

# GLOBAL DISCOURSES AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN EGYPT: THE CASE OF ACTIVE-LEARNING PEDAGOGIES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – *Educational reform is shaped by the ideas and actions of national actors but also by global (ideological, political, and economic) dynamics. This paper offers an analysis of the global discourses (words and practices) that helped to place notions of student-centred and active-learning pedagogies on the international education reform agenda, particularly since 1990. Additionally, the paper examines how these discourses interacted with educational reform initiatives in Egypt that were undertaken by Egyptian officials and educators, at times with project support from international intergovernmental and nongovernmental organisations. The paper concludes that comparative and international educators need to interrogate the variety of educational discourses operating at both the local/national and global levels, to examine the complex interactions that occur within and across these levels, and to analyse how such discourses are constrained or enabled by global political and economic developments, including the ideologies and practices of ‘democratisation’ and multinational corporate capitalism.*

## Introduction

**I**n recent years comparative educators and other social scientists have engaged in extensive debates about ‘globalisation’ (Burbules & Torres, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002). And while world-system or global-level dynamics are by no means new phenomena, these debates have helped to call attention to the ways in which *economic, political, and cultural* features of a given society – including *educational reform* – can be understood as being shaped by global as well as national and local processes (Ginsburg, 1991; Daun, 2002).

Some have argued that globalisation represents an *imposition* on nation states and their citizens by dominant countries and elites who control the workings of international financial, trade and other organisations, thus reducing citizens’ capacity to determine educational and other social policies and practices (Arnové, 1980; Berman, 1992; Brown & Lauder, 1996; Ismael, 1999; Tabb, 2001). Others

have characterised the processes that have led to convergence of educational policies and practices in terms of local and national actors voluntarily *borrowing* or *adapting* ‘good’, though foreign, ideas to which they have been exposed, including other countries’ offers to *lend* such policies and practices (Meyer & Hannan, 1979; Inkeles & Sirowy, 1984; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). There are at least three limitations to the way the issues are framed above. First, the global discourses (statements and practices), which could be imposed or borrowed, contain important contradictions, as is the case with other ideologies and practices. This not only means that the global discourses can be ‘read’ differently at different times, in different places, by different people, but also that these ideas and practices may lead to different outcomes.

Second, these portraits either diminish the role of nation-states or treat states as relatively autonomous, rational-choice actors. While viewing the state as autonomous is fraught with theoretical and political problems (see Dale, 1989; Willinsky, 2002), we should note that even semi-peripheral and peripheral nation-states within the world system (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1979) have some influence on global dynamics and have some capacity to filter, if not deflect, the penetration of global discourses (e.g., see Berman, 1992, p. 59).

Third, these portraits relegate to the shadows the full range of national and international actors. For example, Robertson, Bonal & Dale (2002, p. 472) argue that ‘globalization is the outcome of processes that involve real [global organization] actors... with real interests’ and Suarez (2007, p. 7) indicates how intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) serve as ‘receptor sites for transnational ideas ... promot[ing] and diffuse[ing] new ideas in education’ (see also Terano & Ginsburg, 2008). Thus, we should note that various intergovernmental organisations, whether bilateral or multilateral, may have different interests and assumptions, and thus the global reform agendas that these organisations seek to promote may not always be the same or, if similar, may not be pursued in ways that reinforce each other.

In this paper we offer an analysis – based on a review of published scholarship as well as documents published by multilateral organisations (i.e., UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank), bilateral agencies (US Agency for International Development), and international NGOs (e.g., Academy for Educational Development, Aguirre International, American Institutes for Research, CARE) – of the global discourses on the reform of teaching, with particular attention to ideas/practices of active-learning pedagogies. In addition, in order to better understand how such discourses inform and are informed by a range of national-level actors, we focus our lens also on discourses of the government of Egypt, which is one of the nine most populous countries in the

world, has one of the largest education systems (UNESCO, 2006), and plays a central strategic role 'in determining the stability of the Middle East and southern Mediterranean area' (Sayed, 2005, p. 67).

## **Discourses of the community of scholars**

'Active-learning' (or 'student-centred') pedagogies represent a model of teaching that highlights 'minimal teacher lecturing or direct transmission of factual knowledge, multiple small group activities that engage students in discovery learning or problem solving, and frequent student questions and discussion' (Leu & Price-Rom, 2006, p. 19; on student-centred instruction, see Cuban, 1984, pp. 3-4). 'Active-learning' pedagogies can be contrasted with 'formal' or 'direct instruction' approaches emphasising teacher lecturing or direct transmission of factual knowledge, coupled with 'recitation and drill' (Spring, 2006, p. 6)<sup>3</sup>. Thus, there are both behavioural and cognitive dimensions on which active-learning, student-centred pedagogies can be contrasted with formal or direct instruction (see Mayer, 2004; Ginsburg, 2006; Barrow et al., 2007). The behavioural dimension of active-learning pedagogies focuses on the degree to which instructional practices enable students to engage in verbal or physical behaviour, while the cognitive dimension highlights the degree to which teaching strategies enable students to engage in various forms/levels of thinking. Thus, we can identify different theoretical and philosophical notions that have contributed to how the differences between these pedagogies are framed.

