

Re/production of the loyal Muslim Egyptian citizen: Schools' physical spaces, everyday rituals, and discourses<sup>1</sup>

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I problematize in this paper the Egyptian school space and the everyday life during the 30<sup>th</sup> year of the Mubarak regime before its fall in January 2011. In particular, I look at how the state secondary schools within the Egyptian context were spatially and temporally produced by the Egyptian state as “abstract spaces” (Lefebvre 1991) functioning as a disciplining system (Foucault 1979) that would attempt to re/produce (Bourdieu 1971) the loyal Muslim citizen for a neoliberal economy within Egypt. I am specifically looking at the secondary school system of discipline, and embedded citizenry and religious discourses. The school space and everyday practices are problematized on the one hand as the product of a heavy-handed authoritarian state, and on the other hand as a means for subordinating young people, with the aim of producing citizens for the state’s economic reform.

### **Schooling from socialization to reproduction**

Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of social networks along with cultural capital and symbolic capital in the analysis of the role of schooling, and provides a set of conceptual tools for understanding structures that attempt to shape young people’s strategies. Cultural capital might be in the form of “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” referred to by Bourdieu as an “embodied state” (Bourdieu 1986: 243). It is mainly linked with the process of embodiment, the acquisition or cultivation of characteristics. It is a process that requires time, effort and investment by the person. The state of embodiment can be understood through the school discipline practices that I explore in this paper, so that students might embody certain disciplinary and gendered dispositions as a result of being for a long time in the schooling space, practices and rituals.

### **School Ethnography**

Three state schools in a popular neighborhood in Cairo, Egypt, were the entry gates to this research: Moustafa Kamel General Secondary School for boys; Nasser General Secondary school for girls; and Al-Haditha (modern) mixed (girls and boys) experimental school.

The ethnographic approach of Amit-Talai and Wulff (1995) on “how a situated group of young people create and circulate ephemeral yet powerful meanings that play a significant role in determining their educational experiences” (Demerath 2003:152) was a key ethnographic approach to understanding the schooling experience of young people in the three secondary schools. I was attentive, following Amit-Talai (1995), not to become trapped in a simplistic romanticizing of young people as being free and safe from the real pressures of the adult world, but to acknowledge their diversity and differences in navigating the pressures from school, family and economic conditions.

During the first period of the school ethnography I mainly focused on classroom observation. I soon realized that in addition to observing classrooms I should focus more on the “informal realm” of schooling (Amit-Talai 1995, Winkler 2011) in order to grasp the thrust and entirety of the schooling experiences of the young Egyptian. I started to focus more on understanding students’ engagement in extracurricular activities, peer relations, student-teacher interaction, student networking and everyday actions, and the arena of private tutoring.

### **Conclusion**

The physical space of the three schools privileged discourses connected with state-imposed nationalist and religious meanings aimed at reproducing the loyal Muslim citizen. Despite the amount of jargon included in the educational reform’s vision, mission, and strategies for preparing future generations that can contribute to Egypt’s project of modernization (MOE 2007), the three schools’ physical spaces attempted to support the state’s reproduction project and deterred the students from their goals (Lefebvre 1991). Moreover, the physical space and everyday life in the three schools explored in this article emerged to suggest that schools were resources of ambivalence and contradiction. Walls around

the school buildings carried banners and other media propagating the educational reform discourses of the effective school that would ultimately contribute to achieving sustainable economic growth and democracy. However, the schools' physical arrangements, everyday disciplinarian discourses and forms of fragility had come to contradict the propagated reform discourses. Students were not interested in engaging in school activities and were not really trusting schools' improvement efforts. Female students in particular were subjected to schooling disciplinary hegemony which controlled their existence in their school's public space and their participation in activities that would be seen as contradictory to modesty.