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## The de-facto privatization of secondary education in Egypt: a study of private tutoring in technical and general schools

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Most secondary school students in Egypt enrol in private tutoring in almost all subjects throughout the school year. A large proportion of students have stopped attending school altogether due to their reliance on tutoring. This study of how educational markets are perpetuated at school level finds that in the technical track catering to the working classes, the market is forced upon students through physical and verbal intimidation by teachers receiving below subsistence wages. In the more middle class general secondary track, pressure to enrol in tutoring is less direct and the market is promoted as a necessity for competitive exam readiness, despite its unclear dividends. The result has been a de-facto privatization of secondary education facilitated by a state that has determined the material conditions of teachers, failed to prevent related abuse and corruption, and reduced its investment in education to the point that the market has effectively emptied out and displaced public schooling.

**Keywords:** education; Egypt; privatization; private tutoring; secondary education; technical education

### Introduction

In the political and economic context of the end of the Mubarak era, education suffered the same fate of de-facto privatization, corruption and neglect as other social sectors in Egypt. The growth of private tutoring was part of a deliberate policy of the deposed Mubarak regime of promoting privatization and reducing public spending on education. Almost from a child's first year in school, poor families (constituting about 40% of the population)<sup>1</sup> are pressured and intimidated by poorly paid teachers to enrol their children in private tutoring in order to pass from one year to the next. Middle and upper middle class families are equally pressured to enrol their children in tutoring to secure an acceptable level of education. For secondary school students especially, over 80% of students report year-long enrolment in tutoring. In fact, this has culminated in extreme cases of teachers simply going ahead and privatizing their own school by running it as a tutoring

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centre (see *Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2009d; *Al-Ahram* 2011). Tutoring on this scale has obviously created a system that is both very inequitable and very expensive (World Bank 1996, Annex 2).

The spread of tutoring in Egypt began in the 1980s to cater to private and public school students who were preparing for increasingly competitive general secondary certificate (*thanawiya 'amma*) examinations leading to university admission; an issue that primarily affected middle class families for that critical transition year. However, tutoring has now spread to lower stages as well as higher education, thereby affecting a huge proportion of Egyptian households. While private tutoring in the secondary stage to prepare for high-stakes examinations exists in many countries, few other countries have tutoring rates that are as high across all educational stages as in Egypt (see Bray 1999, 2003, 2006). However, tutoring is growing rapidly across the world (Bray 2006) as well as in the Middle East, with studies in North Africa pointing to the rapid spread of tutoring from elementary to higher education (Akkari 2010). The growth of tutoring in Egypt has intertwined with various forms of corruption, exam cheating and emotional and physical harm to students. The concrete ways in which 'informal' tutoring markets have been established within and alongside formal schooling have transformed state institutions and informed the sense of injustice perceived in their operation. Tutoring on this scale has profound implications for equity, access to education, and the content and quality of youth schooling experiences.

The first part of this article presents the available data and literature on private tutoring in Egypt in terms of the institutional context, private tutoring enrolment and household spending on tutoring. The second part discusses the causes and implications of tutoring suggested in the available international literature and their relevance to Egypt. The third part approaches tutoring from the level of the school, based on observations and interviews with students, teachers and principals in one technical and one general boys' secondary school in the Greater Cairo area. As a qualitative study of two schools, the purpose is not to 'prove' the existence of the phenomena described in Part I. It is rather to add texture and depth to our understanding of how some of the issues play out at the school level. The article highlights the institutional setting and school relations that perpetuate tutoring, especially as understood and expressed by students. It emphasizes the existence of two distinct systems of private tutoring – and schooling – fundamentally divided by class. The two worlds of tutoring differ in terms of the driving forces, mechanisms and implications of marketization. In the technical school where marks do not matter, coercion into tutoring is the means by which teachers secure their livelihoods, increasing the level of marginalization and emotional harm to disadvantaged students. In the general school where pressure to enrol in tutoring is less direct, students are no longer able to rely on the school for learning or competitive exam preparation and increasingly abandon it altogether as an institution of learning and

socialization. In both systems, access to the available forms of schooling (and freedom from emotional harm) is largely structured by the ability to pay for private tutoring.

### **Part I: private tutoring in Egypt**

'Private tutoring' in this article refers to classes provided for a fee, which take place outside and in addition to the formal school timetable with the aim of improving official exam performance. Private tutoring in a particular subject usually takes place once or twice a week from the start of the school year (and for general secondary about one month earlier), frequently with numerous additional revision and examination classes scheduled throughout the year. There are two main types of tutoring in Egypt. The first are officially sanctioned after-school classes called 'in-school tutoring' (*majmu'at al-taqwiya al-madrasiya* or simply *magmu'at*). They are provided by the school's teachers after school time and organized according to Ministry of Education (MOE) regulations. Introduced as early as 1952, Law No. 149 for the year 1986 made these classes a mandatory service of the school (Herrera 1992, 75). This was seen as a way to combat private tutoring and alleviate part of its financial burden on families by providing tutoring in school at lower prices, a strategy that has obviously failed. The second type of tutoring is the more straightforward private lessons (*durus khususiya*) that are conducted either in student homes or increasingly in especially established tutoring centres (*marakiz*). Tutoring centres have been mushrooming since the mid-1990s, and cater to almost every socioeconomic group, although they are more concentrated in urban centres.

