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Social Change in Egypt's Private Primary Education: A Teacher's Perspective on Digitalisation and Her Pupils

Abstract

In Egypt, private primary schools are becoming increasingly important for middle-class families in urban areas. This trend can be observed across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Attending a private primary school is associated with a certain level of prestige and with educational quality that less well-equipped public primary schools are unable to provide. The following case study of an interview with a teacher at a private primary school in Greater Cairo offers insights into this type of school. The article looks at the teacher's habitual orientations and explores how the necessity of private education is legitimised in her perspective. The data are drawn from a narrative interview with the teacher, which was analysed using the documentary method. The teacher's speech thematises the significance of private primary schools in Egypt in times of social change. She addresses changing pedagogical conditions in the context of digitalisation and refers to a perceived change in the nature of primary school pupils. It is striking that the simultaneity of progressiveness and preservation in times of social change is (implicitly) proclaimed to be the core of private primary schools.

Keywords: Egypt, Private Primary Education, Social Change, Digitalisation, Documentary Method

1 Introduction

Egypt has the largest education system in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with more than 25 million pupils and students (USAID, 2022). In 2023, almost 14 million pupils attended primary school (UIS, 2025). The free education system established under the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s was a “central part of the [country’s] modernizing project” (Loveluck, 2012, p. 4). The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 stipulates compulsory education until the end of the secondary stage. It guarantees a state-funded public education system at all levels. In recent decades, Egypt has achieved nationwide access to basic education (Toprak, 2020). At the same time, the quality of the Egyptian public school system is increasingly being questioned (Elbadawy, 2015). In public primary schools in particular, the shortcomings of the public education system become evident in overcrowded classrooms, shift systems of teaching in urban areas, and deficits in teacher training (Herrera, 2022). According to international standardised assessments, Egypt performs far below the expected benchmarks for basic education (Salehi-Isfahani et al., 2014). To compensate for the shortcomings of the public school system, many pupils – starting from primary school age – attend supplementary private lessons in the afternoons. These private lessons are cost-intensive, and an illegal market for private tutoring has emerged (Hartmann, 2008; Sobhy, 2012). Egyptian educationalists argue that private tutoring, which is widely accepted by parents as a matter of course, undermines the public school system (Elamin et al., 2019). Egypt’s challenged public education system is also contrasted by a private school sector that promises to compensate for the deficiencies of public schooling – from kindergarten and primary school onwards. For a growing number of families, particularly in the higher-income Greater Cairo region¹, private schools are regarded as attractive and prestigious educational options for their children (Elbadawy, 2015). In more affluent neighbourhoods, private primary school buses and their advertising billboards are ubiquitous. Nevertheless, given the deteriorating economic situation, not all families can afford private education. The most popular type of private primary schools is the private ‘language school’. In these primary schools, lessons are taught in English, rarely in other foreign languages. They follow the national Egyptian curriculum (Hartmann, 2008). In addition, ‘international language schools’ operate according to a non-Egyptian curriculum, offering pupils the opportunity to obtain internationally recognised certificates (Galegher, 2012; further details on private primary schools in Egypt are provided in Section 2).

1 Greater Cairo is a metropolitan area around Cairo. The area consists of the Cairo Governorate and the cities Imbaba, Giza and Shubra El Kheima. It includes planned towns in the desert areas east and west of Cairo.

This paper focuses on the expanding private primary school sector in Egypt. Based on a case study of an interview with a teacher, Mrs Nabila, who works at a private primary language school in Greater Cairo, the paper explores how the increasing privatisation of primary education is legitimised from the teacher's perspective. It further examines her underlying habitual orientations that guide everyday practice. The aim of the article is to understand the inherent logic of Egypt's private primary school system beyond objective quality indicators such as smaller class sizes and reliable teaching coverage. The question therefore arises as to how private primary education is constructed by the teacher herself as both a necessary and desirable form of schooling in contemporary Egypt.

The interview with Mrs Nabila was conducted during the first author's stay as a visiting scholar at The American University in Cairo (AUC)². Ethnographic observations and additional interviews with teachers and head teachers were conducted in the context of research at private primary schools in Greater Cairo. The interpretations presented below represent an initial exploratory approach to the data. The explanatory power of this individual case study is limited, although very similar issues emerged in other interviews. A systematic case comparison cannot yet be undertaken, partly because the analysis of the collected data is still at an early stage. However, drawing on the documentary method (see Section 4), case-internal comparisons can be made and are presented below. This approach makes it possible to understand how the interviewee, Mrs Nabila, legitimises the necessity of private primary schools on the basis of her underlying habitual orientations. These explorations open up a qualitative, teacher-centred perspective on private primary schooling in Egypt that has not yet been sufficiently addressed in existing research (Galegher, 2012; Ridge et al., 2019). This, in turn, may encourage further research on the rise of private primary education across the MENA region.

