

The informal market of education in Egypt – private tutoring and its implications

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Introduction

A large part of instruction and learning in Egypt takes place outside of the official classroom, either at home or in private tutoring centers.¹ The majority of Egyptian high school students, and even a large number of elementary and preparatory school students, attend private supplementary lessons in the afternoons and evenings, in addition to formal schooling. As it is virtually impossible for Egyptian teachers to survive on their regular salaries, let alone to feed a family, most of them have to resort either to private tutoring or to other sources of additional income in order to make a living. Private lessons consume not only much of the students' and teachers' spare time but also a substantial part of the average Egyptian family budget.

As early as 1983, the Egyptian Minister of Education, Dr. Mustafa Kamal Helmi, acknowledged that *“the overspreading phenomenon of private lessons whether in schools or universities has become one of the major drawbacks in the education system”* (cited by Cochran 1986: 59). While free public education had been introduced in the 1950s and 60s, rapid population growth and escalating enrollment rates have, since, led to a severe deterioration in the quality of publicly provided education in Egypt. Where state-run services were absent or insufficient, the responsibilities of the state have increasingly been taken over by non-state actors, including both private entrepreneurs and religious associations or NGOs (cf. Sullivan/ Abed-Kotob 1999: 24f.). In the shadow of the formal education system, an informal “market of education” has, thus, evolved during the last decades. With the proliferation of private lessons, the education process has, to a large extent, become dissociated from the direct control of the state and from school as an institution. While a formal privatization process is also taking place, with more and more private schools and universities being established, I will concentrate here on the informal offers on the “market of education”.

Despite the prevalence of tutoring practices, not only in Egypt, but also in many other countries all over the world, with different characteristics and degrees of institutionalization, the phenomenon has so far received little academic attention. While a number of studies have

¹ Talking about “private tutoring” in the following text, I am referring to classes that take place outside and in addition to formal schooling, in the afternoons or evenings, on weekends and during the holidays. Private lessons in a particular subject usually take place once or twice a week. They are provided for a fee, closely following and oriented at the school syllabus, intending to improve the students' performance at school and especially the outcome of exams. I am not referring to courses that are completely independent from formal schooling, like additional language courses or music lessons.

been published referring to Asia, little research on tutoring has so far been conducted in Africa and the Middle East.² Based on research carried out in Cairo between October 2004 and January 2005 and in March 2006, I will use an actor-centered approach in order to analyze the motivations of Egyptian teachers and students for participating in the practice of private tutoring. What are the implications of the privatization and commodification of education for the relationship between teachers and students? What are the implications for the status of teachers in Egyptian society? On the one hand, the dissociation of teaching and learning from the direct control of the state and from school as a hierarchical and authoritarian institution seems to entail an increase in freedom for both teachers and students. Private tutoring opens up spaces of professional autonomy and creativity within a highly centralized and hierarchical system, although within the very limited and narrow framework of state-controlled curricula and examinations. For some teachers, private tutoring serves to improve not only their economic, but also their social status. On the other hand, education is increasingly turned into a marketable commodity, and the intrusion of the market principle into formerly protected realms of “moral economy” (Elwert 1985), e.g. the provision of basic social services like health care and education, means that more opportunities arise for venality and corruption, and that socio-economic inequalities are aggravated. Despite all efforts made by the Egyptian government to increase enrollment rates and provide quality education to all citizens, the quality of education that can be accessed today depends, more than ever, on the individual family’s financial means.

The development of the public education system in Egypt³

A modern European-style education system was first introduced to Egypt by Mohammed Ali (1805-1849) during the first half of the 19th century (cf. Starrett 1998: 27). He established schools for accounting, engineering and administration to serve his need of well-educated, loyal administrators and army officers for building up a national army. The establishment of a modern education system resulted in the emergence of an educated Egyptian middle class, while the lower classes still relied on the traditional Qur’an schools, called *katateeb* (sg. *kuttab*).⁴ A dual system of education was thus established, which has persisted, in a somewhat

² Most of the available literature refers to East, South-East and South Asia (e.g. Bray 1999 & 2003, Foondun 2002, Kwok 2004). There are also a few studies dealing with North America (Aurini/ Davies 2004, Aurini 2006, Davies 2004), Great Britain (Ireson 2004, Scanlon & Buckingham 2004), Eastern Europe (Popa/ Acedo 2006), Turkey (Tansel/ Bircan 2004) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Buchmann 2002). Most of these studies are provided by educational scientists or economists, some of whom have used ethnographic, i.e. qualitative, research methods, but hardly ever with an anthropological theoretical background or interest. Literature on private tutoring in Egypt is scarce: In a number of publications on education in Egypt, the issue is mentioned (e.g. Hyde 1978, Cochran 1986, Hargreaves 1997, El-Tawila/ Lloyd et.al. 2000) and there are some ethnographic accounts that mention the phenomenon, however without tutoring being the main focus (e.g. Herrera 1992, Singermann 1995, Barsoum 2002, Farag 2006, Naguib 2006, Saad 2006).