#### ***Enrolment in tutoring and school attendance***

Several studies have attempted to document enrolment in private tutoring in Egypt over the past 15 years. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) survey in 1997, 51% of poor students and 60% of rich students took private lessons (UNDP 2005). Rates have been increasing over the years and the phenomenon has gained increasing momentum over the past few years alone. A recent official study found that 81% of households had children who received private tutoring in the secondary stage, while 69% received tutoring in the primary and preparatory stages (74% in preparatory and 50% in primary) (Abdul Wahab 2009).

Private tutoring on this scale, especially in general secondary, has had a profound impact on student attendance at schools. Although no reliable official statistics are available, teacher and student absenteeism is rampant throughout the system. Although it is a known fact in Egyptian households, general secondary certificate attendance rates of less than 10% for much of the school year may be difficult to imagine for readers unfamiliar with the

system (for recent news coverage touching on the matter, see *Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2009a, b; Al-Bihiri 2010). In terms of how far tutoring has literally ‘emptied’ schools of students, a prominent scholar of Egyptian education, Linda Herrera (2008, 69), describes a visit to an ordinary boys’ public secondary school in a medium-sized provincial town in northern Egypt in 2007, where she found absolutely no students in the school (not even first secondary students), a pattern common to many general secondary schools.

### ***Household spending and tutoring costs***

Spending on private tutoring is simply immense. According to a survey by the Egyptian National Institute of Planning in 2000, poor households spent a fifth of their yearly income on (supposedly free) schooling (Tadros 2001). Middle class households have been estimated to spend about one third of their income on tutoring (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2003). A recent official nationwide study found that 66% of households spent more than 500 EGP<sup>2</sup> per month on private tutoring (Abdul Wahab, Nisrin 2009), while GDP per capita was around 12,000 EGP per year (2000 USD) (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] 2009). Household spending on private tutoring has been estimated to have exceeded government spending on education for several years now (UNESCO 2003). Recent official estimates of household spending on tutoring have put it between 12 and 15 billion EGP every year, compared to a 10 billion EGP MOE budget (see Kadir al-Mu‘alimin 2009; Al-Samni 2009).

The cost of tutoring varies widely across neighbourhoods, educational stages and tracks in a highly differentiated market. While more affluent households consume somewhat more private tutoring than lower income brackets, they spend much more on it. According to one official study, per-household expenditure of the richest quintile on private tutoring is more than seven times that of the poorest (CAPMAS 2004). In some tutoring centres, students may be charged 5–8 EGP per class in packed lecture halls in low-income neighbourhoods (Al-Samni 2009). In affluent neighbourhoods, tutoring for private school students can reach 120 EGP per class. Literally, the cost of one class varies from 5 to 120 EGP, and revision classes and summary notes are typically more expensive than regular ones.

## **Part II: the causes and implications of private tutoring**

### ***Educational quality***

A key proposition in studies of private tutoring is that tutoring is caused by the low quality of education in public schools (Bray 2009). This would appear to be a very good explanation for the levels of private tutoring in Egypt. The quality of public schooling has declined to the extent that ‘education’ is routinely declared as ‘non-existent’ by Egyptians. Teachers,

students and parents habitually comment on educational issues using the simple phrase, *mafish ta'lim* – there is no education. There has been official recognition that ‘expanded access to education’ has come at the expense of quality (see MOE 2006). Many quality-related issues are documented in ‘official’ sources, including high class densities of over 60 students, short school days, teacher shortages, poorly paid and poorly qualified teachers (see MOE 2006, Annex 2). The quality of basic education in Egypt (the nine years of primary and preparatory schooling) is so poor that it is informally estimated that over one third of those who complete the nine years of compulsory education remain illiterate.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the basic education stage, the lower performing students, coming predominantly from disadvantaged classes and rural backgrounds, are streamed into technical secondary education, while the higher performing students are tracked into general secondary. General secondary typically takes up 30% of the secondary students, while technical secondary takes up about 60%, with the rest studying in religious or private schools.<sup>4</sup>

A note on technical education is necessary here. The quality of technical schooling is so low that it is difficult to describe it to those unfamiliar with the system. The shortage of teachers in technical education has been ‘officially’ estimated in 2006 at 13,596 teachers, affecting industrial specializations for the most part (MOE 2006). According to the MOE, most equipment and machinery lack maintenance, there are very limited supplies and materials for students to work with, and skills promoted are considered almost worthless on the job market (MOE 2006, Annex 2, 106; see also Antoninis 2001; UNDP 2010). But even these strong statements do not come close to approximating realities in most schools. The utter neglect of technical education manifests itself in every facet of instruction and assessment, issues that are covered in more detail in Part III. Technical school graduates suffer the highest rates of unemployment and the lowest earnings and are concentrated within the informal economy’s poor-quality jobs with precarious working conditions (Assaad and Barsoum 2007).

