

ONE ROOM ONE SCHOOL

BOB STANLEY

*An old idea in education may be
the answer to contemporary problems*

Several islands break the waters of the Nile River as it flows through the centre of Cairo. One of these, a long narrow strip of land called Beyn El Bahryn island, is home to some 3000 people. But in spite of its location in the heart of the largest city on the African continent, the island is virtually undeveloped, its people mostly farmers.

To journey to the island in a tall-sailed *dhow* from beneath the walls of Old Cairo is like a voyage into a different world. Less than a kilometre away the roar of Cairo's infamous traffic carries faintly across the water, but keep your eyes below the horizon and this could be any one of Egypt's 4000 villages.

Rising above the island, the tall finger of the mosque can be clearly seen even from the city shore; up close it dominates the village. Adjoining the mosque is the village school — a single large room with concrete floor and concrete benches around the walls and down the centre.

The villagers themselves helped to build and finish this hall, and it also serves as a community centre for meetings, weddings, and other gatherings.

What makes this school different, other than its unique location, is its participation in a country-wide project that could help to meet the government's aim of bringing free primary school education to the country's almost six million eligible children.

This is known as a one-classroom school. In many respects it resembles the old one-room schoolhouse that was once the mainstay of the education system in rural North America. It is a flexible system, open to any child between the ages of 6 and 14 at any time — without formal application or fees.

It is hoped that the one-classroom school concept will help solve two problems: it will provide basic education to the remote areas that previously had no access to schools of any kind, and it will help to solve the dropout problems because students are free to leave whenever other responsibilities call, and return when they are able.

Depending on availability and location, the teacher may be a local government official, the *imam* of the mosque, a teacher in training, a university graduate conscripted for civic service, or even a teacher from another school willing to work extra hours. All receive intensive training, however, and are provided with course outlines.

After nearly five years there are more than 3500 such schools, all established with community participation, attended by some 125 000 pupils. Obviously the concept has caught on with the villagers, but how effective is it as a means of providing primary education?

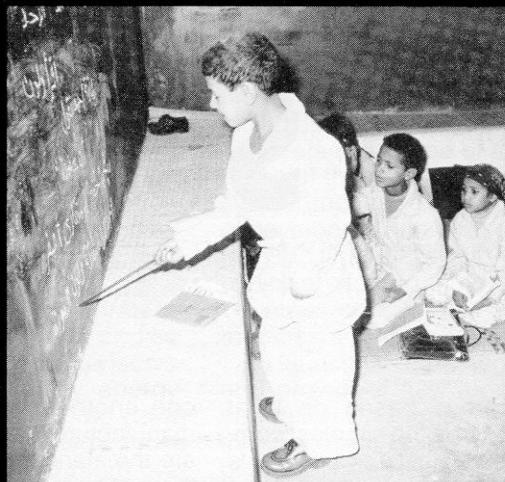
Until last year there had been no organized attempt to answer that question. Now the Egyptian National Centre for Educational Research (NCER), with the support of an IDRC grant, has begun an extensive study of the results from 50 one-classroom schools selected at random across the country. The school on Beyn El Bahryn island is one of them.

Four classes are held simultaneously in the school. The children sit on rush mats on the floor. The benches serve as desks. There are two teachers, both recent commerce graduates who chose a year of teaching for their civic service. At one end of the classroom Nahid Mohamed Radwan instructs one of her two classes in science, using a water hyacinth from the river to illustrate the lesson. At the other end Leila Mohamed Gawish conducts a writing lesson, using a blackboard that is simply painted on the wall.

The other two classes are led by monitors as they await their next turn with their respective teachers. There are about 130 pupils registered at the school, they come in two shifts, six days a week. It is hard work for the young teachers, but they seem to enjoy it.

In fact, teaching has changed Leila's ideas on her future career. When her year of service is over, she says, she would like to go back to college — this time to teacher training college to become a "real" teacher. □





Clockwise, from left: Nahid Mohamed Rawan teaches a grade three science class the workings of a water hyacinth. Middle, the one-room school accommodates up to 130 pupils in two shifts per day. Right, a monitor leads a grade two class awaiting their turn with the teacher. Below, Leila Mohamed Gawish leading her grade one and two classes: now she would like to become a "real" teacher.