³ For more elaborate discussions of the history of education in Egypt see, for example, Hyde 1978, Cochran 1986, and Starrett 1998.

⁴ Since the new middle class of educated Egyptians presented a threat to the ruling elite, many of the new schools were closed down again by Mohammed Ali’s immediate successors.

different manner, until today. During the period of British occupation (1882-1922), investment in education was curbed drastically and secular public schools, which had been free up to this point, began to charge fees.⁵ Education was now fashioned to suit the needs of the British colonial administration. However, the majority of children who received any education at all still relied on the traditional *katateeb* and were barred from upward social mobility (cf. Starrett 1998: 30f.). According to Barsoum (2004: 25), “the limited availability of education created a thirst in the poorer rungs for educating their children.” At the same time, foreign schools became popular among the Egyptian elite (Barsoum 2004: 25). The number of foreign “mission” or “language schools” that used modern curricula, increased significantly during this period.⁶ This system of elite “language schools” has persisted and still plays an important role in Egypt today.

With its “constrained” independence of 1922, Egypt regained control over its educational policies. Arabic was now introduced as the main language of instruction in governmental schools, while education in private language schools continued to take place in English or French (Cochran 1986: 15). The constitution of 1923 made elementary education for all boys and girls between 6 and 12 compulsory, and fees for public elementary schools were abolished in the same year (Barsoum 2004: 27f.). However, the “dual system” was still in place: Elementary schools, that were now free of charge, provided only the most basic skills and did not qualify students to carry on with their education. The fees for primary schools, which allowed for progression to the secondary level, were only abolished in 1949, finally creating a unified school system at the primary level (Starrett 1998: 74).

In 1950, Minister of Education Taha Hussein introduced free education on the pre-university level for all Egyptian citizens, stating that “*Education is a right for people as is their right for air and water.*” (cited by EHDR 2000: 31). In 1962, universal free education was extended to include higher education. General access to free education and later President Nasser’s employment guarantee⁷ for all university graduates in the public sector contributed to a rapid increase in enrolment rates in Egypt (Barsoum 2004: 31). However, the country was soon lacking the resources to meet the educational needs of the fast-growing population, and the quality of publicly provided education started to deteriorate (Cochran 1986: 49f).⁸ With Sadat’s Open Door Policy (*infitah*), a two-class system was re-established, similar to the one that had existed during colonial times: While the poor masses had to rely on the underfunded and deficient public system, the wealthier families could educate their children in an

⁵ This was partly due to a financial crisis, but also to the British fears of civil unrest. According to Cochran (1986: 16), the educational level of the Egyptian population was kept low in order to prevent uprisings against the colonial power.

⁶ These were foreign missionary schools, but also schools for the Greek, Jewish and other minorities as well as Coptic schools.

⁷ Under Nasser, public sector employment was guaranteed to all university graduates, leading eventually to a highly overstaffed and underpaid public sector.

⁸ More and more unqualified teachers were hired and school facilities were insufficiently equipped for the masses of students they had to accommodate.

increasing number of private and “language schools” (*madaris al-lughat*)⁹, a prerequisite for getting a well-paying job in the private sector. The fees for private and language schools range from a few hundred to several thousand LE (Egyptian Pounds)¹⁰ per year.

The Egyptian education system today

While there are parallel school systems catering to the different strata of the society, education in Egypt is still strongly centralized. Curricula, textbooks and examinations are devised and controlled by the Ministry of Education (cf. El Tawila/ Lloyd et.al. 2000: 90f). Private schools are supervised by the ministry and teach state-approved curricula. The Egyptian education system is made up of four main stages: primary, preparatory, secondary and tertiary education. Compulsory “basic education” is comprised of six years of primary and three years of preparatory school.¹¹ After preparatory school, students are tracked either into general secondary school (*thanawiyya ‘amma*), which lasts three years, preparing them for university, or, if they achieve only lower scores, into vocational secondary programs specialized either in commerce, industry or agriculture (cf. Barsoum 2004: 36).¹² Vocational schools make up about 60% of secondary enrollment. Students of all types of schools have to pass centrally administered and standardized state examinations, the results of which are decisive for their further progress in the education system. Since university education is generally perceived as highly desirable in Egyptian society, competition among students is strong and the final exams, especially at the end of preparatory school and general secondary school, are of extreme importance to students as well as their parents. The students with the highest scores can choose the faculties they wish to enter: in most cases the prestigious ones like medicine, dentistry or engineering. Students with a lower score have to settle for the less prestigious colleges and higher institutes. The *thanawiyya ‘amma* exams are passionately discussed every year in the Egyptian public and media. According to newspaper accounts, exam time means “a nightmare” and “a virtual state of emergency” for the students and their families (e.g. Shehab 1999). Being familiar with the context of this extremely competitive education system and the exam pressure that Egyptian students are subjected to, beginning at a very early stage, makes it easier to understand the prevalence and increasing importance of private tutoring. The following chapter will give a short overview of the scope and different forms of tutoring that are offered on the market of education in Egypt.