### ***Teacher pay***

Private tutoring has been attributed not only to low educational quality, but particularly to the low pay received by teachers. In many places, including Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Eastern Europe, China and Vietnam, the inadequate salary level of mainstream teachers has forced them to find supplementary incomes to provide for their families (Bray 2006, 2009). Focusing on developing countries, Biswal (1999) analysed tutoring as a form of corruption where teachers in public schools intentionally reduce their teaching efforts to create demand for private tutoring in order to supplement their low incomes. In this way, governments have used tutoring as a mechanism for providing education at a lower cost (Biswal 1999).

Similarly, 'in-school' tutoring in Egypt has primarily functioned as a means of increasing teacher salaries from the private purse and has become normalized as a part of the 'cost' of free public education. Private tutoring in developing countries therefore cannot be understood without reference to teacher pay as compared to living expenses.

The initial spread of tutoring in Egypt after the first wave of economic liberalization in the 1970s and 1980s came in a period when inflation had reached around 30% while increases in salaries were negligible (Tadros 2006). More recently, and despite consecutive waves of inflation and currency devaluation, public school teachers hired on temporary contracts receive pay as low as 2 EGP per class (see Abdul Wahab 2009), which amounts to a sub-subsistence wage of 105–120 EGP per month. This is less than 0.67 USD per day, far lower than any poverty line estimated for Egypt or globally (see UNDP 2010; Sabry 2010). A new 'Teachers' Cadre' system approved in 2006 has significantly raised the salaries of 'full contract' hired teachers. However, full contract teachers probably do not exceed 30% of the nation's teachers,<sup>5</sup> with the rest being hired on temporary contracts paying either 120 EGP or 325 EGP/ per month. However, even on the Cadre system, a beginner teacher receives a salary of around 500 EGP per month, which increases throughout their career to reach 2000 EGP (Leila 2008). Only an income of around 1200 EGP would put a family of four above the poverty line of 2 USD per day.

Low wages are not exclusive to teachers but extend to administrators and officials across the system, creating strong pressure for corruption of various forms, including the facilitation of student coercion into tutoring. Physical and verbal abuse is commonplace in public schools in Egypt (see, for example, Naguib 2006; Saad 2006). It is intensified, however, as part of the means used to intimidate students to enrol in tutoring, an issue that is regularly covered in the local press (for recent examples, see Mu'aqabat 3 Mudi-ri 2010; *Al-Wafd* 2010; *Al-Akhbar* 2010). Especially in disadvantaged schools, paying for tutoring has become compulsory almost from the first year of primary school to avoid abuse and expulsion (Tadros 2006; Sabry 2010). In middle range schools, teachers typically depend on less direct means of coercion and students perceive and enact greater freedom in choosing their tutors.<sup>6</sup> One of the clearest implications of the costs of effectively compulsory tutoring enrolment has been the flight from public to private schools, even in poor neighbourhoods where many parents perceive private schools as cheaper than public schools because tutoring is not compulsory. Between 2001 and 2006, the proportions of private classrooms at primary level increased by 31% while the numbers of pupils in private schools increased by 24% (MOE 2006, Annex 2, 48).

However, while tutoring may prevail as a means for teachers to increase their income, it should be noted that it is prevalent in private general secondary schools and elite (*Tajribiya*) public schools at similar or in fact

higher rates (as evidenced by high tutoring enrolment and spending by the richest quintile). While teacher salaries in these schools are also relatively low, tutoring in these contexts has been typically understood as being driven by competitive examinations.

### ***Competition and high-stakes examinations***

In contexts where teachers are relatively well paid, such as Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and Singapore, it has been argued that the chief driving force for private tutoring has been ‘the competitive nature of society and the scale of perceived rewards that can be achieved for new generations by investment in tutoring’ (Bray 2009, 101–2). Scholars have also linked international variations in the market demand for tutoring to whether countries have post-secondary entrance exams, major status differences among their post-secondary institutions, and direct occupational rewards for entry into those institutions (Bray 1999). A World Bank study in fact concluded that the nature of exams may be the chief causal factor for the prevalence of private tutoring in Egypt (World Bank 1996, Annex 2). The stakes are indeed high for general secondary students. Public university entrance scores (unified and centralized) have been continually rising to the point that top faculties have effectively restricted their admission to those who score higher than 90%. The sense of heightened competition also relates to increasing competition for jobs in light of high levels of unemployment. From 1998 to 2006, there has been a substantial increase in unemployment rates among post-secondary and university graduates, who have become the most vulnerable group in regard to unemployment, as well as a decrease in female labour force participation (arguably due to widespread unemployment), and an increased informalization of the first job obtained by youth (see Antoninis 2001; UNDP 2010). Entering a top faculty therefore provides a necessary edge in competing with large cohorts of university graduates. As elaborated in Part III, however, marks matter very little for technical school students and their future prospects, and cannot explain their tutoring enrolment.

