practitioners with only traditional [*al-Azhar*] training.'
- ⁹ The elements of the ideology have been documented (and disseminated) by scholars, sometimes characterizing these as objective characteristics that differentiate professions from other occupations that are labeled semi-professions or non-professions (see Becker, 1962; Dingwall, 1976; Esland, 1980; Johnson, 1972; Parsons, 1954; Roth, 1974; Wilenski, 1964). Besides remuneration and service ideal, elements highlighted include: 'performing an essential service or task; ... engaging in work involving a high level of expertise or judgment, thus necessitating extensive preservice education; ... operating with autonomy in the workplace; ... having colleagues (versus nonprofessionals) in control of selection training, and advancement in the field' (Ginsburg, 1996, pp. 133-34). Pickle (1990, p. 82) makes the interesting observation that '[w]ith the possible exception of the service ideal, ... professional cultures have been studied largely through a patriarchal lens. The work norms that have accompanied the public as opposed to the private worlds of work ... are associated with men.'
- ¹⁰ The focus group interview was chosen as a methodology because it allows the interviewees to express themselves in relation to their relevant social context (Barbour & Kitzing, 1999; Krueger, 1994).
- ¹¹ They worked in commercial schools in the late 1980s, almost a decade before the 1997 reform was announced.
- ¹² During planning discussions for the 1997 Reform plan, the option of merging the vocational and academic streams, which commercial teachers asked for, was rejected as inappropriate by the Ministry of Education for three reasons: 1) there is a lack of resources in the education system; 2) despite the fact that many nations have implemented a comprehensive secondary school system, based on core and elective subjects with vocational/academic programs incorporated a single school, there continues to be considerable debate about the effectiveness and efficiency of such a system. (Program Planning & Monitoring Unit, 1998); and 3) merging the vocational and academic streams would not be politically feasible (World Bank, 1999b, p. 5), because 'any major change in the system structure would inevitably affect hundreds of thousands of families and could provoke political resentment' (Richards, 1992, p. 10).
- ¹³ The Ministry of Education determines annually the minimum score (65% or 70%) required to enter academic secondary schools. Students with lower scores are assigned to vocational (agricultural, commercial, or industrial) secondary schools.
- ¹⁴ The relationship between family socioeconomic status and type of school attended could be explained by differences in economic capital. For instance, Teacher C4 stated that 'parents'

abilities to pay for [private, out-of-school] tutoring ... [helped students] to obtain higher grades at the preparatory level [grade 7 to 9] and to enroll in a public academic secondary school' and Teacher C1 noted that 'students of parents with high socioeconomic status did not enroll in commercial school because their parents could enroll them in a private academic school if their final grade did not qualify them for public academic school.' As we will see below in the discussion of academic ability differences between students in the two types of schools, the concept of cultural capital (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) is also relevant.

15 For example, academic school teachers reported that the 85% of their students who receive private tutoring come from upper, upper-middle, and middle class families, while 15% of their students who do not get private tutoring are from lower class families. Thus, teachers who charge for tutoring may be considered responsible, partly, for the unequal achievement between the rich and poor students.

16 It is worth noting that while the two commercial school teachers of computer sciences (C3 and C4) assumed that their social (but not economic) status would be elevated if they shifted to an academic school, they expressed concern about the future of their commercial/ specialization subjects colleagues: 'There is no clear plan undertaken [or declared] by the Ministry of Education that would lay out alternative positions and schools for teachers of commercial/specialization subjects employed in the [converted] schools.'

17 In addition, teachers receive a 'subsidy' equivalent to an additional 25% of their basic monthly salary, paid every three months if they are not absent more than two times per month. Nevertheless, a teacher's monthly salary (plus the subsidy) is not sufficient to provide three meals per day for a small family and the annual increase in a teacher's monthly salary (plus the subsidy) lags behind the rate of inflation (al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 1991, p.529).

18 Both academic and commercial school teachers complained about their current salaries and the negative implications it had for their occupation's social status:

I have been a teacher for more than 16 years. ... I also have a master's degree in Education. My salary is not commensurate with my professional and academic experiences. This low salary indicates that the Ministry of Education ... [does not view teachers as] highly qualified professionals but as low paid workers. (Teacher A5)

The low pay for teachers reduces the social prestige of the teaching profession, especially in vocational education. After spending years in the pre-service and in-service education, my income is equivalent to a worker with high school diploma, and it does not cover my basic needs. (Teacher C3)

19 Academic teachers distinguished between their official and actual socioeconomic status. They classified themselves officially as belonging to the lower class because of their monthly government salary, but when they considered their tutoring (or other sources of) income, they categorize themselves as being in the upper-middle class.

20 For example, a computer science teacher does data entry at a private company and other commercial school teachers work as taxi drivers, cashiers, and salespersons.

21 This leads to substantial inequalities in the living standards between the two groups of teachers. For example, of those interviewed, more than 90% of the academic school teachers and less than 5% of the commercial school teachers possessed a car, computer, cell phone, etc.

22 They mentioned several reasons why students needed private tutoring: a) the overcapacity of classrooms (an average of 55 students); b) the extensive amount of course content to be covered in a class period (during 45 minutes); c) differences in learning skills among students; and d) the importance of achieving a high grade in academic secondary final exam as a requirement for entering the universities.

23 Private tutoring for a fee is forbidden by a ministerial law and is considered an illegal practice since the mid-1990s. In the past teachers, who obtained permission from the Ministry of Education to offer private lessons, were required to pay taxes on their income from tutoring (Fawzey, 1994).

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