Before specifying the research interest in greater detail, a brief overview of the Egyptian school system in general and the role of private primary schools is provided (see Section 2). This is followed by thoughts on the research interest (see Section 3) and methodological considerations (see Section 4). Subsequently, three passages from the interview with the teacher, Mrs Nabila, are presented (see Section 5). After summarising the findings, the results are discussed in greater depth (see Section 6).

2 Special thanks go to Nadia Yousry in her networking and coordination role. Many thanks also to the school managements of the schools visited for their openness and support.

2 Notes on the Egyptian School System and Private Primary Education

First, an overview of the Egyptian school system is provided, followed by a discussion of current educational policy debates and educational reforms. Against this background, the role of private primary education in Egypt becomes clear. Across the MENA region, education is recognised by the majority of political decision-makers as an “antidote for reducing poverty levels and promoting economic growth” (Rizk & Hawash, 2020, p. 2). In the literature, educational expansion is also associated with expectations of democratisation and anti-authoritarianism (Akkari, 2004). In Egypt, educational reforms in recent decades have led to the development of a highly centralised school system, which is illustrated schematically below (see Table 1).

Table 1: Egyptian School System, own illustration

age	school system				grade	related teacher qualification	
17	secondary education (<i>al-taʿlīm al-thānawī</i>)	preparatory school (mathematics and science)	preparatory school (literature and humanities)	technical school	12	Four-year training programme at faculties of education or one- or two-year postgraduate diploma in education in addition to a bachelor's degree in another discipline.	
16					11		
15					10		
14	basic education (<i>al-taʿlīm al-asāsī</i>)	preparatory school			9		
13					8		
12					7		
11		primary school			6		
10					5		
9					4		
8					3		
7					2		
6					1		
5	kindergarten (<i>riyāḍ al-aṭfāl</i>)						
4							

Egyptian children begin primary school at the age of six, marking the first stage of compulsory basic education (*al-ta’līm al-asāsī*). Attending a kindergarten (*riyāḍ al-atfāl*) prior to this stage is voluntary. Primary education is designed to last for six school years (Herrera, 2022). A distinction can be made between state, private, and religious primary schools. Primary schooling is followed by a three-year phase of lower secondary education at preparatory schools, which, like primary education, is compulsory (Loveluck, 2012). After

obtaining the preparatory school certificate, additional three years of upper secondary education (*al-ta'lim al-thānawī*) may follow, during which the general higher education entrance qualification (*al-thānawīyya*) can be obtained (Herrera, 2022).

Egyptian children are constitutionally guaranteed free education under the 2014 Constitution. According to World Bank data, the majority of Egyptian children attended primary school in 2021 (World Bank Group, 2022). While over one million primary school-age children were still out of school in 2014, this number had fallen substantially to just over 66,000 in 2021 (Galal, 2024). To enforce school attendance, Article 96 of the Egyptian Child Law of 2008 imposes severe penalties on parents who refuse to send their children to school. Reasons for non-attendance include extreme poverty (Emam, 2017), the costs associated with school attendance (e.g. for school uniforms and materials), and child labour (El Daw & El-Kogali, 2002). In a comparative study on youth educational inequality across the MENA region, Rizk and Hawash (2020) show that, particularly after the 2011 revolution, the number of years of education among those in the lowest income quartile in Egypt declined sharply – from 4.18 years of education in 2010 to 3.07 years of education in 2015. They also reveal clear disparities between Egypt's urban and rural populations in terms of access to education.

Referring to educational reforms of recent decades, Elbadawy (2015) observes: "Expansion in access to education was not accompanied by improvement in quality" (p. 143). In 2019, a large-scale reform was launched to improve school quality. It is named "Education 2.0". New curricula were introduced with the fundamental aim of "transforming the pedagogy" (Toprak, 2020). In addition, the wide-ranging and costly reform programme, scheduled to run for 14 years and supported by the World Bank among others, aims to create thousands of teaching positions and enhance digital education (BRG, 2021). In the context of 'Education 2.0', digitalisation is consistently presented as a progressive means of improving school quality (UNICEF, 2021). Regarding primary education, there should no longer be exams before the fourth grade, in order to modernise learning and performance cultures. Traditional teaching methods based on memorisation are being replaced by formats that promote reflective and critical thinking (Moustafa et al., 2022).

