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WEBINAR

HOW DOES CULTURE IMPACT PEDAGOGICAL REFORMS?

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DYL: Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, and welcome to all those who have joined us virtually. Thank you so much for taking the time to attend the second webinar in our three-part series in the SPARKS webinar series titled, "How Does Culture Shape Pedagogical Mindsets and Practices?," hosted by the Brookings Institution Center for Universal Education. My name is Rachel Dyl, and I'm the senior project coordinator and research analyst for the Strengthening Pedagogical Approaches for Relevant Knowledge and Skills. or SPARKS project at the Center for Universal Education. I'm just going to give a brief background before we get into our panel discussion today.

The SPARKS project was developed to investigate why, despite so many investments in well-intentioned effort for pedagogical reforms, classroom practices remain unchanged. Much of the focus in recent decades in international education has been on the more visible, surface level aspects of pedagogy, classroom management, teacher training, assessment tools, student-teacher interactions. However, with SPARKS, we think that these visible elements represent just the surface of a much larger and more complex picture. So that is why through research policy collaboratives and a collaborative research model in Egypt, India, and Mexico, SPARKS is investigating how what we term the invisible pedagogical mindsets education ecosystems, culture, learning theories and more are shaping education behind the scenes.

Through the research policy collaboratives, we bring together educators, policy makers, researchers and communities in order to do a few different things, to understand how the invisible pedagogical mindsets are influencing learning experiences in different contexts, to identify how policies and reforms related to pedagogies can be more impactful and meaningful and also to create a dynamic feedback loop between research policy and practice. Our discussion today will focus on one of the elements of the invisible pedagogical mindsets, culture. Key but often overlooked elements of pedagogical reforms. Teaching and learning are not just about policies and curricula, they're also deeply rooted and cultural norms, values, beliefs. that shape teachers' decisions, that shape classroom interactions, and much more.

We use the UNESCO definition of culture that defines it as the set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or social group that encompasses not only art and

literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. Knowledge is situated within a social context. And therefore, in an individual's learning, a student's learning is shaped by these social processes and values within a cultural context. As a result, understanding the role of culture and pedagogy and pedagogical reforms can help us to design reforms that are both meaningful and sustainable in local contexts. So today, our panelists from Egypt, India and Mexico, as part of our research policy collaboratives, will share insights from their context on how culture influences pedagogical choices. and what this means for policymakers and educators looking to implement reforms.

Before we begin, I'd like to remind everyone that we encourage audience engagement throughout today's session. You can submit your questions using the Q&A function here on Zoom by emailing events@brookings.edu or by posting on X using the hashtag #SPARKSwebinarseries. We'll have a Q&A portion of the session. directly following the panel. And it is now my pleasure to introduce today's moderator, my colleague, Dr. Ghulam Omar Qargha. Omar is a fellow in the Center for Universal Education at Brookings and an education, research and program evaluation expert with 20 years of overseas experience designing, managing, implementing and evaluating international education programs. Omar's expertise is in policy analysis, program design, education transfer, and research on teacher education, curriculum development, and monitoring and evaluation in the developing world with a particular focus on fragile, conflict-affected, and emergency contexts.

As a fellow in the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, Omar leads the SPARKS Project, which as I mentioned focuses on how mindsets, values, experiences, systems, structures and other intangible factors. The invisible pedagogical mindsets influence pedagogy in local contexts, and we're doing this through collaborative research. Omar, over to you.

QARGHA: Thank you, Rachel, and welcome to everybody who is joining us online. And good morning, good afternoon, good evening for some. I'm excited to have this conversation today on how culture interacts with reforms, pedagogical reforms in different contexts. We're very grateful to have a panel of experts who will help us untangle some of these issues and get into a discussion about the specifics of how culture interacts with reforms in their own context.

And these three panelists that we have are excellent experts and they've been working on not only on educational reform but looking at educational reform from this lens of how it fits into the fabric of the local context and why certain reforms seem to stick while others don't. So, without further ado, I would like to introduce our panelists and then we'll get into some questions and have a discussion about this very important topic. and then we'll do a question and answer period in which we do have some questions that were submitted beforehand. And thank you very much to all of those who submitted those questions. And as Rachel mentioned, we do have the option of doing live questions as well. So please, if you do have questions, keep them and put them in the chat or tweet them or the other ways that Rachel mentioned.

So, our first panelist is Dr. Pushkarni, she's the associate dean and the associate professor at the School of Economics and Public Policy at RV University in Bangalore, India. She also serves as the executive director of the Center for Research and Education Studies and Training. Dr. Pushkarni holds a PhD in political economy and MA in economics. Her research focuses on the economics of education. strategic planning and policymaking. With a multidisciplinary approach, she integrates grassroots insights into broader discourse and policy discussions on education and social issues globally and focused on India. Welcome, Dr. Pushkarni.

Our second panelist joins us from Mexico. Irene Valentini is a pedagogical development specialist with Education for Sharing. Irene is a learning manager with eight years of experience in structural design, ed tech, and curriculum development. She holds a master's degree in educational sciences and technology. She specializes in the design and implementation of innovative learning programs. Her focus, her work focuses on creating learning experiences, applying competency-based learning, adult education principles, and assessment design to develop impactful training solutions. Irene has led projects ranging from e-learning, in teacher training to the creation of educational frameworks and methodologies. She has managed and designed programs for diverse audiences, adapting to different needs and using education as a tool for social impact and global citizenship. Welcome, Irene.