⁹ “*Madaris al-lughat*” are schools that emphasize teaching foreign languages (usually English or French) and where subjects such as the sciences are taught in the foreign language.

¹⁰ The exchange rate in 2005/06 was approximately 7 LE = 1 Euro.

¹¹ Compulsory education was extended from six to nine years in 1981.

¹² However, those who can afford it can avoid this forced tracking by continuing their education in private schools and universities. Even in governmental schools, students can sometimes make up for a low score by paying extra fees.

The informal market of education – the scope and forms of private tutoring in Egypt

According to the Egypt Human Development Report (EHDR) 2005, the percentage of families whose children took private lessons was 64% in urban and 54% in rural areas (EHDR 2005: 56). The phenomenon exists from kindergarten (KG)¹³ through university level (e.g. medicine students), but is most widespread at the general secondary level, where pressure on the students is highest due to the pending final exams, and estimated rates of participation are over 80%. Although, strictly speaking, it is illegal, the practice of private tutoring is largely tolerated by the state, and obviously hard to control (Herrera 1992: 68).¹⁴

The most common form of tutoring are private lessons (called *privates* or *durus khususiyya*) that take place in the homes of either teachers or students. They are provided individually or to small groups of students and are comparatively expensive, prices varying according to the level and status of the subject. Another type of private tuition that is becoming increasingly popular is offered by commercial institutions, which are run by private businessmen. These institutions can afford to offer comparatively cheap lessons or rather lectures (*sections*) which are usually held in front of larger groups of students. Tutoring centers can be found all over Cairo. They are often located in ordinary apartment buildings and are hardly discernible to the outsider. Sometimes, they are situated on the premises of mosques.¹⁵ It is impossible to give an exact number of centers in Cairo. Their concentration varies according to the area of the city. Some centers have several branches and their sizes vary a lot. One especially large center, located in Boulaq, allegedly has class sizes of around 200 students and may even host up to 700 students before important exams. In other, smaller centers, there might just be 10 to 15 students in one lecture. The target group of the centers are mostly *thanawiyya 'amma* and, to a lesser extent, preparatory school students. Some even offer classes for the primary level. Apart from these lecture-like *sections*, classical private lessons (*privates*) may also take place in tutoring centers. In this case, a teacher rents a room in a center while otherwise the class resembles a private lesson at home. There are usually not more than 10 students in a group, allowing for close interaction with the teacher. While *privates* usually cost 10 to 15 LE per session, *sections* are offered at relatively low prices, usually varying between three and eight LE, depending on the subject and class level. The accessibility of the different forms of tutoring depends mainly on the consumers' financial means. For those who cannot afford the more expensive options, tutoring is also provided by mosques, churches and charitable organizations. *Magmu'at* (study groups) are even offered at schools after the regular classes are over. They are taught by the regular school teachers for a

¹³ A teacher teaching German in a private Kindergarten told me that parents had approached her asking for supplementary private lessons for their children. She refused, however, because she did not have time for tutoring. (Field notes February 2006)

¹⁴ "While the Government has taken the policy decision to ban private lessons and tutoring by public teachers (Ministerial Decree #592 - 11/98), the practice of tutoring remains unabated." (World Bank 2002a: 42)

¹⁵ I often found it difficult to distinguish whether centers were actually run by religious organizations or just located within their facilities, especially since my interview partners made contradictory statements regarding their affiliations to mosques. While some underlined their connection to charitable and religious organizations, another one said that he was "just renting their rooms".

small fee. This official form of tutoring was introduced by the government as a reaction to the widespread existence of illegal tutoring practices.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it seems to be the least popular form of tutoring and whoever can afford it will resort to one of the other options.

According to a World Bank Report published in 2002, private lessons constituted by far the largest household education expense, accounting for 1.6 % of the GDP on the pre-university level alone (World Bank 2002a: 26). Private households spent more on private lessons than on all other education expenses, such as admission and tuition fees, transportation, textbooks and other supplies. This is true for households with children in governmental as well as in private schools (World Bank 2002b: 94). According to the EHDR 2005, 31% of the questioned families named private tutoring as the most significant problem of the Egyptian education system (EHDR 2005: 57). Many parents are forced to take on extra-jobs in order to finance their children's education expenses.

Students as “consumers” on the informal market of education

Why do students who complain about overcrowded classes in a governmental school pay extra-money in the afternoon to attend lectures with up to 200 students in a commercial tutoring center? Why do parents who already pay high tuition fees for private or “language schools” not hesitate to pay even higher amounts for additional private lessons at home? What is the motivation of students and parents in all strata of the Egyptian society to engage on the informal market of supplementary education?