Not only public schools but also private schools are affected by the government's educational reforms. According to journalist Robert Springborg (2022), the private school sector receives substantial financial support from the state. Privatisation of education as a strategy for access to high-quality education not only appears to be promoted by the state. It is also increasingly being sought by parents. In the 2017/2018 school year, around 10 % of all Egyptian pupils (K-12) attended a private school. Almost one million primary school-

age children (8 % of all Egyptian primary school pupils) enrolled in private primary schools (PwC, 2019).

Egypt's private school sector is by no means uniform. Some of the less expensive private schools differ little from public schools, aside from better infrastructure and smaller class sizes. Among parents of the growing urban middle class, the most popular type of private primary school is the private 'language school'. At these schools, lessons are usually taught in English, and rarely in other foreign languages. They follow the national Egyptian curriculum (Hartmann, 2008). In addition, 'international language schools' teach according to non-Egyptian curricula, offering pupils the opportunity to obtain an internationally recognised certificate. Following the historical term *effendiya* (see also Eppel, 2009), Galegher (2012) situates the international language school close to Egypt's contemporary "privileged, cosmopolitan class" (p. 23). This is made up of "members from middle income to very wealthy positions" (p. 22). According to Galegher, it is not only the acquisition of a foreign language that makes international language schools appealing to this clientele, but also the social distinction conferred by learning the "dress and manner that separates them from the rest of Egypt's society" (p. 23). For all private schools, not only for international language schools, it may be important to offer not only better school quality, but also social distinction. This background on the Egyptian school system and the role of the exclusive private schools frames the exploratory focus of this article, which seeks to understand a teacher's perspective of the necessity of private primary education in Egypt.

3 Research Aims

As outlined above, private primary schools in Egypt play an important role as a counterpart to public primary education (Galegher, 2012). This raises the question of how the necessity of private primary schools is legitimised from within the system itself, from the perspective of a teacher. The aim of this paper is to provide an initial exploratory account of this perspective. We focus on the case of Mrs Nabila. She is a teacher at a private primary language school in Greater Cairo. We examine her habitual orientations, which are implicitly underlying her explicit legitimisation of the necessity of private primary education. It is assumed that the prestige and the exclusivity associated with private primary schools (Elbadawy, 2015) are also reflected in the teacher's habitual orientations. In turn, these may justify a specific pedagogical perspective.

4 Methodology: The Documentary Method of Interpretation

Data basis for this paper is a biographical narrative interview (Schütze, 1983) with Mrs Nabila. The openness of the interview format allows the interviewee to respond as freely as possible. The interview was analysed with reference to the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2017). Before presenting the case and the results, some methodological considerations must be outlined. The documentary method of interpretation is an established approach of qualitative-reconstructive educational research in German-speaking contexts (Bohnsack, 2010, 2014, 2017; Nohl, 2017). It has also been applied, to a lesser extent, in English-speaking research discourses (Hinzke et al., 2023). Originating in the 1980s within youth research, the method has gained increasing relevance in school-related research since the 2000s (Böder & Rabenstein, 2021).

Central to the methodological perspective of the documentary method is the assumption of a duality of knowledge. Drawing on Karl Mannheim's (1964) sociology of knowledge, a distinction can be made between theoretical and non-theoretical forms of knowledge. Theoretical knowledge can be expressed explicitly and communicated to others. Non-theoretical knowledge, on the other hand, represents implicit knowledge that cannot be directly verbalised or rationalised. As dimensions of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1998), implicit knowledge guides action without conscious articulation. From the perspective of the documentary method, explicit knowledge corresponds to *norms*, which exist in a dynamic tension with the implicit logic of *habitus* (Bohnsack, 2017). This tension arises because norms follow a propositional, often rationalist logic (e. g. when it comes to legitimisations of one's own or other's actions), while *habitus* follows a performative logic, negotiated in practice.

Moreover, from the perspective of the documentary method, school can be understood as being constituted through relational practices. A wide array of social entities – educational policy, other educational institutions, and families – interact with schools (Nohl, 2023). School is thus not a space separate from society; rather, it is a unique organisational space where experiences and knowledge of teachers, pupils, and other stakeholders intersect. Here, social and organisational norms meet, amplifying the tension between norms and *habitus* (Bohnsack, 2020).