The *behavioural dimension* is perhaps most frequently traced to American philosopher/educator, John Dewey (1859-1952), who developed a pragmatist philosophy, popularised 'progressive' or 'experiential' education, and promoted learning by experimentation and practice, learning by doing (e.g., Dewey, 1938). However, one can also trace a concern for (especially verbal) behaviour in learning to: (i) Confucius (551-479 BC), who argued for 'individualized instruction through discussion'; (ii) Socrates (470-399 BC), who emphasised involving individual learners 'in a philosophic dialogues'; (iii) Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), who encouraged 'firsthand experience in learning environments'; and (iv) Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), who argued for learning via 'free self-activity ... [which] allows for active creativity and social participation' (Treat et al., 2008). Furthermore, we should note the more recent theoretical contribution of scholars and educators associated with the Humanist Movement, for example, Carl Rogers (1969, p. 162), who argued that 'much significant learning is acquired by doing' and that 'learning is facilitated when the student is a responsible participant'.

The *cognitive dimension* is generally traced to the work of the French psychologist, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), who ‘suggested that, through processes of accommodation and assimilation, individuals construct new knowledge from their experiences’ (Wikipedia, 2008, para. 1). Another source of influence is the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), whose writings focused on ‘the relationship between language and thinking’ as well as ‘the roles of historical, cultural, and social factors in cognition’ (Wikipedia, 2008, para. 3). Moreover, although Qur’anic schools have tended to emphasise rote learning and memorisation (Boyle, 2006; Spring 2006), alternative pedagogical traditions associated with Islamic scholars stress students’ active cognitive role in learning. For example, Al-Jahiz (776-868) promoted using ‘deductive reasoning’ as well as ‘memorization’ and Abu Nasr al-Farabi (870-950) encouraged ‘instruction ... that ... ensures that both teacher and student participate actively in the process ..., allow[ing] the instruction to be student-centered’ (Günther, 2006, pp. 375-76). Finally, a more contemporary cognitive psychologist of education, Merl Wittrock (1979), explains that ‘learners have active roles in ... learning. They are not passive consumers of information ... Even when learners are given the information they are to learn, they still must discover meaning’ (p. 10).

## **Discourses of international organisations**

Beeby’s (1966) book, *The Quality of Education in Developing Countries*, was ‘widely influential’ internationally ‘in the late 1960s and early 1970s’ in efforts ‘to improve the quality of teaching by changing teaching styles ... toward liberal, student-centered methods’ (Guthrie, 1990, pp. 220-21). And in a chapter in *The Quality of Education and Economic Development: A World Bank Symposium* (Heyneman & White, 1986) Beeby restated his earlier argument that as education systems (particularly primary schools) progress toward higher stages of development ‘teaching becomes less rigid, narrow, and stereotyped and less dependent on mass methods of instruction and rote memorization’ (Beeby, 1986, p. 39). In the introduction to this volume, based on a symposium organised by the World Bank in May 1983, Heyneman (1986) explains:

‘Previously most educational loans from the World Bank were directed at expanding educational systems by building more schools, hiring more teachers, and providing access for more students. ... [Now the focus is on quality. And,] although classroom pedagogical style may be locally determined, the ingredients required to make classrooms function properly are not.’ (p. 3)

The late 1980s, the 1990s and the 2000s witnessed an explosion of international research reports and policy documents focusing on reforming teachers' behaviour toward active-learning pedagogies. Perhaps one of the most internationally visible policy statements was the document ratified by the World Conference on Education for All (EFA): Meeting Basic Learning Needs, jointly organised by UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, in Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990. The *World Declaration on Education for All* states that 'active and participatory [instructional] approaches are particularly valuable in assuring learning acquisition and allowing learners to reach their fullest potential' (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990, Article 4).

In the following year, the World Bank published a research-based policy report (Lockheed & Levin, 1991), in which the editors conclude

'by summarizing the areas of accord [across cases in book] as a basis for considering generic approaches to developing schools that will become more effective ... The emphasis on student learning is to shift from a more traditional passive approach in which all knowledge is imparted from teachers and textbooks to an active approach in which the student is responsible for learning.' (pp. 15-16)

UNICEF helped to channel this global pedagogical discourse into Egypt, when in cooperation with the Egyptian Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Canadian International Development Agency it launched the Community School project in 1992. As a key UNICEF staff member (Zaalouk, 2004) later recounted, the 'community-school education model in Egypt was established during the period following the [1990] *Jomtien Education for All* (EFA) world conference' (p. 31):

'The contract signed [with the MOE] stipulated that ... community schools would provide innovative pedagogies for quality education [especially for girls] that would focus on active learning, acquisition of life skills, values-based learning (with an emphasis on practicing rights), and brain-based learning that would awaken all the child's intelligences, including his or her spiritual and emotional ones.' (Zaalouk, 2004, p. xi)<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, UNESCO and UNDP helped to diffuse the discourse on pedagogical reform by funding an assessment of educational reform efforts in Egypt between 1991 and 1996. The authors of that report, which was widely and prominently circulated in Egypt, state that:

'By all standards, the initial phase of the basic education reform in Egypt (1991-1996) has been successful. ... [However,] a number of capacity-building initiatives are needed to strengthen the reform in the following

areas: (1) teacher education, both in-service and pre-service, so as to broaden the teachers' capacities to deliver the new curriculum and [interactive instructional] methods.' (Spaulding et al., 1996; cited in MOE, 2002, pp. 169-71)