Sumaya¹⁷

Sumaya is 16 and in the second year of general secondary school. She lives in a rather poor part of Giza. Last year she started taking classes in a nearby tutoring center. First she was skeptical, because she had heard people say that the teachers at the centers were not good, but then she went there once and liked it. She thinks that the teachers there are much more committed than most of her teachers at school. Also, the center is convenient for her because it is close to her house and the prices are affordable. She pays seven or eight LE per class, and there are discounts for students who cannot afford the lessons otherwise. In her opinion, the main problem at school is the lack of time. Classes are very short and teachers do not have time to explain the subject matter properly. There is no opportunity for the students to ask questions in case they have not understood everything properly. Sumaya says that, at the center, the teachers make sure that every student has understood the lesson and, if necessary, they stay on afterwards to explain things individually. (Interview Sumaya 16.03.06)

¹⁶ “The minister introduced *magmou'at* as an alternative to private lessons (which he has passionately campaigned against since his appointment). Teachers are forbidden (and “severely punished” he warns) from giving private lessons. Private voluntary associations, as well as churches and mosques which used to offer children private tutoring, have been ordered to shut.” (Tadros 2001)

¹⁷ All names (of persons and tutoring centers) have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Girgis

Girgis is in the third and last year of preparatory school. He lives in a small flat in Imbaba with his parents and five siblings. Girgis hates going to school and avoids it whenever he can. Instead of doing his homework, he prefers to hang out with his friends, roam through the streets and play computer games in an internet café. While his sisters have to stay at home in the afternoons and evenings, help their mother with the housework and study, he spends most of his time outside the house, just like his father and his elder brothers. When he failed all of his subjects in the mid-term exams, his parents insisted that he take private lessons. After some time, they found out that, instead of attending the lessons, he often took the money and spent it together with his friends. Worried about their son's future prospects, Girgis' parents decided to ask some of his school teachers to come to their house and teach him on a one-to-one-basis. For these lessons, they pay approximately 100 LE per subject and month. (Field notes 09.03.06)

Dina

Dina is in the second year of general secondary school and lives in Ma'adi, a middle and upper class neighborhood. Although she has always been a good student, she has started to take private lessons in all her subjects this year. *"I used to study at home, with the help of my mother. My results were quite good: 95 % in primary school, 89 % at the end of preparatory school. But I need to get a higher score now, because I would like to enter the faculty of pharmacy and for this you need a very high magmu'a, about 98%."* She takes all her private lessons at home, in groups of about eight students, most of them friends. Dina estimates that her expenses for private tutoring total about 400 LE a month, while school fees at her governmental secondary school are only 50 LE per year. In addition, extra books have to be bought for the private lessons. Dina's father, an engineer, has had to take on a second job in order to finance his children's education. Dina says that she has chosen most of her private teachers because they were recommended to her by friends and some because she knows them from her own school and they have a good reputation. Only one of her private tutors, the chemistry teacher, is also her regular teacher at school. (Interview Dina 18.03.06)

At first glance, Sumaya, Girgis and Dina do not seem to have much in common. They live in different parts of Cairo, come from different socio-economic backgrounds and have different attitudes towards school and learning. Nevertheless, they are all "consumers" on the informal market of education and resort to one form or other of private tutoring in addition to formal schooling – Girgis taking lessons with his own classroom teachers, Dina with other, "famous" teachers at friends' houses and Sumaya at a nearby tutoring center. As these examples illustrate, tutoring in Egypt is not at all restricted to weak students who have problems in a particular subject and need to catch up with their classmates, as is usually the case in Germany, for example. Many students, like Dina, take private lessons even if they are already at the top of their class. In a highly competitive education system, tutoring has come to be

regarded as an undesirable yet inevitable part of the game, and parents who cannot afford it feel that their children will be at a severe disadvantage.

As Eleanore Hargreaves (1997: 161) points out when applying Ronald Dore's "diploma disease" theory¹⁸ to the Egyptian case, the extreme importance that is ascribed to the secondary leaving certificate (*thanawiyya 'amma*) and the fact that it is indeed decisive for a student's future opportunities, have led to a situation where the final exams dominate the whole education process ("examination-orientation and ritualization"). Fierce competition for a limited number of jobs has resulted in a strong "credentialism" on the Egyptian labor market and in the whole society, i.e. a strong emphasis on formal degrees (*shihadat*), disregarding the quality of the educational process itself and actual learning outcomes.

"*Fil madrasa mish beyishrahu kwayyis.*" – "*The teachers at school don't explain well.*" This is the answer given almost invariably by students when asked about their motivations for taking private lessons. It was insinuated by some students and parents that teachers deliberately fail to cover the entire syllabus at school. One can frequently hear complaints about students being blackmailed by their teachers, who threaten to fail them if they do not take private lessons or who simply favor their tutees against the other students (cf. El Tawila/ Lloyd et.al. 2000: 27).¹⁹ However, most students I talked to were quite aware of the fact that it is not just the teachers who are to blame for these deficits, but that structural constraints make it difficult for them to fulfill their duties during regular class hours. Given the insufficient learning conditions, especially at governmental schools (overcrowded classes, sometimes double shifts, poor facilities), many students as well as teachers prefer to concentrate their resources and attention on private lessons. As Dina explained: "*A teacher at school might, for example, just explain a lesson very superficially, without going into any details. He knows that we are all taking private lessons, so why should he bother? At school, we don't pay attention anyway.*" (Interview 18.03.06). Before important exams, many students prefer to stay at home altogether in order to study by themselves or attend a last-minute revision class (*muraga'a*).²⁰