Following these remarks on the methodology of the documentary method, the methodical steps of the documentary interpretation of interviews will be briefly discussed (for further information on the interpretation of interviews see Nohl, 2017). The successive interpretation steps of 'formulating' and 'reflecting' interpretation are central to the documentary method (Bohnsack & Nohl, 2013). Transcriptions follow the TiQ rules (Talk in Qualitative Social Re-

search) (Nohl, 2017)³. In formulating interpretation, the focus is on the *what* of the interview. The first step is to identify the thematic structure of the interview (Bohnsack, 2014). Next, the transcribed material is analysed to identify super-ordinate and subordinate themes, expressed by the interviewee. In doing so, the researcher attempts to remain strictly within the interviewee's system of relevance, avoiding the imposition of own prior knowledge. In the reflective interpretation, attentions shift from *what* is said to *how* it is expressed. The aim is to reconstruct implicit knowledge. Following Nohl (2017), the text is first categorised into text types (narrations, descriptions, argumentations, evaluations). Narrations and descriptions are considered particularly close to the speaker's experience. They can give insights into the habitus. In the second step of reflective interpretation, so-called positive or negative horizons (Bohnsack, 2014) are identified, revealing the frameworks through which topics are negotiated. This refers to the action-guiding, implicit knowledge associated with the topic in the sense of the interviewee's habitus. Importantly, interpretation is conducted in research groups. Intersubjective comprehensibility then represents the central quality criterion of reconstructive research. The so-called location-specificity (German: "Standortgebundenheit", Mannheim, 1964) of interpretation is particularly noteworthy in this article, as the first author of the article approaches Egypt from his German socialisation. The second author's deep knowledge of Egyptian society controls the perspective of the interpretation.

In qualitative research, a single case and its interpretation can reflect broader social phenomena (Loos & Schäffer, 2001). In order to be able to abstract from a single case, case comparison is an important analytical step in documentary interpretation (Bohnsack, 2017). However, such comparisons are not carried out in this exploratory access to a single interview presented below.

3 TiQ rules (Nohl, 2017, p. 123):

(3) or (.) → speaking pause in seconds or very short

no → accentuation

. → falling intonation

, → rising intonation

may- → word is broken off when speaking

no:::: → elongation of a word, frequency of : corresponds to the length

have=we → mutilage of words

(but) → uncertainty in the transcript

((groans)) → paralanguage

@no@ → spoken with a laugh

@(.)@ → short laugh

//mmh// → signal from the interviewer

°no° → very quietly spoken

no → very loudly spoken

The project from which the data originates is not yet at this analytic point. This limits the possibility of generalizing the findings. Nonetheless, the individual case provides insights into the individual habitus (Kramer et al., 2009) of an Egyptian teacher at a private primary school, offering an initial exploratory perspective on private primary education in Egypt and opening up follow-up questions for further research.

5 Empirical Insights: The Case Mrs Nabila⁴

Mrs Nabila works at a private primary language school situated in a middle-class district of Greater Cairo, predominantly inhabited by civil servants and state employees. The school has a long-standing tradition and appears to enjoy a respected reputation. English is the language of instruction, and in addition to the Egyptian curriculum, the American and British curricula are also taught. At the end of a school day, the first author conducted a 50-minute interview with Mrs Nabila. She is originally from Egypt but was raised in the USA, which accounts to her fluent English. The interviewee is 50 years old and holds a teaching degree from an Egyptian private university. Over the past two decades, she has taught at various public and private schools in Greater Cairo. Mrs Nabila currently teaches a fourth-grade class. The following chart (Figure 1) presents an overview of the findings, distinguishing between norm and habitus. The overlapping circles indicate the tension between these two dimensions.

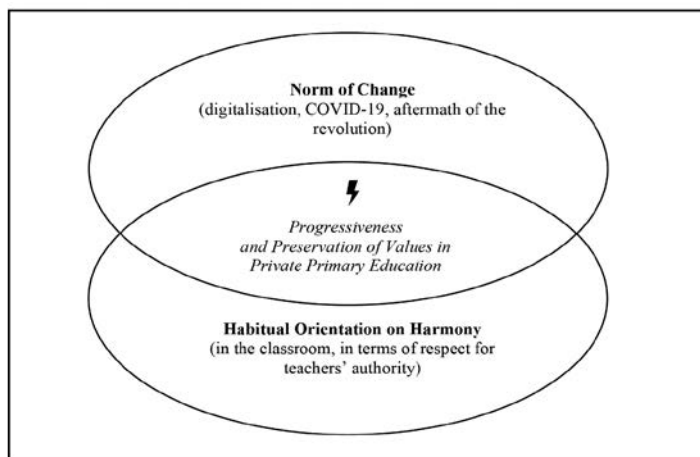


Figure 1: The Case Mrs Nabila, own illustration based on Bohnsack (2017)