Our third panelist joins us from Egypt. Menna Mansour is an educator, researcher and community development practitioner in the field of education with her work focusing mainly in Egypt with over 13

years of experience. Her work centers on enhancing knowledge and practices through social research and collaboration with local and multilateral organizations. She has her masters of education from the University of Glasgow. Menna's research interests includes education, pedagogy and culture. Previously, she contributed to various local and regional alternative education projects, particularly for marginalized groups. Currently, she leads our SPARKS project in Egypt. Welcome Menna. So, thank you all for joining.

As we can see, we have an incredible level of expertise in this panel. So, I'll just start by maybe asking Pushkarni to start the conversation with my first question. Global education policies often overlook uh, the deep cultural, uh, forces that, uh, that impact education. And these global forces that impact educational, or these cultural forces that impact educational reform sometimes are met with resistance and sometimes they're accepted. A lot of times that at the heart of this tension is this issue of that these reforms don't take into consideration the cultural norms within each of the contexts. Would you mind sharing with us your thoughts about how these forms can be more culturally relevant for a specific context and you can be specific to India or general depending on how you want to take the conversation.

PANCHAMUKHI: Thank you, Omar, and thank you for this very pertinent topic that you brought for discussion. So yes, you're right, culture definitely has a huge role to play in terms of influencing the teacher thinking more than anything else. In the sense, what does a teacher bring to classroom It's not necessarily her degrees and her qualifications, but also, you know, the multitude of values that she has received from the society. So, if I have to speak of India, then yes, we have an extremely diverse culture, as you all know. So, beginning with in terms of, you know, the vastness of the country itself, geographically, we also have a multitude of languages, religions and all of that and each of these bring with them a lot of values, right?

And these have influenced education definitely in our country in the classroom setting. So sometimes, yes, I would say they're very favorable, for instance, you know, in India, education was looked upon as a very sacred process. It was considered, you know, where knowledge is imparted not just of the mundane, but beyond the mundane. You know, it was pluralistic. I'm not even talking about one

certain school of thought, but all the schools of that have existed and flourished in India all carried a similar perspective of imparting education, which is very substantial and deals not just with the mundane or the skills, but beyond that in terms of helping students to introspect and think beyond. So, these values embed a certain kind of a duty attitude among teachers which is reflected very prominently in the Indian schooling system.

So, research on teacher thinking has revealed that this particular idea of being flexible to be regulated and regulate and to accept teaching as a duty has held implement some of the reforms and it's been favorable. So, whenever there is a reform that's proposed teachers have looked at it as something which is coming from an authority therefore we need to implement it. Yes, but at the same time there is also the question of hierarchy which is you know authoritative that's there also embedded in our culture which has many a times prohibited the implementation of reforms in the truest sense. So, I'll come to it then when we speak about what kind of reforms, but I think I'll now, I'd love to hear from my other co-panelists as well.

QARGHA: Thank you, Pushkarni. It's how our cultural influences come into our classrooms and how, as you mentioned, how we view authority, how we view education is extremely important. I'll turn to Irene now to give us some examples from Mexico and how you see culture interacting with classroom practices and student-teacher relationships.

VALENTINI: Yes, sure. Thank you very much, Omar, and thank you for everything here. Yes, I would say that we're very alike as in India. We have this authority figure in which teachers are just an authority and a command for students, and some reforms are also being looked at as a structure to follow. Teachers were not involved in the creation of these reforms before, students neither, nor communities, and these reforms are always like a strong structure that everyone should follow. As in India, in Mexico, we are also very various in terms of diversity, community, language, traditions, everything. And we cannot have one reform for everyone, as we have different values, traditions, way of viewing the world and way of living the current context.

So, before we had these different reforms in which we were imposed to follow them and students didn't feel as if they were really involved in the context and in the creation of their own I would say their own reforms and educational policies and we also have some strong indigenous communities in Mexico that are very variable and various and each one of these indigenous communities have their own way of viewing the world. So, I would say that we have this strength of community as well, and it is important to take this into account while creating reforms. Because yes, we go into the classroom and each one of us has their own cultural baggage, their own cultural background and everything, and we have to think on how to adapt these methods and needs. to meet all of the diverse students that we have here in Mexico.

And I would say we have a key context also in Mexico, which is the violence that we challenge and we face here in Mexico, and this might also be a barrier in implementing reforms because, for example, teachers may also have to struggle not only with implementing the reforms that they're imposed and with the teaching and the classrooms that they have to go to, but they also have to have this role of emotional regulation and psychological support for students and the communities that they work in. So, it's very important to think on all of the cultural taboos and all of the specific contexts that we have here in Mexico to create reforms here and around the world. So yes, I will say we're very much like India too. And I would also like to hear more about Menna in Egypt.

QARGHA: Thank you, Rene. Yeah, so what I'm hearing is that the culture itself is complex. There's many elements of culture that goes into it. There's not one culture in any setting. There's multiple cultures. And both students and teachers and policymakers bring those influences into. and to their policy space, and to their classrooms, and to their learning experiences. And what I heard you say, Irene, was that these reforms are coming down from sort of top without consultation and without the voices that have to deal with these reforms. So, I would like to turn to Menna now too. to same question, how does this interaction look like in Egypt?

AHMED: Well, Omar, thank you, Irene, and thank you, because, yeah, we can always see how these discussions, the similarities, and the applications of the reforms and the challenges that come with the implementation process that come top-down to the teachers. But thinking about culture, I always see

you then. To understand, culture is about to understand the reality of the classrooms today. And to understand the reality of the classrooms today, we must somehow first examine the historical trajectory of the education, which informs us, in the case of Egypt, of the changes and development of the role of the teachers among the different shifts in education, which tells us a lot about the education culture. So, for example, the conceptual foundation of education in Egypt is very much interweaved with the concept of upbringing and knowledge. This kind of came from the traditional schools in Egypt.