Since in elementary and intermediate school, 50% percent of the final grades are determined by the classroom teacher, students at these stages are more likely to take private lessons with their own teachers. When it comes to the final years of secondary school and the centralized *thanawiyya 'amma* exams, however, the grades are determined centrally and not

¹⁸ According to Dore, typical symptoms of "diploma disease" are a steady rise in the qualifications required for any particular job and at the same time a devaluation of these qualifications ("education inflation"). As a result, most graduates are (at least formally) overqualified for the jobs they work in and the numbers of "educated unemployed" rise. The teaching process in itself is devaluated, what counts is only the outcome in form of a degree ("learning to *get* a job" instead of "learning to *do* a job"). Cf. Hargreaves 1997

¹⁹ According to the study by El-Tawila/ Lloyd et.al., 59% of interviewed students felt that there was unequal treatment of students, and 22% said that students who took private lessons with their teacher were favoured against those who did not.

²⁰ When I attended a science class at a governmental preparatory school for girls, I was told that more than half of the students were absent that day. According to the teacher, they had stayed at home in order to prepare for the upcoming exams. They obviously felt that private lessons and individual study would be a better preparation than their official classes at school.

by the classroom teachers. Therefore, *thanawiyya 'amma* students and their parents are more likely to choose tutors according to their reputation and exam success record (cf. Singerman 1995: 161 and Herrera 1992: 69).

The deficits of an underfunded education system, a syllabus that fosters cramming and examination-orientation, the competitive nature of exams and university admission policies, the high value that is attached to education and formal certificates, peer pressure and pressure from teachers as well as a general lack of trust in state-provided services are among the most important motives of students and their families for engaging on the informal market of education in Egypt. However, the “socializing effects” (Foondun 2002: 20) of private tutoring should also not be underestimated. Especially for girls who might otherwise be confined to the household in the afternoons, private lessons provide a welcome opportunity to meet friends and increase their freedom of movement within a legitimate framework.²¹

Teachers as “suppliers” on the informal market of education

The education system employs the largest number of civil servants in Egypt, about 3.8 million in 2002 (World Bank 2002a: 8). However, I did not encounter a single Egyptian child or student during my research who wanted to become a teacher. What struck me even more is that the majority of teachers I talked to had not chosen their profession for idealistic reasons or even chosen it at all. Due to the specific nature of the university system, many of them had just been allocated in the faculty of education due to their final score: “*‘ashan al-magmu‘a*”. In the hierarchy of subjects and university faculties, education occupies a rather low position. Hence, it seems that teaching is not an occupation that many graduates consciously choose, but rather one they end up with. Manal, who is 28 and has been teaching at a governmental secondary school for girls for six years, told me: “*I would have liked to study pharmacy, but my magmu‘a was too low, so I studied German and education. At first, I did not want to be a teacher, I did not like my job, but I have gotten used to it. It is a hard job, though.*” (Field notes 12.01.05). Or Abla Zaynab who is 45 and a science teacher at a public preparatory school for girls: “*I did not want to be a teacher. My dream was to become a lawyer. Actually, my score was sufficient to enter the faculty of law, but my family was against it, because lawyer is a male profession. Teaching is a female profession, so I became a teacher. I have learned to like my job.*” (Interview 28.12.04).

While teaching had once been a respected and prestigious profession in Egypt (cf. Herrera 1992: 55 and EHDR 2005: 69), the social status of teachers has deteriorated rapidly since the 1960s, when more and more unqualified teachers were hired to meet the rising demand (Cochran 1986: 49). Many teachers who are employed at Egyptian schools today

²¹ Mr. Hamid, manager of a tutoring center, confirmed this observation: “I think about 50% of students attend lessons here at the center because they really want to learn something, the other 50% come in order to meet friends.” (Field notes 09.03.06)

have not received any pedagogical training prior to entering school service.²² In addition to the lack of prestige, teaching is now one of the lowest paying jobs in the public sector. The combination of a low remuneration and social status and difficult working conditions renders the teaching profession rather unattractive for young Egyptians and results in a high level of dissatisfaction and frustration among teachers. Teachers at Egyptian governmental schools usually earn between 120 and 350 LE a month, i.e. between 17 and 50 Euros (a salary that is augmented by some supplements). It is virtually impossible to survive on this income alone, let alone to feed a family. Different strategies of income diversification have become a necessity for many Egyptians working in the public sector. Being a teacher, the easiest and most efficient strategy for gaining an extra-income is private tutoring. Informal networks play a decisive role in this context. For many Egyptian teachers, private tutoring actually serves as their main source of income.²³ They do, however, still have good reasons to take on underpaid jobs at governmental schools. While the material incentive may be very weak, there are other factors that render public sector jobs attractive, such as the security of a health insurance, a minimal salary and a small pension. Apart from this, employment at a governmental or private school has now gained an additional function: For many teachers it serves as a basis of legitimation and as a platform for recruiting customers, i.e. private students.