### ***Corruption and the manufacturing and perpetuation of the market***

In a national context where corruption is widespread and accountability at high levels of government minimal, the impoverishment of education employees encouraged and intertwined with networks of interests and corruption to facilitate the growth of private tutoring and set in place strong self-perpetuating patterns. From the earliest stages of the growth of tutoring, examination-setting committee members and subject consultants in the MOE were tempted to provide expensive ‘highly valued’ tutoring and author ‘external’ textbooks and practice workbooks for the market. It also became ‘known’ that there was



only one way of answering the exams that was acceptable to markers, so that even high-achieving students had considerable incentive to enrol with tutors who were privy to that ‘way’ of answering. Until today, tutors promote themselves based on links – often weak or fabricated – to such insider information (see *Al-Jumhuriya* 2010). Other forms of ‘corruption’ and conflicts of interest compounded these patterns, such as MOE curriculum-setting committee members being interchangeably – and even concurrently – private (external) textbook authors, creating for private publishers more ‘efficient’, organized, succinct and attractive texts while authoring unapproachable official textbooks, forcing students to rely on private textbooks. This has exploded into a huge and powerful industry. It has been estimated that Egyptians spend 1.5 billion EGP on ‘external’ textbooks every year (Kadir al-Mu‘alimin 2009), in addition to the 12–15 million they spend on tutoring.

Furthermore, a proportion of the income generated from in-school tutoring (about 15%) goes to ‘administration’ at different levels of the system, thereby creating clear stakes for them to ‘encourage’ or condone tutoring. In-school tutoring regulations are not observed in many schools in terms of maximum class size, the actual fees charged and conditions for fee exemptions (see also Tadros 2006). Apart from sporadic and arbitrary measures, there has been little interest in controlling the massive growth of unlicensed (and untaxed) tutoring centres, many of which are owned by local cronies of the (then ruling and now dissolved) National Democratic Party (see *Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2009c). The highly profitable tutoring and private textbooks businesses became part of a powerful web of corruption and patrimonial relations across the system. Often described as a ‘mafia’ in the media, this web of interests has gained considerable leverage over key centres of decision-making in the MOE. Examination, curriculum and teacher pay reforms that may undermine the private market for education are routinely blocked and resisted. For example, the Teachers’ Syndicate has proposed that students hand in their books at the end of each school year for use by students in the following years, releasing very significant funds for supplementing teachers’ salaries. However, ‘Ministry of Education officials, who receive a commission on every printed copy and make money from selling books at the start of every school year, blocked the plan’ (El-Sayed 2006). In addition, maintaining a long and crammed national curriculum for a very short school year means that many students know that the material could not possibly be covered at school. Therefore, while (middle class) parents are sometimes blamed for perpetuating tutoring by enrolling their children in it regardless of their actual need, this ignores these institutional realities and the divorce between knowledge of the material and ideal exam answers. Incidentally, these issues only begin to suggest the level of wastage and duplication of resources implied in this level of informal privatization where billions are spent on official textbooks that are not used by students and on various aspects of public education, when most learning occurs outside of the formal system.

Finally, while the assessment system in general secondary is lacking indeed, there has been political will in maintaining its basic fairness in terms of marking and monitoring. More recently, however, there have been disturbing signs of decline in even this basic premise, in terms of patterns of collective cheating, cases of leaking of exam questions, irregularities in marking and ranking, and tampering with pass rates (see Al-Dustur 2009; Al-Ghazali Harb 2009). On the other hand, while difficult to imagine for outsiders to the system, the reality in most technical education schools is one of predominant exam cheating and arbitrary marking, as elaborated in Part III. This absence of examination integrity is only possible because it is facilitated and perpetuated by education officials across the system.

### *Equity and school activities*

It has been argued in various settings that private tutoring maintains and exacerbates social stratification (Bray 2006; Akkari 2010). In fact, in a context where private tutoring effectively replaces mainstream schooling, arguments on ‘privatization’ are more relevant than the impact of private tutoring per se. The implications of a largely private education system for equity are straightforward: access to education is premised upon income. In reference to increasing privatization in Chinese education, Mok (1997) and Cheng (1995) have argued that, especially in the largest cities, it is unquestionable that the growth in private education has caused disparities among different income groups. In Singapore, a country where reforms were carried out against the backdrop of heavy government investment in education, Tan (1998) has also argued that the marketization of education exacerbates the disparities between schools in terms not only of educational outcomes but also of social inequalities. In fact, official achievement data in Egypt show clear and extreme polarization based on social class/financial ability. Those who come from poor households constitute 5.3% of achievers in the primary education stage, 3% of achievers in the preparatory stage and 0.5% of achievers in the general secondary education stage, where achievement is highly dependent on school type, which is a proxy for social class (UNDP 2010, 45–6). Despite the lack of detailed data, tutoring is a plausible cause for at least a significant part of this polarization in achievement. One implication of the particularly high cost of tutoring in the general secondary track has been the decreased ‘demand’ for general secondary education, which has become beyond the means of many families. According to official figures, demand for general secondary education has decreased by 20–40% from 2001/02 to 2005/06 alone across different parts of the country, falling by 23% in Cairo and 43% in Beheira, for example (MOE 2006, Annex 2, 79–83).