When I say traditional schools, back in the history I don't mean here something like backward, but I mean that there was kind of conceptual and pedagogical foundation. So accordingly, teachers at this case held authority and were tasked to insulting societal values and moral behaviors and perspective of education that stemmed from more of religious values. With the development and shifting in education system later on, we had more schools that are strategically deployed by states as a tool of nation building, promoting national identity, political authority and social cohesion. So, we could see that the role of the teacher here was kind of the guardian of national identity, responsible of transferring the civic values and even the knowledge and sciences that was reflected in the school rituals and the classroom practices and on the value and image of the teacher among the society and kind of interacting with the societal, big societal culture at this context.

Later on, we had this whole notion of privatization of education in Egypt emerging of the private tutor market and I would love here to use the terminology that we had this kind of teacher-student relationship which was transactional relationship. So, teachers were navigating with that like you know expansion of public education and education for everybody. They were navigating the market of private tutors and also navigating teacher teaching inside the. This somehow, we can see how the pedagogy is transforming through the shifts in education, but these shifts never erase the foundations and the culture that transmit over the different pedagogies. With the expansion of the internet and technology now, we can see more of the entrepreneur teachers.

So, they are using like, you know, digital tools and tech integration to teachers are marketing for themselves in a different way and this also is emerging a new cultural education. So, yeah, I would

like always love to look at all of these changes and emergence, like, you know, cumulative and shaping the culture of education and also affecting the reform.

QARGHA: Thank you, Menna. Yeah, so taking into consideration the historical trajectories, that forms the culture, that forms the one of the examples or an imagery that I like when thinking about culture is this example that Dr. Farooq Abdullah use is that culture is sort of the bedrock of the river. And the water that flows into it, it starts getting the hue of whatever the bedrock is. So, if the clay has a red tint, the water will look a little red. If it's a different color, it'll look differently. So, so it's this thing that forms the background, that influences, that's so much integrated, but also easy to not see because you think that it's part of this entire water that's flowing.

And before going to the next question, the one thing that out of all of your conversations that came to my mind is, so there's specific individual contexts and cultures that impact how people see education. There's also a global culture, especially with globalization and colonization and everything else with education transfer that's taken place. So there's also this interaction of this global education governance that Introduces another force and so maybe we'll get into that a little bit later on moving a little bit more towards more specifics, and maybe I'll start this around with Irene, and if you could tell us about the specific education reform in Mexico, the new Mexican schools policy, and tell us how cultural norms and values support either the approaches that active learning, playful learning, student-centered learning, or how they kind of go against that, if we can get into more of the weeds and in each of the contexts. So, because a lot of our viewers might not have heard about the policy previously, if you can give us just a little short bit about what the policy is about, and then how culture influences the adoption of those pedagogical reforms.

VALENTINI: Sure, yes, I can give you also a context of what the name is. The name is the New Mexican School Reform. It is a very recent reform that has been implemented here in Mexico. This is a very unique and different approach of a reform that has been implemented through the years. Because previously in the past, also as Menna said, here in Mexico we have been viewing education just as a transaction and just as a passage from school to the economic markets.

So, children and students are only being there, studying there, just to go to a specific economic market and to participate in the economics of the country. And now this NEM is a very, very different approach of education. They address the needs of the Mexicans of today and of the future. And normally it's a very flexible and open curriculum. It is very important because culture plays a very important part of the NEM. The NEM is a structure of some subjects that go through primary education to a more upper level and students, teachers, communities plays a really important part in this because they try to create a dialog with these disciplines. and they create their own way of addressing these specific subjects and topics.

So, there's for example a School Technical Council that is held recurrently and through the school year in which teachers meet regularly to discuss on the topics, the design, the plan and the projects that they want to implement in their own schools. And they address school-specific issues and community-specific issues. So, this makes the name a very flexible curriculum to be implemented in all of the variety of Mexican context. So yes, I would say that NEM, one of the unique aspects of the curriculum is that we have the subjects, but we really think on the communities and we think on the cultures, the indigenous culture as well. They recognize, for example, the Mexican cultural diversity, they acknowledge the indigenous traditions, and they work with communities to develop projects to address these that they have proposed for everyone. So, I would say it is a very student-centered approach in a very modern one compared to other reforms that we have had in Mexico. As it is very positive and it is very modern, these type of reforms might also have some challenges to being implemented here in Mexico.

For example, there's been a resistance in implementing these type of models because It is very open and it also has some subjects that might think as cultural taboos or like very difficult subjects to address here in the context of Mexico, for example gender equality, sexual education, and they might have had a pushback due to this culture of conservatism. And despite being a very open and in an inclusive curriculum, there are also difficult contexts in which it could be applied. Because there are rural areas and marginalized areas, and some teachers might have also difficulties in implementing these types of curriculums due to these cultural taboos, and also due to the lack of, for example, resources and support from the government that be.

So, I would say this is a Mexican education system that really serves millions and millions of students, teachers, and a lot of schools around Mexico. So, it has to think also on this diversity that we have. And we're now in this complex task of implementing this reform. And we are not at the point of testing this reform because it's a very recent one. So, we don't have the results right away, but we're in this stage of using it and approaching it, depending on the community that we're in it. And I would also want to add that one thing that we also have to have in mind in implementing this type of reforms is the continuity of the reform, because through the past, we have had different reforms that changes with the political leadership in the country. So, we lack this continuity and we lack this result stage. So, we can never see, okay, what were the results of the previous reform that we implemented because we often change everything with the political leadership that enters now in the new cycle of politicians. So yes, that's something I would have in mind while implementing and in the context of Mexico is really print and re-print.