Mr. Yussuf

Mr. Yussuf, an English teacher, is 46 years old, married and has three children, two of whom are still in school. He studied English at 'Ayn Shams University. In addition to teaching, he sometimes works as a translator for radio and television stations. He lives in Shubra, which is quite far away from Dar al-Salaam. However, his professional life is centered in Dar al-Salaam where he teaches at a public school for boys and where he is "famous" among students and therefore recruits the majority of clients for his private tutoring business. He gives private lessons at students' homes and is also renting a room in Dar al-Salaam, his "office" as he calls it, where he holds tutoring sessions. While the classes in his office are predominantly attended by boys, girls, or rather their families, prefer to have him come to their homes. Mr. Yussuf knows his students quite well and tells me details about their parents and older siblings, whom, in many cases, he has already taught before. He says that he has known some of his students since they were born: "*There is a relationship between me and their families.*" Once a year, Mr. Yussuf organizes a special exam for all of his private students, where the best students are awarded a prize and honored in a special ceremony. Mr. Yussuf teaches at his school until 2 p.m. every day. After a break of about two hours he gives three private classes of approximately two hours each, often finishing only late at night. Friday is his only day off. (Field notes 13.03.06)

²² According to the EHDR 2005, only 46% of employed teachers are graduates of Faculties of Education (EHDR 2005: 64).

²³ One teacher told me that he earns 140 LE a month teaching at a governmental secondary school and about 7000 LE a month through private lessons (Interview 06.01.05). This may be an extreme example, but it shows why it is so tempting for teachers to get involved in the "tutoring business".

Mr. Imad

Mr. Imad is 26 years old, engaged, and lives in Giza. He has been working as an Arabic teacher for six years. He studied literature at Cairo University and took a six months graduate course in education at ‘Ayn Shams University. Although Mr. Imad is still young, he has already established a wide circle of “customers”. In addition to working at a private secondary school, he teaches at about seven different tutoring centers all over the city and gives private lessons at home. He has written a book and publishes revision lessons for exam preparation, so-called *murag‘at*, in a major newspaper once a week. Mr. Imad used to work at a public school, but as he says, it was impossible to continue working there and teach at tutoring centers at the same time. The teachers at the centers are well-known through advertisements and it is forbidden for teachers of governmental schools to work there. He estimates that about three quarters of teachers who teach at tutoring centers come from private schools. Later he admits that there is another reason why he changed from a governmental to a private school: At the governmental schools, there are so many teachers that each one only teaches very few classes, sometimes only a single one. Therefore, the number of students that can be recruited for tutoring is limited. At his private school, he teaches many different classes and, accordingly, many students come to him for tutoring. “*Students from other classes also attend my private lessons. So the other teachers think that I am taking their students away. This causes a lot of hatred and envy among teachers.*”. Mr. Imad works at school from 7:45 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. every day except on Saturdays. In the afternoon, he teaches at the centers, a different one every day of the week, and in the evenings he gives up to three private lessons at his home in Giza. Sometimes he finishes at 8 p.m., but on other days, especially before important exams, he may be tutoring until 3:00 in the morning. He does not have a day off. Mr. Imad says that he likes working at the tutoring centers, even if he could earn more by just giving private lessons at home. He considers it an honor to be working for some of the most famous centers in Cairo. (Interview 14.03.06)

“*Howa mudarris mashhur.*” – “He is a famous teacher.” This expression was frequently used by students, managers of tutoring centers and teachers in the context of private tutoring.²⁴ The teachers I encountered in private tutoring centers all shared some characteristics: They were self-confident, usually quite charismatic and very conscious of their reputation. They worked a lot, especially the younger ones like Mr. Imad who were still not married and trying to save as much money as possible for marriage.²⁵ Most of them were very experienced and had established a wide circle of “clients”. The older ones, like Mr. Yussuf, had already taught several generations of siblings of the same families. Some of these “famous” teachers gain an

²⁴ The same has been reported from China and other East Asian countries, where, according to Kwok (2004: 71), “idol tutors” are worshipped as “*ming shi* (famous teachers)”.

²⁵ During one interview, I tried to explain to a teacher what the situation is like in Germany, where private tuition does exist, although on a much smaller scale. I told him, that in Germany, private lessons are usually provided not by teachers, but by senior high school or university students. When I said this, my interview partner exclaimed: “So what do German teachers do after school?”

additional income by writing supplementary textbooks and study guides (*kutub kharigeyya*).²⁶ “Famous” teachers usually have a personal “assistant”, i.e. a student who runs errands for him, assists him with the preparation of teaching materials and helps to produce and distribute advertisements.