Finally, one of the clearest implications of teacher dependence on tutoring is the resulting teacher shortages in ‘non-tutoring’ subjects. Once estimated at 50,000 teachers, shortages are mostly concentrated in subjects that

do not enter final student marks and therefore do not warrant private tutoring, such as art, music and sports, or concentrated in rural areas where even tutoring is not profitable enough for teachers to make a living (Tadros 1999). Not only are rural and poorer areas additionally disadvantaged, but also most schools simply cease to conduct music, sport or arts classes or any school activities at all.

With this background in mind, it is possible to explore how concrete realities in schools reflect and relate to these issues.

### **Part III: tutoring in two Cairene schools**

This section describes the findings from observations and interviews with students, teachers and principals in two morning-shift boys' secondary schools in the Greater Cairo area. One of the schools is a public technical school (industrial specializations) catering to working class students and the other a public general (academic) school catering to the middle class residents. The research was conducted in the academic years 2008/09 and 2009/10 over one and a half school years. Observation and attendance of classes was carried out in each school, in addition to one-on-one and group interviews with students, teachers and principals, although this article gives greater attention to student discourses and classroom dynamics. The discussion here is limited to these two boys' schools, although the research is part of a larger study exploring discourses and practices around privatization, discipline, gender and citizenship in six secondary schools in Cairo. First, I summarize some of the key trends, and then discuss the dynamics of tutoring in each school.

At least half to virtually all students in the two schools enrolled in year-long tutoring in all key subjects. Students in the technical school enrolled mostly in in-school tutoring, while general secondary school students exercised more choice in their tutoring arrangements and mixed between tutoring in centres and home tutoring. The cost of tutoring for general secondary students was at least five times that for technical secondary students. Almost all students relied on either tutoring notes and/or external textbooks and rarely studied from the official MOE textbooks. Teacher absenteeism was rampant in both schools; teachers did not arrive to 30–50% of the classes. On one level it is possible to say that coercion by school teachers is the main direct cause of tutoring enrolment in the technical school, while the search for exam mastery and a well-structured learning environment is the direct cause in the general school. However, in both schools, other factors complicate and qualify these statements. Students in *both* schools consistently reported that most teachers intentionally do not explain properly or waste the class time, and expressed that it is because of this that students had no choice but to enrol in tutoring. They understood many of the prevailing teaching strategies (lingering dictation and 'discipline'-related activities)

as ways of avoiding actually teaching or explaining the material. In both schools, there was no visible attempt on the part of school authorities to deter tutoring or the teacher practices perpetuating and ‘encouraging’ it. However, in both schools and in each grade, there were teachers who did not pressure students into tutoring enrolment and used class time to explain the material well; and students keenly pointed out those teachers.

### *Tutoring in the technical school*

In the technical school, about half of the final third year secondary students were enrolled in in-school tutoring. The rate is generally higher for first and second year students (between 60 and 75%), who seemed to have been more physically and practically vulnerable to teacher pressure to enrol. Their marks had a larger component controlled by school teachers, whereas final year students went through national exams that are not marked in the school. However, they could not pass the year without the marks for ‘practical’ skills determined by school teachers. Those who enrolled in tutoring mostly took classes four days a week for the four core ‘specialization’ subjects. They often took revision classes for other subjects before the exam, such as Arabic and English. The average monthly cost of tutoring for technical school students varied between 50 and 100 EGP, with an average across the years of somewhere around 80 EGP per month. Most students paid 25 EGP for four classes a month for each subject. This was reportedly double the rate outlined in MOE regulations. Students could, however, negotiate a discount of up to 50%, based on financial need. There was very significant student absenteeism in the school, where attendance was around 50% in most classes I attended. As students explained, ‘one can attend the first four practical classes in the year then ditch the rest because if he passes this, he will pass . . . he can make an agreement with the teacher to leave school and just say he went to bathroom’.

A detailed description of the state of education in the technical school is beyond the scope of this article. However, and even though many teachers attempted to improve their performance in my presence, there was very little ‘learning’ in most classes I attended in the school. Most classes consisted of teachers dictating short excerpts of lessons (a few key points to be written out in student notebooks, which are monitored by MOE supervisors), disciplining every murmur through verbal and physical abuse. This occurred in a very short school day, where many classes were cancelled or teachers simply did not arrive to class. Some teachers actually attempted to ‘explain’ the material at hand and a minority of students engaged with them. When this happened, it became apparent how much of the material was beyond the level of most students, some of whom were effectively illiterate, some with very poor basics in the subjects being taught and others who were so irregular in their attendance that they could not possibly follow the material.