The World Bank also helped this pedagogical discourse to travel to Egypt, when in cooperation with the Egyptian Ministry of Education and the European Union it initiated the Education Enhancement Programme in 1996. According to the *Project Information Document* (World Bank, 1996), this project sought to 'significantly increase students' achievement of basic skills and help improve their critical thinking skills' (p. 2). This would be accomplished by 'improving the quality of teaching and learning' (p. 2) and introducing educators to 'new methods of teaching' (p. 8). While this brief document is somewhat ambiguous about how teaching quality and new teaching methods were conceived, the programme evaluation conducted a decade later clarifies a preference for active-learning, student-centred versus formal transmission, and teacher-centred instruction approaches. Variables studied included:

- *Educational Techniques* to meet the needs of low achievers ..., for example, giving them a large number of questions ...
- *Frontal Teaching* represents the time the teacher, on average, spends on frontal teaching.
- *Group work* represents the time the teacher, on average, spends on group work. ...
- *Teacher classroom management* refers to ... giving pupils the opportunity to express their opinions, distributing roles and responsibilities among pupils, encouraging pupils to depend on themselves ...
- *Learning strategies* ... refers to the extent to which teachers divide pupils into 'cooperative working' subgroups, take into consideration to develop pupils' critical thinking, train pupils in problem solving ...' (Programme and Project Monitoring Unit [PPMU], 2006, pp. 48-49)

The US Agency for International Development also began to promote pedagogical reform toward active-learning methods in the mid-1990s. For instance, the 'amplified description' of a proposed (but not implemented) Strategic Objective Agreement between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the United States of America for Girls' Education states: "The Parties to this agreement will advance this process [by training] ... teachers to apply the interactive teaching methodologies and encourage problem solving by learners. ... Technical assistance will support the development of ... [teachers] using student-centered methodologies and emphasizing problem-solving and analytic skills' (USAID/Egypt, 1996, p. 10).

Ten years after the World Conference on Education for All, UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank co-sponsored a meeting in Dakar, Senegal, attended by representatives from most governments from around the world, including Egypt. The 'Dakar Framework' from this 2000 meeting reiterates an international policy commitment to active-learning pedagogies: 'Governments and all other EFA partners must work together to ensure basic education of quality for all, regardless of gender, wealth, location, language or ethnic origin. Successful education programmes require [among other things:] ... well-trained teachers and active-learning techniques' (UNESCO, 2000, p. 17).

In the same year USAID/Egypt initiated the New Schools Programme (NSP), which in many respects mirrored the ideas contained in the (non-implemented) Strategic Objective for Basic Education grant. Based on USAID/Egypt's request for proposals, CARE, the Education Development Centre, World Education and several local NGOs submitted the following as part of their NSP proposal, in reference to one of the expected intermediate results – 'Improved Teaching and Learning Practices in USAID-Supported Schools: The CARE Team will develop an effective training program for teachers and school officials ... in single-grade NSP schools, ... emphasiz[ing] active, child-centered learning methodologies that help students develop strong problem-solving skills' (CARE et al., 1999, p. 16). Such reform pedagogies were also mentioned in the mid-term evaluation of NSP (Aguirre International, 2003): 'To meet its goal of improving educational quality', the New Schools Programme provided 'teachers with support for trying new ideas, ... [including:] cooperative learning, some forms of active learning' (p. x) and for 'changing ... their teaching practice from traditional, rote learning to one in which children are working together, participating actively in their own learning' (p. 18).

And in March 2001, USAID/Egypt (2001) committed to supporting the Alexandria Education Reform Pilot Project designed to 'improve the quality of education in the Governorate of Alexandria ... through [among other things] ... enhanced training of teachers and school administrators' (p. 1). The Concept Paper for this project observed that 'most teachers ... over-emphasize the skill of memorization. ... [and need to be] trained for using alternative methods encouraging student interaction' (pp. 4-5). In the Status Report on the Alexandria Pilot, which was distributed half way through the second school year of the project, USAID/Egypt (2002, p. 8) calls positive attention to the training courses provided for teachers, including: Effective Teaching Methods, Student-Centred Methods, Advanced Student-Centred Training – (conducted in the) US, and Supervising Student-Centred Classes.

Also in 2002, in preparation for requesting proposals for the Education Reform Programme (see Academy for Educational Development et al., 2004; American

Institutes for Research et al., 2004), USAID/Egypt commissioned a study. The study report sketched a number of cross-cutting themes, including: ‘Classroom Learning Environment. ... Egyptian public schools ... emphasize memorization and rote learning of the exam-driven curriculum. ... There is little ... [use of] new methodologies that encourage and enable students to become active, enthusiastic participants in their own learning’ (Aguirre International, 2002, pp. 11-12).

