



## Is free basic education in Egypt a reality or a myth?



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### ABSTRACT

Egypt has made enormous progress in increasing access to education. While school is theoretically free, families must often spend substantial sums in order for their children to succeed in school. The question that this paper investigates is whether students can succeed in Egypt's basic education system, regardless of their family circumstances, and without additional spending. The paper begins by examining inequality in completing basic education and then investigates the use of supplements, such as private tutoring. Outcomes are examined by socio-economic status, to illustrate how the need to supplement publicly provided basic education contributes to unequal opportunities for young Egyptians.

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### 1. Introduction

Free education—promised in the Egyptian constitution—is considered a fundamental right of every Egyptian. Over the past three decades, Egypt has made substantial progress in increasing access to education and raising educational attainment. Net enrollment rates in primary education have increased from 64 percent in 1978 to 96 percent in 2009 (UNESCO, 2015). Over a similar period the average years of schooling attained went from 2.7 to 7.1, putting Egypt among the top 20 countries globally in terms of increases in school attainment over that period (Campante and Chor, 2012). The focus in Egypt, as in many other countries and in the international discourse on access to education, has essentially been on increasing enrollments and attainment, often to the neglect of other important dimensions of education. There has been, until recently, insufficient concern about the demonstrably low school quality and low levels of learning students are achieving (Assaad, 2014; Salehi-Isfahani et al., 2014; World Bank, 2008). There has also been limited societal debate about the substantial inefficiencies and inequities associated with public expenditure on education (El-Baradei, 2013). These issues mean that while education is theoretically free, substantial additional spending is often required by families to ensure that children learn and succeed within the education system. The need for additional spending contributes to young people's unequal

opportunities to attain education or achieve learning (Assaad et al., 2014b; Assaad, 2013; El-Baradei, 2013; Salehi-Isfahani et al., 2014; World Bank, 2012).

The problems of low quality, inefficiencies and unequal opportunities start within the basic education system, which in Egypt goes up to ninth grade and constitutes the mandatory stage of education. Although education quality is a difficult concept to define and measure, Egypt consistently shows quality deficits. Within the international education literature, quality tends to be measured either in terms of inputs, for instance the pupil/teacher ratio, textbooks, or teacher training, or in terms of outcomes, such as literacy, test scores, life skills, and job skills (UNESCO, 2012, 2014). In terms of inputs, the public funding of basic education is inadequate (El-Baradei, 2013), contributing to low school quality. Employers also perceive little value in the skills conferred by the education system; Egypt was one of the lowest ranked countries in the 2014–2015 World Competitiveness Report (141st out of 144 countries) in terms of the quality of primary education (Schwab, 2014).<sup>1</sup> In terms of international tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Egyptian students (and those from other countries in the Middle East and North Africa Region) perform poorly, with 53 percent of eighth graders falling below the low benchmark, compared to an international median of 25 percent (Assaad, 2014).

In part because the quality of education is low, investments in education may generate low returns in the labor market.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the World Economic Forum Executive Opinion Survey.

Annualized wage returns to basic education are estimated to be just 1 percent per year of education (Said, 2015). The returns to basic education in Egypt are less than one-twenty-fifth the international average of 26.6 percent per year of primary education (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004). If only returns in the private sector are taken into account, returns are even worse, less than 1 percent per year (0.1 percent per year for males and 0.4 percent per year for females). While returns to all levels of education are relatively low in Egypt compared to other countries, basic education in Egypt has lower returns than secondary or higher education (Said, 2015). The low returns to education are likely important contributors to the youth frustrations that drove the Arab Spring uprisings. Education in Egypt had traditionally meant access to formal (mostly public) jobs that paved the way to a middle class existence, but it has failed to live up to these expectations for recent cohorts of youth. The devaluation of education in recent decades has not only led to a great deal of anger and frustration on the part of educated youth, but also to persistent demands for social justice and more equal opportunities (Assaad and Krafft, 2014; Binzel and Carvalho, 2013; Binzel, 2011; Campante and Chor, 2012; Kuhn, 2012).