QARGHA: Thank you, Rene. That's very insightful and your last comments sparked a different element of culture for me. As Rachel mentioned in the beginning, we use this broad definition of UNESCO for culture that includes everything from the spiritual aspects in a society and how they value things and to their to the traditions, the values, the experiences that people bring in, and one of the experiences is experiences of reform, the culture around reforms. How do people deal with reforms? This is, as you mentioned, the reform is relatively new, but there were other reforms. So, there might already exist a culture of How do you deal with reforms that come down from the ministry or other elements of the government? And so, I find that very interesting. Thank you. Maybe I'll turn to Menna. And if you can tell us about the reform that's taking place and an Egypt, Education 2.0, what it's trying to with pedagogical reform and how that interacts with these many aspects of culture in Egypt. What are the things that support those reforms and what are some of the things that that cause pushback towards that reform?

AHMED: So yeah, Education 2.0 is a reform that started on 2018. And yeah, like Irene said, in Mexico, that wasn't our first reform. But I would say that was kind of a significant reform because this reform came very straightforwardly, saying that we're shifting the education system in Egypt from teacher-students-based education system to more of student-centered education system. And the

way to fulfill this vision is through using innovative pedagogies, things like disciplinary project play-based, and second big intervention was IPTECH integration. And third was changing the assessment culture, which is something big and significant for the Egyptian education system and culture of even how parents see education or see social mobility through education. And last thing was teacher professional development. So, I would say that these kind of global terminologies and trending terminologies in education ecosystem was very much highlighted in Education 2.0. And with this, like there was like big projects related to ITSEC, like something like that, a knowledge bank and a whole change in assessment system and a whole change in textbooks and a kind of plans. So yeah, and with Spark's research, we focused on Education 2.0 series through like the three circles of invisible pedagogy, looking at the ecosystem, looking at the culture and looking at the learning theories and how our focus was like, look at how teacher perceived Education 2.0 and how they implemented Education 2.0.

And where are the gaps between the policies and the implementation or how teachers understand about Education 2.0. And this informed us a lot about the culture that was and the cultural dynamics that was going on with Education 2.0. So yeah, and accordingly, I would love to shed the light on some paradox that teachers live with and the limitation of Education 2.0 and it's very much relevant to the context I've been mentioning about the change in role of teachers and how schools look like nowadays, especially the 2018 came after a significant political moment in Egypt, the revolution in 2011, so there was a kind of mega politically change and also the pandemic of the COVID. So, um, my first point was that teachers suddenly were asked to facilitate learning that foster critical thinking through pedagogies like multidisciplinary and project-based and integration of ethics.

That was happening very fast, maybe in one year, with our kind of cultural orientation. So, teachers were very much used to rote memorization, focusing on pushing the students to get high grades, but on one day they were asked to foster classrooms that has this kind of active-based learning. So, somehow, they began to see themselves as very facilitators rather than like active intellectuals because such kind of reform and curriculum structure and school environment or classroom environment, it required a teacher that has a lot of you know, cultural and thinking and critical thinking himself.

So that caused like a lot of confusion for the teachers at the end of the day, especially related to student-centered, the meaning of student-centered, especially that ED TECH was presented in the system as an alternative to the teacher or somehow substitution the teacher, this is a hidden message that the teacher got from the discourse at least. My second point, it's a paradox really to the cultural institution. The cultural institution is mostly told down with a very minimal autonomy for the teachers. And again, they've been asked to give autonomy to the students inside the classroom while themselves they're not having any kind of autonomy. And there is a very specific and clear example I got from a teacher when she mentioned that she has been given a textbook, a guide textbook, telling her every and each step she has to take inside the classroom, managing her lesson plan, without any room for her to put any ideas, because her ideas are, you know, treated as traditional ideas, and we want more progressive ideas.

So, these are the teachers that are asked to give autonomy to the students in a system that is very premedical at the end of the day. So yes, so I would argue that there was an initial feeling of alienation and anxiety with the teachers. We could see this, we could feel it from their, you know, explanation about especially the initial process of implementation of Education 2.0. So, because they had the sense of losing control, losing the relevancy towards the bigger society of changing their images and with the parents and with society so they are not relevant anymore. Yeah, so I would love to stop here speaking about the culture that this education point is bringing to with the teachers.

QARGHA: Thank you, Menna. Again, a lot of very insightful comments and observations. I'll just pick up on one thing before going to Pushkarni is this paradox that you talk about in terms of and what that what that paradox messages to the to the teachers that if we're trying to get students to be more active in the classroom, student-centered, and getting them to have more of a voice, but we're not giving the teachers the voice. We're kind of going top down on the teachers and prescriptive, but we're telling them to do the opposite with their students. So... This sends mixed messages I hear and yeah, I maybe we'll get into more of this down the conversation but I thought that was really interesting.

Pushkarni if you could tell us about the national education policy, which is the oldest of the policies in terms of the three countries that we're looking at and how the vision for changing pedagogy in India looks like within the national education policy and how that perhaps since it's been an active for a long time, how have you seen this interaction with culture, with these pedagogical reforms, and what are the challenges, and what are some of the elements that support those reforms?

PANCHAMUKHI: Thank you. So, the National Education Policy is not all that old. It's 2020. But yes, I think to other countries, it's kind of older probably. But yes, the focus of the national education policy in India has been on quality. So, I think my fellow panelists also have mentioned similar opinions about how each of these education policies are trying to focus now on quality, but especially so in India because we had some really epistemically low out learning outcomes in our country. So, some of the reports they mentioned that just 20, 20 percent of students in grade 3 were able to read text which is at the level of grade 2. So, you know and similarly even their arithmetic skills were very low. So, with this in background the focus was on to improving quality.