USAID/Egypt’s growing and increasingly explicit enthusiasm for active-learning pedagogies is evident in its September 2003 Programme Descriptions used to request applications for ERP: ‘Quality improvements are required to ensure that universal enrollment is accompanied by the acquisition of critical-thinking skills. ... Extensive training is required for tens of thousands of Egyptian educators to adopt modern methodologies and promote active learning’ (USAID/Egypt, 2003a, p. 4; USAID/Egypt, 2003b, p. 7). Furthermore, USAID/Egypt (2003a, pp. 19-20) specified two of the sub-intermediate results expected to be achieved by the Classrooms and Schools component ERP: (2.4) ‘teachers receive pre-service education and in-service training in learner-focused teaching and assessment methods’ and (3.1) ‘students engage in participatory learning, critical thinking and problem-solving’.

Then, in 2005, USAID (2005) published its global *Education Strategy*, which argued that ‘[i]mproving instruction is a complex task that entails a wide range of interventions. ... supporting improved teacher training ... [toward] adoption of *teaching* methods that involve students in the learning process’ (p. 9). That same year, USAID/Egypt agreed to extend the New Schools Programme through 2008. In its application for the extension, reflecting its perception of USAID/Egypt’s priorities, CARE (2005) highlighted that: (a) ‘over 1,500 teachers and facilitators are using active, student-centered learning methodologies as a result of their training with NSP’ (p. 5) and (b) ‘active learning methods ... create a dynamic, interactive environment in which girls and boys have a voice and an opportunity for hands-on educational activities’ (p. 9).

Also, in 2005, USAID/Egypt commissioned an evaluation of the Alexandria Pilot Project, which focused in part on the goal of improving teaching and learning. The evaluation report mentions:

‘[T]he introduction of new teaching-learning methods to the schools most directly addresses educational quality. The central premise is that students optimize their acquisition, mastery, and retention of new skills when they are actively involved in their acquisition. ... Most pilot-school teachers understand at least the fundamental nature of active-learner pedagogy. ... Although classroom observation was not possible, evidence suggests that pilot-school teachers have introduced interactive methods into their classrooms to a modest extent.’ (Tietjen et al., 2005, p. vii)



More recently, in 2007, in its Request for Proposals for a new initiative, entitled Girls Improved Learning Outcomes, USAID/Egypt (2007) observed that ‘ineffective instructional methods and other dimensions of school quality also limit the capacity of the school system to prepare students, particularly girls, with basic skills needed for a modernizing society’ (p. 6), and then outlined the purpose of one of the components of the project, ‘improving the quality of teaching and learning: ... to support the implementation of a standards-based model for quality education in targeted schools and communities ... [through] a focus on ... active and meaningful student learning and assessment [as well as] ... girl friendly educational materials and pedagogical practices’ (p. 8).

Given the volume – in the sense of amount and loudness – of the multilateral organisation discourse promoting active-learning pedagogies during the previous two decades, we should not be surprised that UNESCO’s (2008) *EFA Global Monitoring Report* concludes that ‘country case studies ... indicate a trend to revise curricula to make classroom interactions more responsive and centred on the child. There is a move away from traditional ‘chalk and talk’ teaching to more discovery-based learning and a greater emphasis on outcomes that are broader than basic recall of facts and information’ (p. 131)<sup>5</sup>.

## **Egyptian government discourses**

When Mohamed Ali assumed political leadership of ‘modern’ Egypt in 1805, he established a secular education system along side the Islamic al-Azhar system, though both systems seem to have been dominated by teacher-centred, knowledge-transmission pedagogies. During Egypt’s period of ‘semi-independence’ (1922-1952), following British colonisation (1882-1922), ‘great [quantitative] advances took place in public education at all levels’ (Cochran, 1986, p. 1; see also Williamson, 1987, p. 107), but there was less progress in achieving quality. For example, Radwan’s (1951; cited in Erlich, 1989) research concluded that ‘teaching in the schools ... consisted mainly of inculcating abstract or factual information, learned by rote in the traditional way’ (p. 97).

Following the 1952 Revolution, the Egyptian government headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970) continued to focus on quantitative growth in schooling, ‘expanding access to education at all levels’ (Williamson, 1987, pp. 118-19), as did Anwar Al-Sadat’s government (1970-1981). However, in September 1979, the Ministry of Education during the Sadat period published *A Working Paper Concerning the Development and Modernization of Education in Egypt*, which focused some attention on quality issues: ‘This paper ... argued that ... [there is] an urgent need to change and update Egyptian education ... [because]: a) curricula

do not prepare students for practical, productive lives; b) rote memorization dominates the learning-teaching situation; ... [and] e) low teacher qualifications' (MOE, 1979; discussed in USAID/Egypt, 1981, p. 5).

And when Mohammed Hosni Mubarak (1981-present) became president, his government initially emphasised quantitative expansion, including extending compulsory education from 6 to 9 years. However, in 1991, at the end of his first decade in office, in the wake of the World Conference on Education for All, and in the context of Egypt negotiating a structural adjustment programme with the World Bank, Mubarak (in a speech before the joint session of the People's Assembly and the Shura Council; see MOE, 1992) called attention to what he termed 'the crisis in education ... Education continues to suffer from a predominant focus on quantity rather than quality' (p. 5). The volume in which his speech was published, *Mubarak and Education* (MOE, 1992), articulated the Egyptian government's conception of improving educational quality:

'Education should, therefore, change from an outdated mode of teaching dependent on memorization and repetition to a new form of instruction, which would include the student as an active participant in the educational experience and an active partner in the learning process. ... Emphasis on rote learning and memorization has produced individuals who are easily programmed and vulnerable ... contributing to the prevalence of many social problems, such as drug dependency, extremism, and fanaticism.' (p. 43)

Similarly, in its *Implementing Egypt's Educational Reform Strategy*, the Egyptian Ministry of Education (1996) elaborates its conception of educational quality, when discussing education being a 'national security' issue: 'The democratic framework also necessitated that students through all stages of the educational ladder be exposed to different types of learning tools and materials, and taught necessary democratic skills, such as debate, tolerance for other opinions, critical analysis and thinking, and the significance of participating in decision making' (p. 22). And in his book, *Education and the Future*, Hussein Kamel Bahaa El Din (1997), who served as Egypt's Minister of Education from 1991 to 2004, echoes points made earlier by Mubarak when discussing the continuing 'crisis in education': 'It is imperative for us to change from a familiar system that emphasized rote memorization and passive learning to a new system that emphasizes active participation, with the learner a significant partner in the process' (p. 107).

While (as discussed above) multilateral and bilateral organisation discourses can be seen to have been channelled to Egypt through technical assistance projects and evaluation studies, we should also note how Egyptian discourses have been

a part of, and likely informed, such international organisation discourses. For instance, Egyptian President Mubarak spoke at the 2000 Dakar EFA conference, stressing: 'As the ninth decade of the last century witnessed determination that education is for all, the first decade of the twenty-first century must witness, with more determination and insistence, strenuous efforts to achieve a new vision, i.e., *Education for Excellence and Excellence for All*' (see MOE, 2002, p. 67). The phrase 'education for excellence and excellence for all' was repeated in the MOE publication, *Mubarak and Education: Qualitative Development in the National Project of Education* (MOE, 2002), calling this 'a major national target that directs its march according to the criteria of total quality in education' (p. 6). This MOE (2002) publication also identifies the following as two key elements of the 'future vision of education in Egypt': (a) 'Achieving a Learning Community ... Moving forward from a culture of memorization and repetition to [one] of originality and creativity. ... marked by the individual's active role in the teaching/learning process' (p. 140) and (b) 'Revolution in the Concepts and Methods of Education ... The student's role is not that of a *passive receiver*, but of a knowledge-producing researcher' (p. 148).

In 2003, the Ministry of Education published a key document, the *National Standards of Education in Egypt*, following an intensive effort involving many educators. According to the introduction to this document: 'Having succeeded in achieving ... [the objective of 'education for all'], the state is now inspired by the President's vision which is represented in his [1991] call for a qualitative change in education' (MOE, 2003, p. 4). The standards and indicators for the 'educator' domain, entitled 'learning strategies and classroom management', provide evidence of how central active-learning, student-centred pedagogies had become within at least the official Egyptian discourses:

- First Standard: Utilizing educational strategies that meet student needs. [Indicators:] Teacher involves all students in diverse educational experiences suitable to their skills and talents. Uses different strategies to present concepts, introduce skills and explain the subject. Gives students open-ended questions and facilitates discussion to clarify and motivate the student's thinking.
- Second Standard: Facilitating effective learning experiences. [Indicators:] Teacher provides independent and cooperative learning opportunities. Divides students into groups to promote interaction and learning. Encourages positive interaction and cooperation among students.
- Third Standard: Involving students in problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity [Indicators:] Encourages students to apply what they have

learnt in educational and life situations. Encourages students to be inquisitive, have initiative and show creativity. ... Involves students in problem-solving activities and encourages various ways to reach solutions. Encourages students to put forth critical questions. ...

- Fifth Standard: Effective utilization of motivation methods. [Indicators:] Creates a favorable educational and learning climate to encourage classroom interaction ...' (MOE, 2003, pp. 75-76)

During his relatively brief period as Minister of Education, Ahmed Gamal Eddin Moussa (July 2004-December 2005) downplayed somewhat the role of standards, though the Ministry and the Egyptian government more generally maintained a clear focus on improving educational quality and active-learning. For instance, in its September 2004 publication, *Reforming Pre-University Education Programs*, the Ministry outlines the latest plans for reform, which included as two of its five main pillars for reform: 'assuring education quality' and 'training and improving teachers' conditions' (MOE, 2004; cited in El Baradei & El Baradei, 2004, p. 5). Moreover, the Minister of Education articulated the following during a newspaper interview: '[More important than] having thick books [and] a huge number of courses ... is that students interact with what they are learning in order to simply gain knowledge and acquire useful skills. ... Quality is more important than quantity, and if we have a lot of schools without qualified teachers or proper equipment, then we haven't solved anything' (Moussa, 2005).