When the quality of education in public schools is poor, families who can afford it must often use other means to help their children succeed in school. In Egypt, the poor quality of public basic education has generated substantial demand for educational supplements or substitutes, such as private schooling, parental help, help groups, and especially private tutoring. Spending on basic education, and particularly on private tutoring is a substantial and rising share of the budgets of Egyptian households with school-age children (El-Baradei, 2013). Given the low quality of free public education, this supplemental private spending may be a critical element for succeeding in school, for those who can afford it.

This paper examines whether free basic education is a reality or a myth in Egypt. The discussion begins with an examination of equity in access to, success in, and completion of basic education. The paper then investigates the use of education supplements and substitutes, such as private schooling and private tutoring or help groups, as well as the provision of study help by family members. Two key outcomes of basic education are also explored: the performance of students on tests during basic education, and their ability to pursue the general secondary track (higher education bound), as opposed to the poorly regarded and usually terminal vocational track after basic education. The differences in education experiences and outcomes by gender and socio-economic status are explored to illustrate how the need to supplement publicly provided basic education contributes to unequal opportunities for young Egyptians.

The overarching question that guides the paper is whether free basic education is a reality for most Egyptians or if substantial private spending on education is necessary for success. Are privately-funded educational supplements necessary? How does success in basic education vary based on children's social origins and the resources their families are able to invest in their education? This will be investigated through two linked questions:

- (1) Is there equality in accessing basic education? What inequalities of opportunity in completing and succeeding in basic education occur in terms of gender and socio-economic background?
- (2) What role do education supplements, especially private tutoring, play in basic education and inequality of opportunity? What differences in education supplements and education outcomes occur by gender and socio-economic background?

To answer these questions, this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the background, including frameworks for investments in

education and unequal opportunities. Section 3 presents the data used and describes our methods. Section 4 describes the structure of the education system in Egypt. Section 5 presents the results in terms of accessing basic education, use of education supplements, and education outcomes. The last section concludes and provides policy recommendations.

## 2. Frameworks

The Egyptian constitution identifies a free education as the right of every citizen. This right is framed in terms of the socialization of young people into the nation's character, identity, and culture, as well as in the instrumental terms of promoting innovation and meeting labor market needs (Egypt State Information Service, 2014). This articulation of the role of education in society reflects global debates about the role of education. Free education is often framed as a human right, for instance as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990), to which Egypt is a signatory. The importance of equal opportunities is emphasized for this particular right of children, but such basic rights approaches tend to neglect issues of education quality. Education is also often framed as playing a key social and political role, both in terms of the state providing civic education (Cogan and Morris, 2001) and education being a key prerequisite to democratic political forms (Glaeser et al., 2007).

The instrumental, economic argument for public investments in education rests on substantial market failures that cause private demand for education to be lower than would be socially optimal. Substantial externalities (public benefits and spillovers) such as improvements in child health, reduced fertility, more effective political participation, or decreased crime are examples of justifications for public expenditure on education (Lindelow, 2008; Schultz, 2002; Temple and Reynolds, 2007). That parents, deciding on education for their children, will not capture the full benefits can also lead to under-investment in education (Edmonds, 2008). Information issues, where parents or youth are unaware of the true returns to education (Jensen, 2010), or credit constraints to investing in education (Schultz, 1961), all might act as justifications for public investment. Public investment should particularly target the levels of education and individuals who would not otherwise receive (enough) expenditure in the private market, as it is at these points that there is a justification for public investment in education. Currently, Egypt publicly funds primary through higher education, a policy that will, at least in the abstract, overcome some of the market failures, but at the expense of substantial spending on those who would otherwise attend and can afford to spend on education even if education were not free.

The human capabilities approach to education links together the intrinsic value of education, as a right, with more instrumental goals for education. This approach recognizes that the well-being of individuals is not just predicated on standard economic measures such as income, but on what individuals are free and able to do—their capabilities. Education is thus doubly important, as a route for expanding individuals' capabilities, in addition to its value in the labor market or for other instrumental goals (Sen, 1999). Education quality is also particularly relevant for expanding capabilities and letting individuals achieve the goals they value (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). The extent to which individuals of all backgrounds are able to equitably access quality education in Egypt, i.e., whether free basic education is truly a reality, is thus of great importance.

In investigating whether free basic education in Egypt is a myth or a reality, we empirically connect three interlinked issues. The first is the unequal and inefficient nature of public investments in education, making it difficult for many young Egyptians to learn

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