And therefore, the government beginning from making education more, the system, entire system more holistic you know the school education more holistic the idea was everything should be connected not disjoined so they introduced samagra shiksha it's an it's an it's a term to describe the holistic or the continuum from preschool to primary and upper school and so on and so forth. We have achieved access to education, but we are struggling on quality. And though there have been different ways of kind of bringing in quality, the one way which the government has very dominantly tried is to infuse competition. This is another policy. in itself as a part of a policy in the census scheme within the national education policy which was called as the was that Shala Siddhi, sorry the Shala Siddhi, which was trying to infuse competition into the schooling system not individually but among schools not within one but among schools and the teachers were supposed to evaluate themselves, rank you know the students, the school, the learning process, the assessments all of that.

However, what happened was you know there were several interesting studies that went into seeing the outcome of the Shala Siddhi program and in one of the cases the teacher says that what did was only paperwork. Right? So, what we were doing was just lot and lot of paperwork to fill in the school

assessments and the improvement plans. But by the end of it, there was no change in the teaching practice or the learning outcomes. So, what comes out is like what Menna so nicely mentioned. There isn't there isn't any voice of the teacher in terms of A, there's no training given to them. B, there's no one to listen to their concerns, you know, listen to their concerns in the sense on the ground, they are the ones who are dealing, they are the ones who are battling. So there hasn't been really much improvement on that front. And they, you know, we are still struggling with improving the quality.

Again, you know, there has been a lot of literature or of debate on how do we assess students. So, we had the national curriculum framework you know where which defined how the assessment should be based on developing competencies among students. But then they're all very theoretical in one sense. The empowerment among teachers is glaringly missing and that's something which is a big struggle. Therefore, there's also some discussion in the policy on how to go about teacher training, which is probably the punisher for all of this, to improve the quality. So there, the first one of the suggestions that has very strongly come up as teacher training should not happen in isolated institutions.

They should happen within a setting of a university where there are multiple disciplines and they all inform the teacher training. And I think this is a very good step. Apart from increasing the duration of teacher training, now there's also this idea that It has to be more planted discipline. So yes, I would say that our education policy, which focused at all levels of education, the national education policy spoke about higher education also, university and even early child care and all that. But then in the context of school education, in the context of improving quality in schools, the major thrust is on teacher training. However, there is much to be done in terms of practice. in terms of ground realities.

QARGHA: Thank you. A lot of food for thought, and I'm looking at some of the questions that have been submitted and trying to see. I'm actually going to interject a couple of the questions that have been submitted, because I think it flows with this conversation before going to sort of the question that we had planned about talking. So, this idea of reforms coming in into countries, and then you have a lot of these reforms, not in particular, but in terms of their origin, for example, student-centered pedagogies.

There's this global governance, this international force that's kind of pushing some of these reforms. And then a lot of the countries that we're dealing with also deal with issues of post-colonialism. And I'm combining two questions here from our audience. One is that the example of high-stake testing is a remnant of colonialism in many locations. And so that's there. And that's sort of the ecosystemic challenge that we have that if you're trying to reform things and in terms of making it more holistic, as you mentioned, you're always faced with this issue that you're doing high-stake testing and you end up teaching to the test. And then current reforms, these reforms that are coming into the countries, a lot of time they're supported by international organization or at least international rhetoric. Can you talk about, and maybe I'll just direct this to you, Pushkarni, at first. Can you talk about how the public kind of perceives these reforms? Do they see it as something that is nationally grown, or do they see it as an imposition from outside? How does that dynamic work?

PANCHAMUKHI: Okay, I think there is a lot of acceptance, acceptance in one sense about the globally changing scenario of education, the meaning of education by itself. The society, the Indian society, you know, we began with understanding that there are two ways in which education is provided in most of the countries that we are here talking about. There's a government and there's the private sector, right and somehow the other know the cultural values are pretty different in these two settings. In the sense, let me elaborate on this first before I go to what the public perceives or what the nation perceives of these policies. So, the private sector and it's a huge sector in India. More than 30 percent of schools in India are owned and managed by the private sector and more than 30 percent again of students are studying in private schools.

So, this sector, this segment is governed by the value of commercialization of education or understanding education as something which is, you know, is merely an opening to your career. It's a job. You know it's only a link with your with the job. So, in that sense, all the values of globalization, which are more towards giving you more opportunities. Yes, that's very well accepted, which is why parents in India, they're absolutely chasing private education. They're lapping up everything that comes to their door in terms of these international, or should I say, all these exams, which are at the national level, international level, all of that.

And they're only preparing their children to somehow the other track there. So, there is really no element of reflection about the goal of education, I would say, to a very, very large extent. So, this reflective element which We hope to build in our teachers, so that they can impart to the students. It's so crucial because like I said, teachers in India, they don't mind accepting things from authority in one sense, just to pass the time with a sense of duty. And they might engage with reforms which are student centric in terms of, bringing in activities, fun and all that. But then, there is no element of critical thinking, reflective thinking. And like what Menna so nicely said, because they don't have a voice, so they are expecting students to be trained in critical thinking, whereas they don't have, they're not empowered to critically think about the goal of education itself, therefore they cannot impart it. So, I would say that India is lapping it up, you know, the global change. I don't see much of a resistance there. Though the national education policy does bring in quite strongly talks about the Indian knowledge systems, the indigenous ways of learning stuff. That's, however, still at the periphery. And I seriously don't know whether that has any intent of this reflective element. Perhaps it's only to give you another edge in the global economy. So, it's more to do with economics than anything else right now.

QARGHA: Thank you. Maybe I'll turn to Menna to same question. How is the public seeing these reforms? Is it seeing it as a homegrown initiative or are they seeing it more as a sort of an internationally led initiative that's not as much culturally rooted?