While not argued to be universal to all technical schools,<sup>7</sup> this situation is obviously the result of the very poor quality of education received in previous years, the predominant practice of guaranteed cheating (see below), as well as the economic pressures that forced most students to work full time and attend school irregularly.

The very poor resources and learning conditions in technical schools may easily point to tutoring as an understandable remedy. However, tutoring did not quite perform such a function. It was structured around memorizing only what was enough to pass the exam, which was very little indeed. Students did not need to really understand even that limited material. They could obtain the summary notes provided through tutoring and memorize them, or simply bring them to the exam and copy from them during the exam itself. Students, teachers, administrators, and some newspaper reports (see, for example, Al-Saqqar 2009), explained the key facts known to insiders to the system – that exams are very easy, that no one really invigilates, that exam papers are very ‘irregularly’ marked and that most students who provide some answer pass. Students casually explained this ‘normal’ state of affairs of tutoring and cheating. For example, according to a third year student, ‘Students go to *magmu‘at* [in-school tutoring groups] but they don’t understand ... they just take the *muthakirra* [tutoring summary notes]. That’s 90% of the cases’. He continued, ‘They just put it under the exam paper when they are solving’. As a student in another class put it, ‘People don’t take these sheets to study them, they [enrol in in-school tutoring] and know that the teacher will “cheat them” [*yighashishhum*] the exam’.

Even if students wanted to ‘understand’ the material, this was not really available to them through tutoring. In fact, some students reported being told explicitly by some teachers that they do not need to ‘understand’ because all exam papers are marked similarly (without really being looking at). Therefore, those who entertained some aspiration of attaining marks high enough to apply for university admission had little faith that their marks would in fact reflect their exam performance. In addition to the organized facilitation of cheating, as a senior administrator in the technical school recounted, when transfer and completion rates are not high enough to be politically acceptable (which was the case almost every year), the MOE simply instructed districts and schools to raise their rates and the marks of students so that they could pass. Therefore, those students who did not enrol in tutoring were not necessarily school- or self-reliant, but more often counted on obtaining summary notes from friends, being able to cheat on the exam or just being passed by ministerial directive (while only a small proportion of around 5% do fail (MOE 2006, 70)). The overwhelming majority of technical students were concerned mainly with passing and expressed that their marks do not matter for either jobs or entrance into a two-year college. Not only do final marks not matter, but graduates typically obtain jobs independent of their specializations, through connections and based on competences

developed through work experience typically obtained while studying (see also Antoninis 2001).

In such context, coercion was the basic means by which teachers ensured student enrolment in tutoring. One of the school staff put it this way:

It all depends on private tutoring. The ones who have money and can pay, pass, others don't pass. 75% of teachers do not explain because they save their energy for tutoring, or they make students not understand so that they need the tutoring. Teachers use different official and unofficial means to harass students until they enrol in in-school tutoring.

This harassment ranges from physical beating and verbal humiliation to threats of expulsion and actual expulsion to students who had not yet enrolled. This is typically done under the pretext of non-compliant uniform, attendance, tardiness or misbehaviour. After enrolling in tutoring, this wave of teacher 'complaints' ends and many violations are tolerated. Students took this abuse as a fact, and some explained non-enrolment in tutoring simply in terms of whose father is deceased, does not live with the family or does not provide for his son, implying that all those who were financially capable enrolled in tutoring. Most of the students in the school had to work full time to support their families. This is why some of them enrolled in tutoring mostly on paper, effectively paying for the leniency required to have irregular school attendance in order to accommodate their working hours, but securing the summary notes needed to pass the exam.

Therefore, tutoring in the technical school prevailed, despite the lack of any sense of competition over consequential marks, without remedying the profound quality issues, and at significant emotional and economic cost to disadvantaged students and their families. However, while the stakes may not have been high for students in the sense of final marks, they can be quite significant in terms of actual passing or 'completion' of technical secondary. Obtaining a secondary certificate opens up the possibility of obtaining formal secure employment, possibly better marriage prospects (due to higher social status), and avoidance of prolonged compulsory drafting into the army.

### ***Tutoring in the general school***

In the general secondary school, with some exceptions, all students in first secondary enrolled in private tutoring in all key subjects that enter the student's final marks. Almost all students were enrolled in tutoring in nearby tutoring centres (*marakiz*). As for *thanawiya 'amma* students (second and third secondary), their enrolment in tutoring was similarly universal, but they tended to mix between private lessons with smaller number of students (*durus*) and tutoring in centres with large classes. The average cost of tutoring for general secondary students was 70 EGP per subject per month, and students typically