4 The name has been anonymised. The interviewee has given her consent to the scientific analysis of the interview.

Central to the case is the invocation of a norm of change. From the teacher's perspective, change occurs in the context of digitalisation (see Section 5.1), through the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the aftermath of the revolution (see Section 5.3), all of which have impacted schools. In addition, Mrs Nabila exhibits a habitual orientation towards harmony (see Section 5.2). From her perspective the tension between the norm of change and the habitual orientation (see Section 4) is resolved in the private primary school, where progressiveness – particularly in terms of digitalisation – can be experienced, while simultaneously preserving values such as obedience to the authority of teachers (see Section 5.4). Three passages from the interview are presented below and will be analysed in greater detail.

5.1 'Technology is Fast' – Digitalisation as a Norm of Change

At the beginning of the interview, Mrs Nabila talks about the ongoing advance of digitalisation. According to her, technological progress has a significant impact on educational practice and on herself in terms of lifelong learning. The evolving nature of digitalisation emerges in the following interpretation as an explicit norm invoked by Mrs Nabila.

we as teachers have changed ourselves from 2003 until now. I started with a chalkboard //okay// then with a whiteboard @(2)@ and then moving to a smartboard. thats one thing. so education ourselves into technology. I did my lesson plan once in paper and pen. now my lesson plans are on PowerPoint //yeah yeah yeah// so its=its complete difference uhm sometimes I feel like I'm an very old person just because technology is fast and its changeable every minute I am not saying every day every minute (l. 3-8)

At the beginning of the interview, Mrs Nabila raises the topic of the transformation of teachers ("we") over the past two decades. She then focuses on her own experience, describing her personal development in dealing with changes in classroom equipment. In this passage, Mrs Nabila speaks descriptively with argumentative elements, which refers to a subjectively perceived norm of change. She summarises this process of moving from analogue techniques to digital teaching artefacts ('chalkboard – whiteboard – smartboard') as "education [...] into technology". The teacher further illustrates how she used to plan lessons with pen and paper, whereas she now routinely uses "PowerPoint". This shift is characterised as substantial. At the same time, digital change is presented as a natural progression, and lifelong learning emerges as an expected responsibility for teachers. Despite the self-evident nature of these changes in teaching tools and practices, as well as the ongoing self-education in dealing with them, Mrs Nabila occasionally feels – with a certain touch of self-irony – quite "old" in these digital era. While she accepts change

as inevitable, she also feels somewhat left behind. However, this is not due to a rejection of the digital era, but “just” to the fact that the enormous speed and dynamics of digital change are barely manageable.

This first passage demonstrates that self-transformation in response to digital change is a pedagogical norm for Mrs Nabila. On the one hand, she clearly accepts the norm of digital change. She explicitly portrays herself as a teacher who keeps up with the technology, capable of adapting to the rapid changes in pedagogy during the digitalisation era. She navigates these challenges effectively. This affirms her role as a progressive and confident educator, embodying a clear commitment to embracing change. At this early stage of the interview, Mrs Nabila’s assured approach to the highly dynamic nature of digital transformation demonstrates, in her self-portrayal, her ability to successfully manage these shifts within the context of a specific generational landscape. Pedagogical practices and their associated artefacts evolve, demanding adaptation and a degree of progressiveness from teachers. However, Mrs Nabila herself acknowledges that this confident self-portrayal is somewhat fragile. The evolving nature of digitalisation as a norm – challenging established routines – is also experienced as demanding, particularly given her position as an older teacher. In the following section, we turn to Mrs Nabila’s habitus in order to examine the emerging tension between the norm of digital change and the routines of everyday practice that are shaped by her habitus.

5.2 ‘We do Apologise’ – Harmony in the Classroom as a Habitual Orientation

At a later stage of the interview, Mrs Nabila talks about her pupils and how she deals with them. In this passage, she initially remains argumentative and descriptive. However, she then provides a brief narration that provides insights into her habitual orientation towards harmony.

