

LearnLink

Improving
Girls'
Education
in Egypt

Fall 1999

One hundred and fifty miles south of Cairo, in a dusty village on the east bank of the Nile, seven-year-old Layla Ibrahim sits in the corner of a one-room schoolhouse. Though she does not realize it, Layla is taking part in a series of extraordinary innovations underway in primary schooling in Egypt, especially in the most resource-poor regions of the country—and especially for girls.

Egypt has made good progress in achieving universal primary education, exceeding 90 percent in parts of the country for boys and girls combined and averaging 72 percent for girls nationally. But in rural and remote regions outside of major cities, particularly in Upper Egypt, female enrollment rates dip as low as 15 percent, and female literacy hovers around 40 percent for the country as a whole.

So Layla is in the corner—one of several interactive learning corners that characterize the multi-grade, community-based “small schools” the Ministry of Education and USAID/Cairo are counting on to help attract and retain primary level students who have been estranged from the mainstream educational system.

Small Schools

USAID/Cairo has launched a large program to help improve Egypt’s small schools, a term that refers to all the experimental models that have operated in the country during the last decade to reach under-served communities. In addition to the official one-room schools launched through the “Mrs. Mubarak Initiative,” community schools run by UNICEF, NGOs and others have demonstrated success in improving enrollment and retention of girls in basic education. Located near children’s homes, the schools have only one classroom in which girls (and some boys) vary widely in age and skill level and where teachers are from the neighborhood.

In the Corner

Small schools are typically divided into “learning corners” where students explore topics ranging from math and science to Arabic and art. A “quiet corner” provides a place for reading or working independently while the “listening corner” is devoted to stories or music. Some corners may be permanent and others temporary while still others may be designed around special themes.

A learning corner on the Nile River, for example, might be used for one or two months for activities in almost every subject area. Drawing maps and plotting cities and famous places along the Nile, now and in the past, could be useful for social studies, as could using an atlas to compare the Nile with other great rivers of the world. Science activities might include measuring the level of the Nile, and an Arabic language lesson could involve vocabulary words related to the river. With paper and crayons and pens, students’ artwork could create a mural called “Life Along the Nile.”

Zoom in on Egypt

Geography

Location: Northern Africa, bordering the Mediterranean Sea, between Libya and the Gaza Strip

Area: 1,001,450 sq km; slightly more than three times the size of New Mexico

Environmental Issues: agricultural land being lost to urbanization and windblown sands; desertification; very limited natural fresh water resources away from the Nile

Arable Land: 2%

People

Population: 67,273,906

Population growth rate: 1.82%

Total fertility rate: 3.3 children/woman

Ethnic groups: Eastern Hamitic stock (Egyptians, Bedouins, and Berbers) 99%, Greek, Nubian, Armenian, other European 1%

Religions: Muslim (mostly Sunni) 94%, Coptic Christian and other 6%

Literacy: 51.4% (male: 63.6%; female: 38.8%)

Economy

GDP: \$188 billion

GDP per capita: \$2,850

GDP by sector: agriculture: 16%; industry: 31%; services: 53%

Inflation rate: 3.6%

Budget: revenues: \$20 billion; expenditures: \$20.8 billion

Communications

Telephones: 3.168 million; 70,000 digital cellular telephone subscribers; 7,400 analog cellular telephone subscribers

Radio broadcast stations: AM 57, FM 14, shortwave 3

Radios: 16.45 million

Televisions broadcast stations: 42

Televisions: 5 million

The World Factbook 1999

www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html

The Joy of Learning

Taking effective elements of the small school models to scale, Egypt is attempting to respond to the needs of hard-to-reach students by emphasizing student-centered learning approaches, increased curricular relevance, gender sensitivity, and, according to the Ministry of Education, the joy of learning.

For example, recognizing that small schools require alternative approaches to teaching and learning, the curriculum combines vocational training with academic learning. This is a strategy based on experience, which indicates that income-generating skill development appeals to parents and helps keep girls in school.

In 1997, USAID/Cairo engaged LearnLink to assist with several aspects of the small school effort, including drawing lessons from Egypt's decade of experience, developing teacher training materials and launching an Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) program for teaching English as a foreign language.

On the Front Lines: Staff Development

Recognizing that small schools require alternative approaches to teaching and learning, the Ministry of Education is restructuring the primary curriculum to make it more applicable in multi-grade classrooms. Teachers' guides, instructional support materials and supplementary learning aids are being designed with a focus on topics such as methods of multi-grade teaching, classroom organization and creative use of space, group formations, thematic learning and integration of subjects. The multi-grade materials are being produced in close cooperation with governmental and nongovernmental partners.

One of LearnLink's primary roles has been the development of a teacher training resource manual that compares and contrasts traditional with multi-grade classroom interaction, passive with interactive learning strategies, and teacher-centered with child-centered approaches. The manual also identifies characteristics of the multi-grade classroom and serves as a resource tool for implementing the learning corner approach to classroom organization.

Bitatakalam Englishi?

While English is now a required subject in grades 4 and 5 in Egyptian schools, most small school teachers have little or no English or foreign language teaching skills. IRI was specifically developed to meet this type of need, and LearnLink's feasibility study confirmed that it could be used effectively in the Egypt context to deliver quality ESL instruction.

IRI is an innovative teaching process that builds on USAID's long experience with radio instruction, spanning nearly a dozen countries and over a million students. Though IRI uses radio as a medium for education, unique characteristics differentiate it from most other instructional radio. For example, IRI promotes extensive interaction between learners and radio teachers, calling for a variety of responses from students at regular intervals. It also provides highly systematized instruction to ensure quality, with practice divided into short segments and distributed over time, and responses immediately reinforced. Print materials distributed to participating schools help to supplement lessons. This process corresponds to the interactive small school approach.

While providing effective ESL instruction in schools without qualified ESL instructors, the IRI program in Egypt is also designed to meet the Ministry of Education's objective of familiarizing students with English "in a stress-free and fun-loaded atmosphere." Scripts with songs and music are being recorded with this goal in mind, and pilot testing is promising success.

Girl-Friendly Education

A key objective in the small school program is to ensure gender sensitivity in both curriculum and pedagogy. A "girl-friendly" curriculum is appropriately initiated in the small schools, where almost all students are female. Here teachers and facilitators can more safely move in the direction of introducing, demonstrating and providing opportunities for experimentation with nontraditional, non-gender specific activities. Many studies conclude that the education of girls is the most highly correlated variable related to population control and economic and environmental improvement. Therefore, though it will begin slowly as a small school teaching strategy, success could lead to the adoption of a "girl-friendly" curriculum as a national goal, with far reaching gains for Egypt.

LearnLink is a five-year, Indefinite Quantities Contract (No. HNE-I-00-96-00018-00) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). It is funded by the Human Capacity Development Center in the USAID Global Bureau, the Africa Bureau, and other USAID Bureaus, offices and missions. It is operated by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), which also houses the National Demonstration Laboratory for Interactive Information Technologies (NDL). The NDL fulfills the demonstration and information exchange obligations of the LearnLink contract.

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