enrolled in tutoring for five to seven subjects. The total monthly expenditure was 350 EGP at the minimum and 500 EGP on average, when including additional expenses for private textbooks and workbooks, summary sheets, photocopying, revision sessions and commuting. There was no enrolment in in-school tutoring in the general school (although some teachers attempted to organize in-school revision sessions). However, while this ensures better profits for teachers through more expensive private lessons, it deprives administrators of their percentages of in-school tutoring revenue. Teachers conveyed that ‘in many schools’ (deciding not to discuss their own school), there was an understanding that informal arrangements had to be made to rebalance the financial benefits across the school, mainly through periodic gifts to key administrators, primarily the principal. In some schools, principals simply imposed ‘fees’ on teachers (a kind of private lessons tax/protection fee) in return for showing leniency in terms of teacher absenteeism, complaints of poor teaching or coercion of students to enrol in tutoring. Administrators may have also felt that it was futile to resist teacher tactics, which aim at ensuring a minimum livelihood.

*Thanawiya ‘amma* students attended school irregularly for the first couple of weeks and then they worked their way through reaching minimum – and variably enforced and reported – attendance requirements for the rest of the year, coming to school once every one or two weeks. Sometimes students came, only to jump the fence a couple of hours later. Some were more attached to school as they came to play football in the playground, meet friends or attempt to talk to girls from the adjacent girls’ school. For most of the school year, attendance in most *thanawiya ‘amma* classrooms was no more than one tenth of the enrolled numbers. According to students, teachers do not enter such small classes, although they sometimes did in my presence. As for first secondary students, they did attend school fairly regularly, despite their enrolment in tutoring, as a proportion of their mark is determined by monthly exams marked by school teachers.

While they were usually not overtly coerced, beaten or humiliated in order to enrol in tutoring, a variety of more subtle techniques, an accumulation of poor learning in basic education, and increased university competition facilitated the disintegration of the general secondary school too as a site of learning. Tutoring offered regular follow-up, homework and quizzes and more time to cover the very long curricula. This more intensive teaching geared towards exam preparation and memorization of the right way to answer ‘expected’ questions was only available in tutoring, and according to students, it was especially available in more expensive tutoring with smaller numbers and more personalized help and follow-up, rather than tutoring in large classes in tutoring centres. In this sense, students consistently linked the ‘quality’ of tutoring to how much it cost. They also recognized that they could not possibly afford the ‘really good’ tutoring offered in more affluent neighbourhoods.

With enrolment in tutoring almost universal and absenteeism among students the norm, most teachers, when they actually arrived to class, were not invested in communicating the material at hand, but mostly dictated key points and touched on small sections of the material. Alternatively, some teachers did not really ‘teach’ the lessons, but rather quizzed the students about their existing knowledge in a manner that would completely exclude students who did not enrol in tutoring. In contrast with the technical school, student participation in classrooms, especially in *thanawiya ‘amma*, frequently reflected more advanced familiarity with the material than could realistically be obtained from the class in progress. This is because in tutoring, students were typically a few lessons ahead of the school. For example, in an English language class, the teacher quickly skimmed over the lesson and began asking questions. A number of students shot back the answers and translations of difficult vocabulary, and not one student complained or asked for an explanation or repetition. In discussions after class, students said that ‘of course’ those who were answering knew the material from before. In fact, as one student put it, ‘They take a private lesson with him, so this is kind of a revision for them’. Other teachers gave religious advice to students or let them read the Quran, study for tutoring exams or listen to music during class time. Therefore, because of pervasive tutoring enrolment, classroom teaching could then be a marketing opportunity for potential clients, especially at the beginning of the year, a revision for a teacher’s own private tutoring students (exhibiting their competence in comparison to others), a time of rest, a religious sermon or a simple endeavour to get students to complete their notes so that they are available for inspection by MOE supervisors.

In this kind of context, it is not entirely clear what role competitive high-stakes examinations have in the universality of general secondary tutoring. After all, the school was no longer available as a site of learning in the first place. First secondary students, whose grades have very little stakes, overwhelmingly enrolled in tutoring. Some expressed that they would simply fail if they did not enrol in tutoring. This is not only because of poor instruction at school, but is partly caused by poor quality combined with cheating and easy marking in basic education (in contrast with the long and difficult first secondary curriculum). Furthermore, although some *thanawiya ‘amma* students did show interest in their final marks, it is not entirely clear that most students were indeed competing for university. Most students were on the one hand engaging in tutoring for better marks, or just to pass, and on the other hand expressing that they would never get the high marks needed to enter their desired colleges. Other than the highest achievers, the chances for the rest of the students seem bleak indeed. Students in university predominantly come from the highest fourth (27.1%) and fifth (46.5%) wealth quintiles and only 4.3% of higher education students come from the lowest income quintile (UNDP 2010). As a student commented, ‘We will all end up in the *ma‘had* [institute] anyway’ – a nearby low-status two-year college



accepting low scores. Many students also felt that university enrolment was not worth it, as many of their acquaintances who are university graduates are unemployed or severely under-employed (law graduates working as cleaners or security guards in malls). Students were profoundly discouraged by the level of unemployment they saw in their circles and expressed education, not only their marks, as futile, because ‘we will all end up “on the sidewalk” [jobless] anyway’. In a sense, they were stuck between their (theoretically middle class) background and expectations that they enrol in general secondary and seek university admission, and the knowledge that there were very limited opportunities for them among the multitude of graduates from more affluent neighbourhoods and from private schools competing for the same university places and the same jobs.