I cannot hold every child. I do punish I have side talks with the ones—you know like making fun. but (.) it has to be regularly it has to be on weekly base to make sure to remind the kids you should—you should. no. uhm at some point now even if someone says a wrong answer in class uhm we do apologize if they laugh this is in the—I have in my class. because this happens a lot //yeah// and those snobbish kids those uh genius:: they were like ((ah haha this is wrong) spoken in imitation) and I was like (.) stop it. this is not accepted please apologize to your friend and=so in front of everyone he is apologizing and then we give him a chance to explain until he gets it correct. (l. 178-186)

Speaking further about her own actions, Mrs Nabila states in an approach of generalised abstraction, “I cannot hold every child”. In doing so, she explicitly delineates the boundaries of her own responsibilities. With equal certainty, she notes that she “punish[es]” pupils. In a more nuanced approach, when

addressing pupils who make fun of others, her strategy shifts from punitive measures to constructive conversations. This reprimand is not explained in its form, but in its temporality. The pupils must be reminded regularly, more specifically “weekly”, which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. Referring explicitly to her own class, which is addressed in the “we”, Mrs Nabila highlights the naturalness of apologising when particular pupils laugh at others. Such laughter occurs frequently and is attributed to the “snobbish kids” in a certain social-class-related way. The term “snobbish” is not further defined, nor is it clarified whether it relates to the teacher’s own social background. What is emphasised, however, is that these children see themselves as “genius[es],” and Mrs Nabila conveys both their arrogance and her disapproval through imitative speech. She responds to them firmly: “stop it”, and then instructs the bullies to apologise. Designating the victims of the laughter as “friend[s]” of the perpetrators reinforces the harmonious “we” of the class community, which includes Mrs Nabila herself. The “we” allows the child being laughed at, who is invoked here as a fictional male pupil, the opportunity to explain a supposedly incorrect answer until it can be considered correct. In this second passage, Mrs Nabila positions herself as the teacher concerned with fairness and justice. Degrading behaviour by specific “snobbish” children is addressed firmly, yet appropriately and consistently. Wherever matters of justice are explicitly at stake, Mrs Nabila’s habitual orientation emerges implicitly, which can be describe as an orientation towards harmony. This orientation is documented against the positive horizon of a conflict-free “we” within the class community under the teacher’s guidance. Harmony in this sense both implies and maintains the authority of the teacher. In this context, the bullies have to apologize publicly to their victims, who, from the teacher’s perspective, should become friends of equal rank and thus follow the teacher’s instructions. Likewise, the victims do not allow themselves to be intimidated, but instead fulfil their duties by seizing the opportunity to answer questions correctly in class.

5.3 The Tension Between the Norm of Change and a Habitual Orientation on Harmony

As noted at the outset, from the perspective of the documentary method and its methodology, a notorious tension between norm and habitus is assumed (see Section 4). The following section illustrates how this tension manifests in the case of Mrs Nabila, between a subjectively perceived norm of (pedagogical) change and the teacher’s habitual orientation towards harmony, and how she negotiates this tension. Specific social events in Egypt are relevant here, when we follow Mrs Nabila’s perspective. The perceived norm of change can be found here again, though in entirely different thematic and social contexts.

Whereas above, change was represented by digital transformation, which teachers are expected to follow as part of lifelong learning, here the perceived norm of change refers to a change in the pupils' behaviour observed by Mrs Nabila since the 2011 revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic. In both passages, however, a subjectively perceived norm can be abstracted, one that conceptualises change as an unstoppable force affecting schools and their participants. Near the end of the interview, Mrs Nabila remarks:

students were more patient. now they are not patient as they were because during covid they used to move around they did not have to sit the=thee style of a classroom //yeah// it took us years to have them back into the classroom and to sit on a desk on a chair and sit properly and not crisscross their le:::gs and not=you know like taking of your shoes while they are sitting caus kids were not used to the //ja// the mood of a classroom. and the other phase was the revolution. unfortunately, we had the revolution here a couple of=ten years ago //mmh//. it **taught** the ki:::ds a little bit of vulgar attitude. that with a loud voice I can earn everything //mmh// so. some of the students like when I came back after revolution to teaching I felt like they would yell and scream. it wasnt seen before that in previous years it was the teacher having a little bit of authority especially I'm talking about year three (l. 303-333)