AHMED: Well, if we speak about the public in Egypt, I would say that because of the whole thing of private sector, we have different kinds of the school in Egypt. So, my talk now would be about the population who go to public schools in Egypt or community school or other traditional Islamic school. And I would say that, yeah, there is this notion of, you know, globalization of education. So, schools, as we know in Egypt, like are no longer the schools, and the public are not expecting from the school as building and classroom, traditional classroom, what has been expected from the classroom. This is why there is kind of acceptance to any kind of reform, especially when this reform is integrating an ethic because the public now are, you know, this is a kind of global effect that they think that good education is related to ethics skills and foreign language skills as well.

So, everybody want their children and students know technological skills and to know another foreign language, especially English language. And this is coming from actually also the private sector influence on the public education. So, there is this kind of acceptance, but there is another paradox, because culture comes here for the assessment, culture that is very embedded and rooted in the public in Egypt. There is something that is making them more comfortable to know the path that their children are going through, especially that when the reform happened. Yes, it's kind of was following global direction in reforms, but we still had the issue about the high-stake exam at the high school. And for the public education, again, is about more of social capital, more of cultural capital, and more of economic empowerment.

So, having the chance to go to higher education and to having the opportunity to go into college, is something big for the population in Egypt. So, they found themselves in this paradox while in elementary school, there is no assessment. There was like, I would say a very positive welcoming and acceptance to this thing. But again, the system at the end of the day repeat the same issue about assessment again. So, they found that the students are not, um, used to assessment because it has been kind of stopped at the elementary stage and then they struggle when they go to middle and high school so they kind of went against this again and they required more assessment and more evaluation for the students.

I wouldn't say that the public see that this is coming because this is something coming from outside the country. There is big confusion, whether for the population or the teachers, but the teachers are very much aware. And this is my first time to see the teacher aware that, oh, this book is coming from this multilateral organization. This is culturally and education sector in Egypt is very much new. And it applies also on the teacher professional development programs as well. They can differentiate between what's coming locally and what's coming globally. And we're trying to examine now how this is actually changing even the culture among the teachers themselves. Yeah, so with that.

QARGHA: Thank you, Irene, your comments about Mexico.

VALENTINI: Yes, well, in Mexico it's pretty particular. I think we often cherish what it's not from our own culture, and this is part of our culture as Mexicans, which is very weird and it comes from really the colonialism and when we've were, yeah, it comes from the back for history and culture. And we often cherish everything that comes from the outside. And I think this is good because we have these role models, we have these values that we want to achieve, and we want also to participate in the global market because as Pushkarni said, education is often seen here in Mexico as the passage to the market and to the economic stage in which children and students can really participate in the economic area.

And they often see this, also teachers and students, they see education as the only way to earn more money, have a future, and et cetera. So, we often lacked this more social and emotional approach of education. So, as we cherish the global efforts and the global course and standards, we often leave behind what we have here in Mexico, and we have a lot of interesting and important knowledge from our indigenous communities. And I think that this type of reforms that come from a global perspective often create more barriers in our marginals communities. They provide these kinds of role models, but we leave behind students and teachers, and we create more barriers between our indigenous cultures and communities and the global role models that we want to achieve. And this is also seen with the EdTech approaches and uses that we want to have. We see that marginalized communities and indigenous communities do not have the same technologies, resources and support as other communities that we might see in Mexico.

So, it also not only creates barriers with other countries, it also creates barriers in our own country and these divisions in our own community. Specifically, from the NEM, they don't see it as an external thing because it is more of a community-based way of approaching education. It has some ideas and values from a global perspective. But as it is very community approached, and as it is always being challenged with the communities itself to address school-specific issues, we don't often see it as something from a site because we often adapt it to our own needs and our community needs.

So yes, I will say it's really complex subject and we see it both as a role model, but it also leaves behind some rich and important knowledge that we might have to highlight from our indigenous communities.

QARGHA: Thank you very much. And thank you to those people who submitted those questions. We'll get back into some of those questions in a little bit, but I wanted to kind of ask my last question in this. We know that context matters. We know that culture is multifaceted. We know it's very messy in a way. And then we have these reforms with rather clear goals in terms of what we want out of these reforms. And I'll start with you, Irene, because I think it flows nice well from your comments. How can integrating cultural insights and education policy NEM, for example, for Mexico? and integrating those cultural insights into how NEM is taught in teacher training colleges or in teacher training in service or pre-service. How can we make those reforms more effective by integrating these cultural insights? How do we do that? And how have you found the SPARKS project contributing to that goal.

VALENTINI: How do we do this? Normally, I would say, I think we're in the good path with the NEM because with these discussions with the community, I think that's the way of creating our reforms of the future. We have to talk with the teachers, talk with the students, talk with the families. Something very interesting of our Mexican community and culture is that we place the families at the center also of our educational communities. So, whenever we invite families, mothers, fathers, tutors, everyone from the families to join into the conversation to create the reforms, we find a value also from that side because we're really family-based and family-centered here in Mexico. So, creating this type of reforms in which we acknowledge the cultural diversity, we respect all of the cultural backgrounds that we have, we foster this sense of belonging in students.

In these reforms we have to think on inclusive education and on the specific context of which of the students that we find around us. As I said, Mexico is a really varied culture and we cannot define Mexico with a few words and with a few cultures because it's a very various culture in just one country and big country, so we with this community conversations and family's conversation, we could build more empathetic, inclusive approaches to education and to help also students feel respected and

valued and with a more student-centered approach. Yes, I will say that we should have this mindset of not imposing educational models. We have to have a current conversation and to think that this will always change in the future and as culture changes and culture evolves, we have to keep on going with these cultural conversations with the communities that we work in. And I will say that SPARK plays a crucial role in this because it gives us a voice in recognizing the teacher in training. And it also gives us a comprehensive view of the school environment. It not only analysis and reflects on the dynamics of the schools but it gives us with this comparative research some different viewpoints of other countries and that could also help us see what other countries and other economic systems are doing to identify for example shared solutions and new teaching strategies. So, I would say that we see this and we see the invisible. with these sort of projects and it's important to see the invisible to then make it visible for educational roles and systems.