While little prestige is thus connected with the teaching profession in general, private tutoring seems to be a means not only of turning a low-paying public-sector job into a means of gaining a considerable extra-income, but also of gaining prestige and a certain degree of professional self-confidence. In this regard, my findings confirm the thesis of Popa and Acedo (2006) that private tutoring can be regarded as a strategy for not only regaining a higher socio-economic status, but also professional autonomy and self-esteem. However, one has to keep in mind that the methodological freedom gained through private tutoring is limited. After all, it is taking place within the framework of the mainstream education system, strictly following the official syllabus and focusing almost exclusively on exam preparation.²⁷

While many teachers at Egyptian schools are female, it struck me that I did not encounter a single woman in any of the tutoring centers I visited. While I heard about female teachers who gave private lessons at home, the private centers seemed to be completely male-dominated. There are obvious reasons why female teachers are less likely to offer private lessons, e.g. a lack of time and energy due to their domestic responsibilities, especially if they have a family. Apart from this, it is socially less acceptable for women, especially for young unmarried women, to spend their afternoons outside home, visiting students or inviting them to their own house. The only acceptable possibility would be the official in-school *magmu‘at*. They are also more likely to be supported financially by their husband or family and thus not as dependent on an extra-income as their male counterparts. When I asked Ustaz Ashraf, owner of a private tutoring center, why there were no female teachers at his center, his spontaneous response was that female teachers just lacked *mawhiba*, i.e. a “talent” for teaching. According to him, they lack natural authority, a self-assertive and charismatic appearance and the ability to “explain well”. He added that they were likely to stop working as soon as they got married or, at the latest, when they got pregnant. Therefore, he would not employ female teachers as it was too risky for him from a financial point of view. (Interview 08.01.05)

All of my interview partners agreed that the relationship between teachers and students in the context of private tutoring differs a lot from their relationship at school. School is often quite anonymous due to the large number of students and a lack of time. There is hardly any opportunity for individual attention and, as I was told, teachers sometimes do not even know

²⁶ A large market exists for these *kutub kharigeyya*, which are solely aimed at efficient exam preparation, providing exercises, summaries and previous exams for practice. They are sold in bookshops and stationeries and are also used by other teachers of the same subject for their private lessons.

²⁷ In general, Egyptian teachers have very little freedom in conducting their classes, as the curriculum which is devised by the Ministry of Education prescribes exactly what is to be taught in each lesson. They have to rush through the syllabus in order not to lag behind, and all lessons have to be reproduced by the students in final exams which are administered at the same time in all governmental schools.

their students' names. In contrast, private tutors usually seem to know their students very well, as the example of Mr. Yussuf shows, and they are even familiar with their personal and family background. The picture which I once witnessed in a tutoring center – a group of students gathered around their teacher at a small table, listening with rapt attention to his explanations – provoked associations of a traditional Qur'an scholar and his disciples. The students obviously had a lot of respect for their teacher. Unlike at school, students are free to choose their private tutors according to their abilities and reputation (although this is not always the case as we have seen above). Since the teachers are paid directly for their services and are competing with their colleagues on this informal market of education, they are said to care more about their "performance".

Commodification – expansion of the market principle

According to classical economic definitions, a market is a sphere of exchange of commodities between buyers and sellers, or consumers and suppliers. Under the conditions of perfect competition, the prices of these commodities (goods and services) are determined by the law of supply and demand (Lie 1997: 930). Sociologists and anthropologists have sought to take into account the "embeddedness" of the market, placing it into a wider context of social relations (e.g. Karl Polanyi). The process whereby social relations, goods or services become the object of commercial transactions is referred to as "marketization" or "commodification" (Elwert 1987: 301). This expansion of the market principle which is described by Polanyi in "The Great Transformation" (2001, orig. 1944) entails an increased opportunity for venality (or corruption). According to Georg Elwert (1985: 515), the expansion of the market principle in modern societies has to be balanced and limited by a sphere of non-market relations guided by moral norms and values, by "generalized reciprocity". Using a concept that was originally coined by Edward P. Thompson and later modified by James Scott, Elwert (1985: 509) refers to this sphere as a "moral economy". In small communities, exchange relations are guided by friendship and personal trust. In complex states, however, the moral economy has been institutionalized: an independent judiciary, welfare services, a public health system and a public education system are all part of this sphere of moral economy. Trust in certain rules and institutions is essential for the functioning of modern states and market economies. If this trust is lost and the economy is "disembedded", venality takes over (ibid.). As has been shown, the encroachment of the market on the education system has twofold effects: On the one hand, competition between teachers and other "educational entrepreneurs" leads to an improvement in the quality of some of the educational services delivered, private offers compensating for the deficiencies of the public system; on the other hand, where the logics of the market pervade all spheres of life, the incidence of blackmailing and venality rises, especially when underpaid civil servants are desperate for additional sources of income.²⁸

²⁸ While many of the people I talked to in Egypt, especially students and their parents, emphasized the negative aspects like pressure, corruption and the venality of teachers (a discourse which is also supported by the media), others, mainly "educational entrepreneurs" and teachers in the environment of commercial tutoring centers, but