Soon after Yosri Saber Husien El-Gamal was appointed Minister of Education in December 2005, he stated in an interview: 'The third pillar is professional development – focusing on raising teachers capabilities ... [including using] modern educational methods ... The second challenge is about the quality of education ... based on national standards. ... [and focused on] ... develop[ing] students' mental skills and creativity' (El-Gamal, 2006). The Minister also mentioned similar points, while highlighting teachers' use of student-centred and active-learning teaching methodologies as well as students' engagement in critical thinking and problem solving, during a presentation made in March related to the Ministry's strategic planning initiative:

- The Educational Vision is built upon sector-wide, total quality approach, based on six main domains: 1) Effective School, providing quality education for every learner, in an untraditional student-centered environment, using technology and active-learning methodologies to enable the student acquiring self learning, problem-solving, critical thinking and life skills. ... 3) Curricula that are relevant, based on active learning, [and] support critical thinking [and] problem solving ...' (MOE, 2006, slides 6-7)

- Strategic Directions: 2. Quality: ... a) opportunities for on-going training and professional development ... [and] d) curriculum and teaching will be diverted from rote-learning mode to active learning, building the knowledge base of the learner and enhancement of higher skills.’ (MOE, 2006, slides 15-16)

MOE’s *Strategic Plan* (2007, Part IV, Chapter 2) continued to stress the importance of active-learning pedagogies: (a) ‘there are 4 key factors that contribute to educational quality in what and how students are taught: standards-based content, integration of IT, integration of assessment, and adopting an active learning methodology’ (p. 1); (b) ‘the ... curriculum documents/frameworks [should] ... reflect the move away from a traditional rote memorization approach with a strong focus on content to one that is focused on application of skills and critical thinking and problem solving’ (p. 4); and (c) ‘to insure effective implementation of the new curricula and instructional materials, teacher professional development programs in the area of student-centered, active-learning methodology and assessment are essential elements’ (p. 7).

Finally, in 2007 Egypt’s National Centre for Educational Research and Development (NCERD, 2007) published a *Mid-Term EFA Evaluation*, reporting on progress in achieving the goals set out in Egypt’s *National Plan for Education for All, 2002/2003-2015/2016* (NCERD et al., 2004). The report summarises the qualitative shift in which the Egyptian government in engaged, including a focus on active learning: ‘The MOE works on achieving a qualitative shift in education, and improving the quality of the educational process through the following efforts: ... (2) moving from achieving quantity to quality aspects in education; (3) ensuring excellence for all and achieving total quality education through students’ active involvement in the educational process ...; [and] (4) promoting teachers’ professional development and improving teaching methods’ (NCERD, 2007, p. xi).

## Conclusion

In this paper we sought to illuminate how the global and national/local interact with respect to educational reform. Our focus was on the discourses of multilateral organisations (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank), bilateral agencies (viz., USAID), international NGOs (e.g., Academy for Educational Development, Aguirre International, American Institutes for Research, CARE), and the Egyptian government with respect to promoting active-learning, student-centred pedagogies as a key element of improving educational quality.

While our focus here is on reform rhetoric, readers may also be interested in whether such rhetoric corresponds to classroom practices. That is, to what extent have active-learning teaching methods been fostered through professional development activities and to what extent have Egyptian teachers implemented this pedagogical reform? There is, indeed, evidence that within the context of pilot projects teachers acquired the commitment and competence to at least move along the continuum from teacher-centred and transmission/memorisation-oriented to student-centred and active-learning pedagogical approaches. This is the case, for example, for the Community School Programme in Egypt (1992-2004) supported by UNICEF and the Canadian Development Agency (see Zaalouk, 2004), as well as for three USAID-supported projects in Egypt: (a) the New School Programme (2000-2007) (see Aguirre International, 2003); (b) the Alexandria Pilot Project (2002-2004) (see Tietjen et al., 2005); and (c) the Education Reform Programme (2004-2009) (see Ginsburg et al., 2008; Megahed et al., 2009). However, reformed teacher behaviour appears not to have been generalised either by 2002 or by 2007<sup>6</sup>:

‘Egyptian public schools ... emphasize memorization and rote learning ... [and] there is little ... [use of] new methodologies that encourage and enable students to become active, enthusiastic participants in their own learning.’ (Aguirre International, 2002, pp. 11-12)

‘[D]espite ... effective implementation of components targeting changes on factors of the teaching-learning process in Egyptian schools, there is not much evidence of ... impact on pedagogical practices.’ (World Bank, 2007, p. 47)

With respect to the relative strength of influence of local/national versus global actors, Sayed (2006) argues, for example, that

‘the reform initiatives had already been conceived internally within Egyptian government schemes ... before the launch of the Jomtien Education for All Campaign in 1990. The MOE assimilation of the EFA goals allowed it to jump on a moving wagon ... [and] secure funding for education projects.’ (p. 148)

We believe that this represents only part of the picture. The report of discourses presented above reflects neither a simple dynamic of national/local actors making unfettered choices in a free market of ideas nor a simple process of international actors imposing ideas on unwilling national/local actors. The complex dialectic between the global and local (see Arnove & Torres, 1999) may be seen from the

following statements by the Egyptian government. First, reflecting a more voluntary choice perspective, the MOE (2002) identifies what it terms *its* own objectives in the field of international cooperation and partnership:

- ‘1. To benefit from world experiences and international co-operation that Egypt has approached through openness to different cultures.
2. To set up new partnerships with the international organizations concerned with education (e.g., UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, European Union, USAID, CIDA, Japanese Aid, Finnish Aid, and some others).
3. To get foreign aid and international expertise to participate in carrying out different education projects.
4. To develop education cadres capable of coping with international developments.
5. To get acquainted with international standards that help to achieve quality education.’ (p. 128)