## **Conclusion**

Private tutoring in Egypt emerges as a phenomenon that is not easily explained as a remedy to poor education, as a strategy to subsidize low teacher pay or as driven by high-stakes examinations, but rather as a complex relationship between these variables and the related educational and institutional policies and practices. The school level dynamics described here only amplified the impact of the policies and practices supporting this type of marketization across the system. The growth of tutoring has been effectively backed by government policy intent on privatizing the financing of education and embedded in a complex web of corruption extending from high up in the structure of the MOE to the community and school levels.

In the technical school, the market entrenched itself not by manufacturing demand, or for remedying poor quality, but primarily through intimidation and abuse of students by poorly paid unaccountable teachers. The current educational context has allowed for greater abuse, especially of poor students, with serious implications for their need for respect, dignity and safety from physical and emotional harm. In a context where education is ‘absent’ and cheating pervasive, technical school students are forced to ‘buy’ their degrees by paying for tutoring in return for almost no education at all. This privatization through forced tutoring has contributed to fundamentally undermining notions of equity, merit and fairness, where passing is effectively conditional upon a negotiated payment to teachers. This payment – for supposedly free education – is being extracted from families already struggling to secure their basic needs and from boys (below the legal working age) working full time to support their families.

On the other hand, the market initially presented itself to general secondary students as providing an edge in exam performance in the context of greater competition for university admission and jobs. This myth perpetuated itself through a web of interests and corruption in a billion pound industry supported by the MOE’s remuneration, curriculum, textbook, examination

and marking policies and practices, and an almost complete absence of accountability. The outcome is that the general school has been almost completely eliminated as a site of learning, as it becomes displaced by tutoring centres and home tutoring. Private tutoring is no longer seen by individual students as a 'choice'. Students are forced to obtain tutoring, each family according to its means, in a highly differentiated market. Lower middle class students are equally forced into this market, increasingly without a solid expectation of entering university or competing for high-quality jobs. This has imposed a massive cost, which can amount to one third of household income, on middle class families constitutionally entitled to free education.

This mode of privatization has reinforced the transformation of much of formal youth schooling into private tutoring focused on exam readiness in a few 'key' subjects. It has structured the effective removal of art, music and sports components from the actual curricula of public schools, eliminating key spaces that had been intended to allow young people to develop a range of skills, abilities and experiences. Ultimately, the forms and mechanisms of privatization described here reinforce the patterns whereby access to constitutional and legal rights of schooling and freedom from physical and emotional harm is dependent upon each citizen's financial ability. By altering the social contract and subjecting poor and middle classes to heightened forms of abuse and exclusion, the de-facto privatization of schooling in Egypt has profoundly contributed to undermining the legitimacy of the state and its institutions.

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### Notes

1. An estimated 41% of the population, or about 28 million people, were under the poverty line in 2005, and *absolute* poverty increased from 17% in 2000 to 20% in 2005 (Alissa 2007).
2. 1 Egyptian Pound (EGP) = 0.10 British Pound (GBP) in August 2011 (www.xe.com).
3. Adult literacy (15+) has been officially estimated at around 70.4% in 2007 (UNDP 2010), but actual literacy skills are not independently measured across the system for actual students. Internationally comparable figures from Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) examinations place education quality in Egypt below the international average, but higher than most sub-Saharan African countries (MOE 2006).
4. For example, of those who enrolled in secondary education in 2005/06, 32.9% went to general secondary, 56.3% studied in technical schools, 8% studied in

- Azhar religious schools and 2.7% studied in private general secondary schools (MOE 2006, Annex 2, 77).
5. Because teacher salaries are so low, official figures on them are sensitive and simply not available. This estimate is based on my own data gathering within educational districts. However, the issue is frequently discussed in the press where, for example, it is reported that 8254 out of 13,000 teachers in one rural province were hired on the 120 EGP per month temporary contracts (*Al-Badil* 2011).
  6. A study of a number of urban and rural technical and general schools in Giza, Egypt, found that more than 60% of students said that their in-school tutor is their regular school teacher and more than 30% said that their private lesson teacher is also their regular teacher (Megahed 2004, 144–7). In a study of a high-performing public preparatory school, Linda Herrera (1992) found that only a minority of teachers used tactics of intimidation, poor teaching, favouritism, and sometimes physical punishment so that students in their class would take private lessons with them.
  7. While realities in this technical school may be similar to many ‘industrial’ technical schools across the country, there is no doubt that conditions could be better in other schools, such as commercial schools and girls’ schools, due to lower teacher shortages, fewer resource problems with workshop machinery and materials, and less pressure on students to work while studying.

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