Education – a public good? The role of the state in the provision of education

The public provision of mass education is a relatively new phenomenon. In Europe and North America, it was only during the mid-19th century that education came to be regarded as a responsibility of the state rather than the family (Starrett 1998: 25). Today, it is generally perceived as a public good which should be provided by the state.²⁹ The current international discourse stresses the human right to education and the importance of free access to education for all.³⁰ The public provision of education should, ideally, guarantee the equality of opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic background. In economic terms, education is regarded as a means of “human capital formation” and as an investment in the future, turning children not only into loyal citizens of the state but also into productive members of their society. It has, thus, come to be regarded as an important precondition for economic development. However, confronted with high population growth and increases in enrolment rates, public education systems all over the world have come under pressure during the last decades and the quality of publicly provided education has deteriorated in many countries. At the same time, the nature of education as a public good is contested by neo-liberals who argue that only the dynamics of a free market, regulated by supply and demand, can ensure high quality and efficiency of the provided services and encourage innovation and modernization.³¹ The opponents of privatization argue that “markets have no morals”, that the provision of education should remain independent of considerations of profit and should not be left to the forces of a free market economy and to private entrepreneurship.³² In the meantime, unconcerned with these theoretical debates, social practices have developed in many countries in the shadow of the formal education systems, that amount in fact to an informal privatization of education.³³ Looking at private tutoring in Egypt, we are dealing

also students, stressed the aspects of free choice, professionalism and the service-orientation of private educational offers.

²⁹ According to economic theory, “public goods” are goods or services that are consumed collectively by communities rather than individually by members of the community. They are indivisible and individuals cannot be excluded from their benefits. Another characteristic of pure public goods is non-rivalry, i.e. the cost for providing it is the same no matter how many people benefit from it (Bradley 1997: 614 f.). Education cannot be regarded as a pure public good since “it is divisible among individuals, individuals are excludable, and the availability and quality of education depend on the size of the school-age population” (Bradley 1997: 616). However, there are good arguments for education to be treated as a public good, since the external benefits of education affect the community as a whole and so do the costs of a lack of education.

³⁰ The right to education is stipulated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the UN in 1948, and has been elaborated in the “World Declaration on Education for All” adopted in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990: “An active commitment must be made to removing educational disparities.” Since the Dakar conference in 2000, the Egyptian government has added a focus on educational quality, the new Egyptian slogan being “education for excellence and excellence for all” (MOE 2003: 2).

³¹ A lot has been written by education economists about the role of the state in the provision of education and the pros and cons of privatization (especially about the voucher system), e.g. Friedman (1974), Lott (1987), Chubb/Moe (1988), Levin (1991), Belfield (2000). However, this debate is restricted almost exclusively to the US and the UK, it deals mainly with the formal education system and does not take informal practices into account.

³² An additional concern is that not only governments, but also private suppliers of educational services might pursue political agendas, e.g. Islamist groups in Egypt (Herrera 2006).

³³ Thomas Bierschenk (2004: 190) distinguishes between “regulated” and “spontaneous” privatization.

with an informal practice³⁴ taking place within a formal system. Despite the prevalence of this informal practice, the state determines the rules of the game: it controls entry into the teaching profession, sets the curricula, takes examinations and issues degrees. The “shadow education system”, as Mark Bray (1999) calls it, cannot exist without the formal system. The informal practice is shaped by and shapes the formal system at the same time.

In his article about the informalization and privatization of conflict resolution in the judiciary system of Benin, Thomas Bierschenk (2004) points to the stabilizing effect of informal practices that are “embedded” in an overburdened judiciary system, thus sustaining its ability to function at all. At the same time these practices withdraw resources from the formal system and, thus, undermine its potential to work properly, without relying on informal practices: “The system stabilizes on a low level of performance.” (Bierschenk 2004: 190)³⁵. Such a vicious circle, or “feedback loop” (*Rückkopplungsschleife*, Bierschenk 2004: 187) is clearly at work in the Egyptian education system: The public education system is overburdened, due to high population growth and rising rates of participation, and underfunded. Many teachers are unmotivated because of their low salaries and social status, as well as insufficient working conditions. The situation is aggravated by organizational deficits, like a very dense syllabus and the exam orientation of the whole education system. Students resort to private lessons in order to cope with the curriculum and prepare for exams which determine their future opportunities. Teachers use their position and symbolical capital, i.e. their reputation, and sometimes their power (over grades), in order to supplement their salaries and be able to make a decent living. Informal tutoring practices mean that a direct financial relationship is established between students (or their parents who pay for private tutoring) and teachers. In addition to paying taxes which are, to some extent, used to finance the public education system, private households are thus directly subsidizing teachers’ salaries. Bierschenk’s analysis of the relationship between citizens, civil servants and the state, thus, applies to the phenomenon of private tutoring, as well: „The triangular relationship citizen – civil servant – state (the latter in its fourfold significance as regulator, service provider, tax collector and employer) is cut short into a dyadic one, where the citizen pays the civil servant directly for his service – which gradually becomes the precondition for the civil servant actually fulfilling his official duties, even if only selectively. This deligitimizes the collection of taxes, ultimately reduces tax revenues and impedes salary increases.” (Bierschenk 2004: 210).³⁶ Private tutoring can, in this vein, be seen as part of the problem or part of the solution. It is probably both.

³⁴ Using the term “informal practices”, I refer to activities that are unregulated and uncontrolled by the state (cf. Portes 1994)

³⁵ my translation, S.H.

³⁶ my translation, S.H.

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