Initially, Mrs Nabila reflects on an indeterminate past, observing that pupils were once "more patient". She attributes the perceived decline in patience to two major social events. The first is the COVID-19 pandemic, during which pupils were not encouraged to behave according to the "style of a classroom". Re-establishing this behaviour was a long-lasting challenge for a "we" that can be interpreted as a collective of pedagogical actors. Fundamentally, pupils had to be reintegrated "back into the classroom". More specifically, they needed to be taught to "sit properly" at tables and on chairs, and to adopt appropriate posture. Childlike behaviours, such as "taking off your shoes", which did not correspond to the aforementioned mood of a classroom, had to be unlearned. The second event cited is "the revolution", which Mrs Nabila identifies as a past occurrence explaining the shift in the pupils' behaviour. The event is explained to the interviewer in terms of time, and the revolution is characterized as regrettable. Contextual clues indicate, Mrs Nabila refers to the revolution of 2011, a pivotal moment of the so-called Arab Spring. Her explicitly expressed regret is framed in terms of what the personified revolution "taught" the pupils. A "vulgar attitude" is attributed to the revolution in a restrictive, almost scandalising manner. According to Mrs Nabila, the children had learned from these events that "with a loud voice I can earn everything". After the events of the revolution, Mrs Nabila returned to school as a teacher. Sie recalls being confronted with diffuse aggression from the pupils. They "yell[ed]" and "scream[ed]" in ways she had never experienced before. Previously, among

third graders, a small but reliable degree of acceptance of the teacher's authority had been taken for granted.

As demonstrated above, a norm of change is invoked in Mrs Nabila's speech. School artefacts and practices are inexorably shifting from analogue to digital, and these changes also demand corresponding adaptations from teachers. Mrs Nabila's ability to navigate these shifts characterises her, in her self-presentation, as a progressive teacher, even though she admits to feeling overwhelmed by the pace of digital transformation. On an implicit level, Mrs Nabila's habitual orientation towards harmony becomes apparent when she discusses the pupils in her class. Implicitly, the absence of conflicts and the adherence to role expectations by pupils are treated as maxims of teaching. In the last passage considered, norm and habitus are now shown to be in conflict. According to Mrs Nabila, contemporary Egyptian society is undergoing processes of change. These changes are no longer primarily digital, but concern the evolving behaviour of children, shaped by experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the events of the 2011 revolution. Although the revolution occurred long enough ago that the pupils in Mrs Nabila's class did not experience it directly, its effects are still felt today in that pupils no longer accept teacher authority as a matter of course. Just as digital change must be accepted as inevitable, other processes of school transformation initiated by crisis-ridden social events must also be acknowledged by Mrs Nabila as self-evident. This inevitability generates expectations of pupils' behaviour that is contrary to the implicitly affirmed harmony in the classroom – in the sense of discipline and obedience. A return to times when pupils were compliant and respectful to teacher authority and school order can no longer be anticipated.

5.4 Summary of the Results – Primary Education between Progressiveness and Preservation

The results of the interpretation of the case considered here are very limited. Further case studies and comparative analyses would be required to refine the findings and to test their scope. At the same time, the individual case presented here has explanatory value. It addresses issues that many (private) primary school teachers in Egypt, as well as in other countries in the MENA region, may face. It does not explain the organisation of a private primary school as such, but rather provides an internal perspective on one example. What, then, does the case study reveal about a private primary language school in Egypt? First, Mrs Nabila explicitly refers to a norm of change. In the first passage, this norm of change is closely linked to teachers' perceived ability to transform themselves through lifelong learning. In the other passage, change leads to a perceived deterioration in pupils' behaviour. The processes of change

from analogue to digital teaching cultures, which Mrs Nabila has successfully mastered as a teacher, are portrayed as unstoppable. At the same time, the change challenges established routines of everyday practice, and it becomes clear that Mrs Nabila herself is also challenged by them. The way she speaks about the pupils in her class suggests a habitual orientation towards harmony. A conflict-free environment, in which pupils follow their assigned roles and respect the authority of the teacher, represents a positive horizon. The tension between the norm of change and the habitual orientation towards harmony becomes particularly evident when Mrs Nabila speaks about changes in pupils' behaviour. It has changed as a result of the crisis-related events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the revolution. Unlike in the past, pupils can no longer be expected to respect teachers' authority as a matter of course or to follow the school's instructions without question. The implicitly affirmed harmony in the classroom, based on pupils' obedience to authority, is currently being challenged against the backdrop of changing patterns of behaviour. Like the shift in teaching towards the digital, changes in pupils' behaviour are unstoppable in terms of the norm of change and thus stabilise an emerging tension between norm and habitual orientation. In Mrs Nabila's speech, the way this tension is negotiated is ultimately reflected in the positioning of the private primary school's mission as an education oriented towards order, conformity, and in preservation of values. The legitimacy of responding with potential severity to pupils' non-compliant behaviour ("I punish") is also grounded in the fact that Mrs Nabila presents herself as a progressive teacher who is not fundamentally opposed to (digital) change. This case study gives rise to further questions concerning primary education in the MENA region, which will be addressed in the final section.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This article examines an interview with a teacher at a private primary language school in Egypt. It offers insights into a type of school that is gaining increasing importance in Egypt and across the MENA region (Galegher, 2012; Ridge et al., 2015). As noted in the previous section, the findings of this single-case study on private primary schooling in Egypt are limited, raising the question of the extent to which the case can be generalised. On the one hand, the case may be representative of many teachers from different cultural contexts who are working in times of accelerating social change. On the other hand, the case of Mrs Nabila highlights a specific interpretation of the revolutionary uprisings of the Arab Spring and their influence on children's behaviour, pointing to particular features of primary education in the MENA region. Against this backdrop, the case study provides an insider perspective