QARGHA: Thank you, so I'm hearing creating those spaces for the voices of families to come in and creating opportunities to elevate those voices to continually reform the reform itself and continue to think about how it can align. Menna, turning to you and Egypt, same question. with all these complexities, how do we go forward? How do we ensure that the cultural context and the cultural insights are incorporated into reforms? And how do you see the role of SPARKS in this endeavor?

AHMED: Yeah, so to answer this question, I always like to draw upon what comes from the teachers themselves, because I always believe that history teaches us that teachers are the heart of the education system. So that's why I'm drawing upon my interviews with them, my experience with them, and I would say that there is something of a tendency to introduce progressive and contemporary pedagogies as the most effective and modernized. And it's like the best, and we should just embrace it and accept it as is. And while traditional methods are like implicitly framed as outdated or backward, and teachers get this message very quickly. So, I would say with the reform, there has to be something about cultural orientation for the methodologies and new pedagogies with the teachers that really consider the culture, that really consider their previous experiences and their understanding of the reality of the schools and the students.

They have been there for years and they know their students. So, any kind of cultural orientation that impose ideas on the teacher or consider them as backwards will make cultural rejection from the teachers. And this will be framed as resistant to change. While there are lots of dynamics we just need to look at, maybe it's very simple and small, but it makes a whole difference. And that was expressed, like I mentioned before, like teachers said like that, we had to show readiness and acceptance for the new system without bringing any voice from our side as if this is the only way. The second thing I've been thinking about is actually the technicalities of the training, the technicalities of teacher professional development.

There is like, you know, as part of the SPARKS we're doing digital ethnography, looking at the online teacher's activity and how they do peer-to-peer learning. educating themselves and supporting themselves to navigate Education 2.0. When you look at these kind of autonomy spaces and see the interactions between the teachers, you would learn a lot about the language that the teachers use to train each other. It's more of like very friendly, simple context ways. They give examples from the daily classroom. They use even the materials. and the artisan way that is very relevant to their communities, to their even digital skills. And the thing that they found around in the classroom, they use games that's coming from the community. They've been witnessing the children plays over the years. And on the contrary, you find those very standard programs that is kind of global. specific standards and speak the same language and gives the same example of a very neat classroom with a few numbers of students very much away from the reality of the classrooms.

So, we need to look very closely on these activities that the teachers do in the different be especially online now to learn how to develop our training programs to learn the real needs of the teacher, the real language of the teachers. For example, in Egypt, they prefer storytelling and human interaction. And now there is more, you know, enforcement of blended kind of training. So yeah, and the last example I would draw from the community school, one of the community we were doing case studies and this works on and one cross-cutting element that the whole teacher and the community school mentioned during the interviews. That in the training, they started their training with, it's like, you know, community schools always follows the community norms and context. So, they started the training with learning about the cultural context of the children.

Here is the kind of the mind shift that happened to the teachers. this making them more acceptance to any kind of innovative with the with the gorgeous because they saw the students as human beings, they saw the cultural context of the students. So, they came without great judgment on students' capabilities, how they learn how they can learn, they were able to utilize more like interactive and creative I will just, speaking about SPARKS. Well, I want to speak about the element of the research and how SPARKS is changing the culture of research and education itself by giving us this thing of humanizing the teachers. This is what I've been observing over the last year and few months working in SPARKS. So, like drawing this picture of them. intersections between the cultural elements and the ecosystem, it was a very human image about the teachers, unlike, you know, the researchers only use stuff like questionnaire, surveys, focus on students' results.

And this human image about the teachers in the narrative of the research, it helps us a lot while bringing a different narrative to the organization that has influence on education. He is speaking about policy. So, elevating that voice of the teacher drawing this image about the teachers can influence the policy in a different way. So, it is also helping us to rethink about the policy influence because when we speak about policy influence, we always speak about mega changes or speak about the changes in law. SPARK, thinking about the culture, sometimes we think about very small steps that can be done around the policy, examples that I gave on the training that will make different influence. So yeah, that's most like my ideas regarding this question.

QARGHA: Thank you. Thank you, Menna. Pushkarni, to you and your thoughts about what we can do and how you see the role of SPARKS.

PANCHAMUKHI: Yes, the way I see what globalization is doing to us is killing diversity. I think SPARKS is a huge role to play over there. You know, it's killing diversity in all of our countries and, you know, in the sense that setting very uniform standards, standards for teachers, standards for students. And the goal seems to be just one over there, you know, that is driven by mostly economic or social status considerations. So, you know, Mena spoke about humanizing teachers, that's something which SPARK is doing, but I would say, you know, humanizing students as well.

Because now we're treating them as, you know, as mere products which are, you know, finished at different levels, you know, we're treating them very, very mechanically, not understanding their individual capabilities, inclinations, cultures that they've come from, no diversity there. So, there's the two Indias and I'm sure the two Mexicos and two Egyptians as well. You have one India which is mechanized in one sense, the students and teachers, they're all looking forward to reaching there, yes? And there's another India which is sophisticatedly mechanized in the sense that they have all the tools and the digital whatever, and they're just competing. with you know globally whatever to reach those similar ambitions.