Second, portraying an external-influence perspective, Egypt’s National Centre for Educational Research and Development (NCERD et al., 2004, p. 30) states that the ‘National Plan for EFA, 2002-2016’ was informed by ‘the goals of ‘Education for All’ as approved by the International Forum on Education (Dakar, April 2000)’ – an ‘external’ international document, though developed during a meeting attended and perhaps influenced by Egyptian government representatives. At the same time NCERD et al. (2004) mention the following, which might seem to be internal sources, but in fact were often produced with international technical assistance:

- ‘a. The National Plan for Social and Economic Development (2002-2007) in Egypt.
- b. The Ministry of Education’s five-year plan (2002-2007).
- c. The Program of National Modernization – Egypt in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – education as the base for human development and future modernization (2002-2012).
- d. Structural modeling of a national plan for ‘Education for All’ ...’ (p. 30)

In addition, in this paper we outlined some of the global discourses of the community of scholars focused on active-learning, student-centred pedagogies versus more formal teacher-centred, transmission-oriented instructional approaches. Whether focusing on the behavioural or the cognitive dimension to distinguish these teaching methods, these discourses can be traced back at least to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., John Dewey, Jean Piaget), but appeared much earlier in Asia (Confucius: 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century BC), Europe (Socrates: 5<sup>th</sup> century

BC), and the Islamic world (Abu Nasr al-Farabi, 9<sup>th</sup> century AD). Thus, it should be clear that the ideas were available – and, at least to an extent, circulating – long before they punctuated the discourses of either:

- a. international organisations (first identified in the mid-1980s, but increasingly more audible beginning in the early 1990s); or
- b. the Egyptian government (first catalogued in the late 1970s, but increasingly visible beginning in the early 1990s).

Finally, our examination of global and national discourses of active learning invites further research to explore why the volume of active-learning pedagogical reform discourses (rhetoric and actions) increased when it did. Although it is important to analyse the theoretical and research discourses through which this was accomplished, here we point to political and economic developments that may have not only facilitated such discourses but also enabled active-learning pedagogies to become increasingly taken for granted as part of notions of educational quality. According to the World Bank's (1999, pp. 1-2) *Education Sector Strategy*, two of the 'five drivers of change' in the field of education are (a) 'global democratization and the growth of a powerful civil society which requires education for citizen participation' and (b) 'globalization of markets resulting in employers pursuing the best and least expensive workers by shifting their operations from country to country' (see also Spring, 2004, pp. 45-46).

With regard to *global democratisation*, Spring (2006) has argued that '[f]ormalistic forms of education are often used to prepare students to accept and fit into existing ... systems ... [while p]rogressive forms of education are considered a means for preparing students to actively influence the direction of ... political and social systems' (pp. 6-7). Thus, *at least at a rhetorical level*, there may be a link between promoting active-learning pedagogies and supporting political democratisation. Interestingly, however, while the Egyptian Ministry of Education argued the connection between pedagogical and political reform in the mid-1990s – 'the democratic framework also necessitate[s] that students ... be ... taught necessary democratic skills, such as debate, ... critical analysis and thinking and ... participating in decision making' (MOE, 1996, p. 22) – we did not detect this argument explicitly within the educational reform discourses of international organisations during the time period we investigated. Moreover, we need to be cautious in accepting uncritically the idea that real democratisation – as opposed to the ideology of democracy – is spreading around the world (see Diamond & Plattner, 1993). We also need to consider that although the 'Egyptian state has formally recognized the importance of and need for democratization ever since the 1972s, ... the state approaches democratization with prudence, ...



particularly since national security and political stability are ‘endangered’ by fundamentalist terrorist movements and external conspiracies’ (Sayed, 2006, p. 79)<sup>7</sup>. Thus, in his critical analysis of reforms promoting ‘democracy of learning’ in Egypt, Badran (2008) observes that one meaning of this phrase is ‘giving the students a great deal of freedom and responsibilities’ for learning, but notes that such ‘efforts ... to improve ... the educational system ... will be fruitless unless they occur in ... a context where the spirit of democracy prevails ... [in] the social and political relations taking place outside the school’ (pp. 6, 9; see also Hargreaves, 1997).

In terms of *globalisation of the economy*, Carnoy (1999) notes that the goal of ‘competitiveness-driven reforms’ (in contrast to ‘finance-driven reforms’ and ‘equity-driven reforms’) are

‘primarily to improve economic productivity by improving the ‘quality’ of labour. In practice, this philosophy translates into expanding the average level of educational attainment among young workers and improving the ‘quality’ at each level – where quality is measured mainly by student achievement, but also by education’s relevance to a changing world of work.’ (p. 137)

This, of course, could lead to a privileging of formal, teacher transmission-oriented pedagogies. However, as Mattson (2008) comments in relation to higher education in the US: ‘Increasingly, justifications of active learning seem less interested in questions of democracy and active citizenship ... than in the ‘new’ realities of the American economy. Active learning is necessary because employers need people who can retool quickly’ (para. 6). And clearly the international and national documents reviewed above often articulated at least an implicit link between pedagogical reform and economic development, in that the rationale behind improving educational quality was framed in relation to international competitiveness. This link is made even more explicitly in the following excerpt from a volume entitled *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World*:

‘The teacher-focused learning and authoritarian teaching styles that prevail in most Egyptian classrooms promote passive learning. ... It is clear that Egypt will need a more sophisticated education system that *produces students with critical thinking skills and the ability to enter the competitive job market.*’ (USAID, 2004, p. 11; emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

But why did the discourses favouring active-learning pedagogies reach such a crescendo beginning in the 1990s? While technological developments like the ‘information revolution’ (World Bank, 1999) certainly reshaped the world economic system, we need to consider as a major contributing factor the

restructuring of the global political economy that resulted from the ‘revolutions’ in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the ‘collapse’ of the Soviet Union in 1991. The move from a bi-polar world (plus non-aligned nations) to basically a uni-polar world (though with important divisions in terms of wealth and religious/ideological dimensions) has enabled the rise of at least the ideologies of ‘democracy’ and the ascendance of multinational corporatist capitalism.

## Notes

1. Revised and abridged version of keynote presentation at the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education (MESCE) conference, Malta, 11-13 May 2008. The research on which this article is based was undertaken, in part, in relation to work funded through the Educational Quality Improvement Project (EQUIP1) Leader Award and the Egypt Education Reform Programme (ERP).
2. Both authors have been involved with the USAID-funded Education Reform Programme (ERP), one of the international organisation-supported projects discussed in this paper. Mark Ginsburg initially served as director of the Faculties of Education Reform division of ERP (2004-2006), and subsequently contributed short-term technical assistance for ‘documentation for reform diffusion’ activity of ERP’s Monitoring and Evaluation division, while based at the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, DC (2006-2008). Nagwa Megahed served as programme specialist for Action and Decision-Oriented Research within ERP’s Faculties of Education Reform division (2004-2006), and subsequently worked as a senior technical advisor in ERP’s Monitoring and Evaluation division (2006-2008). The research reported in this article represents an extension of a documentation study of ERP-supported reform in the area of professional development (see Megahed & Ginsburg, 2008). The article also builds on the research undertaken as part of the Leader Award for USAID’s (global) Educational Quality Improvement Programme (EQUIP1) (see Ginsburg et al., 2008; Megahed et al., 2009).
3. Guthrie (1990) notes that ‘the schools of lesser-developed countries are littered with remnants of attempts to change the quality of teaching. ... [based on] Western philosophies of education that denigrate the formalistic teaching’ (p. 219); ‘while many modern educationalists do not approve of formalism, it is desirable and effective in many educational and cultural contexts’ (p. 228). Furthermore, noting the paradox that rote learning tends to be more dominant in Asian than Western schools, but students in Asian countries tend to outperform their Western country peers on international achievement tests, Watkins (2007, p. 309) calls our attention to ‘cultural differences in the perception of the relationship between memorizing and understanding’, commenting that Asian students ‘frequently learn repetitively, both to ensure retention *and* to enhance understanding’.
4. Approximately ten years after this UNICEF- and CIDA-supported project was launched, the author of a UNDP and UNESCO reform assessment mission in Egypt recognised favourably the ‘innovative models of institutions, such as One-Classroom Schools and Community Schools ... [which have] introduce[d] appropriate learning materials and teaching practices for multi-grade teaching’ (Spaulding, Manzoor & Ghada, 2003, p. 12).
5. The *EFA Global Monitoring Report* mentions that the People’s Republic of China ‘introduced a new curriculum in 1999, focusing on active learning ... It was in place across the country in primary and junior middle schools by 2005’ (UNESCO, 2008, p. 131). Interestingly, China adopted such progressive pedagogies as government policy in 1999, apparently as a result of

World Bank (as well as UNDP, UNICEF, and UNESCO) discourses, but in the 1920s, before the rise and fall of the Mao-led communist revolution, 'John Dewey introduce[d] progressive education ideas that had a major impact on Chinese educational theory' (Spring, 2006, p. 7).

6. In fact, part of the basis for assessing the impact of professional development activities undertaken within the context of the Education Reform Programme (ERP) was to observe systematically that teachers involved in the programme exhibited a higher degree of reform pedagogies than those in the same governorates who had not participated in ERP-supported activities (see Abd-El-Khalick, 2006, 2007).
7. Sayed (2006) explores in more detail how the Egyptian government and international organisations (bilateral and multilateral intergovernmental as well as nongovernmental) have faced and tried to deal with 'conspiracy' – whether theories or realities – in relation to foreign assistance in education and other sectors. For example, international projects focused on developing 'the 'international orientation of the curriculum' is the element that is most contested and gives weight to conspiracy theory arguments' (Sayed, 2006, p. 110). However, pedagogical reform does not seem to have been caught up in the politics of conspiracy, perhaps, as discussed below, because economic development (versus democratisation) was emphasised by international organisations and the Egyptian government in its discourses about active-learning pedagogies.
8. Reinforcing the point that international organisation discourses focused on economic (versus political/democratic) benefits of pedagogical reform, a subsection of this USAID document devoted to 'civic participation' actually highlights the economic dimension, quoting the *Arab Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2002): 'The most worrying aspect ... is education's inability to provide the requirements for the development of Arab societies. ... If the steady deterioration in the quality of education in the Arab countries ... [is] not reversed, the consequences for human and economic development will be grave' (cited in USAID, 2004, p. 12).

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