on private primary education. It is notable that the *de facto* exclusivity of Mrs Nabila's private primary school is not explicitly addressed by her. Issues such as school fees are not discussed, nor are things such as superior facilities or the high reputation of private education, which are frequently cited in the literature as reasons why parents choose private primary schools for their children (Elbadawy, 2015). Rather, she implicitly presents the private primary school as a form of schooling capable of responding to the country's social change. It can be assumed that Mrs Nabila does not attributed this potential to state schools to the same extent.

Private primary school is presented as a setting characterised by constant change, particularly in the context of advancing digitalisation. These changes must be addressed productively, and new technologies integrated into teaching practices. According to Mrs Nabila, the private primary school initially emerges as a space of progressiveness: digital change is accepted by teachers and successfully implemented. Technical equipment is taken for granted, and there is a collective willingness to engage in further training. This may distinguish private schools from less well-resourced public schools. Against this background, Mrs Nabila presents herself as a teacher who is progressive and open to innovation. In a broader sense, her openness to digitalisation confirms current educational reforms in Egypt, which focus on digitalisation to improve school quality (Toprak, 2020; UNICEF, 2021).

At the same time, other social changes also affect the school environment, particularly as reflected in the pupils' behaviour. Mrs Nabila identifies the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2011 revolution as key moments of change. Referring back to the theoretical considerations outlined earlier, it is notable that Mrs Nabila does not mention deficiencies in infrastructure or staffing – issues that are highly relevant in public schools but evidently less so in private schools (Elbadawy, 2015). Instead, Mrs Nabila locates school-related deficits primarily in pupils' behaviour. From her perspective, the revolution in particular led pupils to abandon their respect for teachers' authority. Mrs Nabila defines her task as a teacher as educating children in order and obedience. Such an education secures what remains implicit in Mrs Nabila's speech but appears to fundamentally guide her actions as her habitual orientation: harmony in the classroom. A classroom atmosphere in which pupils treat one another in a benevolent and friendly manner is desirable and achievable at her school, with teasing being sanctioned accordingly. Implicitly rather than explicitly, this approach is accompanied by a return to a school order in which the teacher's authority is not called into question. Education for obedience thus compensates for the moral misconduct that pupils have displayed as a result of broader social change.

More abstractly, from Mrs Nabila's perspective, the private primary school is not only a site of social distinction (Galegher, 2012; Hartmann, 2008), but also a place of preservation. Challenges associated with social change are acknowledged, and the negative consequences of changing patterns of pupils' behaviour are compensated for within private schools. The professional competencies of private school teachers are presented as enabling them to resolve conflicts between pupils. The causes of such conflicts are attributed to the children's 'vulgar attitude', which, in Mrs Nabila's view, can only be countered by a return to recognition of teacher's authority. This return, understood as a practice of preservation, does not contradict the progressiveness shown in the context of digitalisation. Rather, the private primary school emerges as a space in which progressiveness and preservation coexist. It is presented as a setting in which social change – characterised by high dynamics and crisis-like effects on Egyptian society – can be moderated.

The case of Mrs Nabila illustrates an understanding of practice in private primary education in which progressiveness and preservation occur simultaneously. This pedagogical practice is framed as one that is capable of absorbing, mitigating, and moderating social change. At least implicitly, this may serve to legitimise the exclusivity of private primary school in comparison to other forms of schooling.

Further research should incorporate additional comparative cases beyond the one considered here. This could clarify the extent to which the simultaneity of progressivity and preservation is also evident in other types of (primary) school and in different regional and global contexts. It would also be valuable to examine how the findings presented here are reflected in everyday educational practice. Moreover, the case Mrs Nabila raises broader questions concerning the professionalisation of primary school teachers. More specifically, one could ask to what extent it is legitimate to uphold strong notions of teacher authority when primary school takes place in conditions of social uncertainty.

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