So, it's the same but you know keeping in mind the kind of mental health issues that children are facing and this is definitely true of India. We have a whole lot of teenagers 50% of them you know facing severe mental health issues including I know depression, social anxiety. and we see that in you know in as early as primary school when they don't want to do anything and it's so many incidents of children just taking their lives because of this kind of pressure that they have to reach these global standards. So I think SPARKS is a huge role to play in all of this and the way I see it is we've been doing such great research We want... cluster of schools where we set up these labs, these live labs where there's research and training for teachers and I'm not talking about centers which schools have in terms of counseling and all that but I'm talking about training, teacher training in terms of the critical thinking abilities not just in the language or the mathematics or the science.

You know developing you know, this critical thinking and questioning why rather than giving a whole lot of information that training yes but also training on how do teachers develop this reflective ability in themselves. and students. Because this reflective element of education is very culturally embedded in the education system in our country and I'm sure in other countries as well. So, I think we definitely can do a lot in this direction. Thank you very much.

QARGHA: Thank you. Thank you all. We have about five minutes. So, I'm gonna do a quick sort of a speed round of questions or maybe even one question. There's several questions that have come in. So, I'm gonna, given where we are in history and the role of technology and the role of AI, I'll shift to that quickly. and I. I would like you to just kind of respond in a lightning round kind of a manner. We

have talked about the role of technology in education and sometimes being seen as a panacea, replacing teachers, all of these things, but technology does bring a lot of benefits with it as well in terms of if it's done correctly. So very quickly, if you can tell or you can and think about how artificial intelligence might impact this cultural dynamic in your country. Again, sorry for the lightning round, but maybe I'll start with Menna first. And since you talked about how technology is so prominent in the reform, how do you see the role of AI and the cultural elements come with, with who has access, who doesn't, what does that mean for education in Egypt?

AHMED: Well, this question needs time to think about and to examine as well, because AI is very much a new thing. But I'm thinking about the exams, I'm thinking about the whole thing about the grades and exam and how this would change the game of education, because students are faster, from what I have seen now, students are faster on embracing AI and they're going to use to somehow overcome the obstacles of the whole thing about assessments, exams, and so on. So, this is one big cultural factor I see the intervention of, or the influence of AI in education in Egypt on. Yeah, that was the first thing that came to my mind.

QARGHA: Thank you. Irene?

VALENTINI: Yeah, I also agree with Mena. It's a complicated issue and question, but I will say it's a double-edged sword. Here in Mexico, I agree we're not using as much as the AI right away. We are really reticent, reticent, sorry for the word, I think that's the word, on using these technologies in our classrooms and in our educational context because we feel threatened. And we feel that, for example, a lot of teachers, I've heard from them that they don't want students to use them, and students use them. So, we have to embrace it. And in the context of culture, I would say we still have to be strong in showing our culture, showing what we have. And this is done through education.

If we create this value for our culture, if we create this love and respect for our own cultures and our many and diverse cultures that we have in Mexico, even with the globalization and all of the information that we have, students will feel their culture is also respected because they will be respecting it. And yes, on the negative I will say that these, sort of, technologies might also create

more socio-economical barriers if we don't know how to use them wisely in our educational context. So that's my quick thoughts on it.

QARGHA: Pushkarni.

PANCHAMUKHI: I think AI is here to stay. We cannot escape that. I think it's best to make best of the bad bargain. That's how we might look at it. And I would say that taking children out on the field, getting them experiential learning should be our focus. So, your teaching learning time in the classroom with AI probably is the shrinks. you don't need so much time now assessments can happen faster quicker all that but how about getting them to do some really you know experiential learning because of all the time that's left that's my thought that comes to me how to navigate this phase

QARGHA: Thank you very much. I know that was a loaded question and it's something that we all are struggling with trying to make sense about how this new technology is going to impact education and for our conversation what that means for the cultural influences. So, I want to thank all the panelists for a very, very insightful discussion. And I want to thank all the people who are online and the people who submitted the questions and just kind of transitioning and giving some of my musings about the current conversation that we had. The culture is very complex, as we mentioned earlier. It's sort of the bedrock that colors everything.

And sometimes it's very difficult to identify, very difficult to pinpoint. But it influences everything that we do. It influences how we feel, influences how uh, we make sense of. environment. And this is a conversation that needs to continue. Certainly, one hour or one-and-a-half-hour discussion is not going to capture all the different elements that impact reforms from a perspective. Maybe I'll close with three points that I picked up from our conversation today.

The first is that the multiplicity of cultures within each environment and the different intersection, whether it's socioeconomic, whether it's the different strata of students that we're dealing with, whether it's the different actors that bring in the different cultures from their own perspective, whether it's policymakers, teachers, parents, community members, global community, education actors that

there is a lot of voices and a lot of perspectives and a lot of experiences that need to be taken into consideration as we talk about education reform and pedagogical reform. The second is that all of these reforms seem to, the locus is the teacher. The reforms, at the end of the day, the weight of those reforms are put on the shoulders of our teachers and making sure that their voices are heard, along with the voices of students and communities and parents, is really key in ensuring that these reforms are responsive because this culture of changing reforms is also something that people are used to and maybe they say, I'll wait this out for five years or 10 years or whatever the cycle of reforms might be in a particular context.

And then we don't see a lot of changes in practice and we don't see lot of changes and the quality of education and. and most importantly, the relevance of education. And this is related to the comments about making spaces for discussion about what the purposes of education are. There is not one purpose, yes, economic purposes, national identity purposes. All of these are important, but there are other more humanistic, more spiritual, more uh thriving purposes that people come into education with. The word that resonated with me is humanizing and I think um when we think about these reforms stepping back and making sure that we put it into perspective that these reforms are being enacted on human beings. And these are teachers need to be humanized, students need to be humanized and policymakers as well. So, I would like to thank again, the panelists and everybody that's online. This has been a very, very good conversation and insightful and I will leave you with that. Thank you very much.