

THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN QATAR: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

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Abstract

Until the late 1990's, Qatar's educational system was run along intrinsic-nationalistic and cultural tradition of Arab schools. Few students were able to pursue higher degrees in Western Universities predominantly run in English as in the United Kingdom and United States. In the late 1990s and early 2000s the Qatari leadership approached RAND Corporation to examine and analyse the existing educational system and recommend options for building a new educational system. RAND assessment study concluded that the country's education system was rigid, old, lacking any standards or international benchmarks. This opened for a reform consequently, the establishment of a system of Independent Schools, new curriculum standards, teacher and leadership professional development to find the most effective systems for Qatari students to succeed along international and particularly Western benchmarks. The most recognizable change was the transformation of government schools to Independent Schools, what may be known in the United States as the Charter schools, to encourage key principles of *autonomy*, *accountability*, *variety*, and *choice*. The approach was to have the Ministry of Education metamorphose into the Supreme Education Council within it the establishment of the Education Institute and Evaluation Institute which both oversaw the implementation of the new curriculum and assessments respectively. More so, a new system and organization has changed the structure of the school system. Consequently, the number of initiatives taken shape post reform is markedly different from what was recognized in the reform. This paper gives a brief historical preface of the educational system in Qatar, discusses the reform in terms of its changes, successes and challenges and future development of the K-12 educational system.

Keywords: Qatar, reform, standard-based system, school structure

1.0 BACKGROUND

Qatar is one of the richest Arab Gulf States that has one of the largest gas reserves in the world. Its leadership made several bold decisions among them putting Qatar under English protectorate. In 1971, Qatar gained its independence as a monarchy residing over it an Emir which has full legislative and executive power. A lineage of power among the Al-Thani family put the Emir Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani as the man who initiated the new education reform. He has been succeeded by his son Tamim Al-Thani, Hamad Al-Thani instituted municipal councils, a legislative bodies and a constitution with the intention to democratize its public institutions (Rathmell & Schulze, 2000). Tamim Al-Thani is working on operationalizing these decrees within public institutions in the process of democratizing the nation.

Since the 1950s the income from the oil has enabled Qatar to provide its citizens with a number of social welfare benefits. Now the government provides free education and health care to all Qatari citizens. Allowances to widows, divorces, orphans, and those with special needs who have no providers (Al-Misnad, 2007). The generated wealth in Qatar is a large diversification in semi-privatization of some sectors of the industry as well as the educational one.

Before the discovery of oil, there was no formal educational system, education was mostly run by the Kuttab, known by the "traveling educators" who would travel from one village to another teaching language and the Quran. The move toward a more comprehensive form of education began with a school for boys in Doha which opened in 1948. Government support of this school began in 1950s, and expanded to other public schools. At the same time schooling for girls was encouraged. The first public schools for girls opened in 1956. In the mid 1950s led also to the establishment of the Ministry of Education called Wizarat Al-Maarif, being one of the first ministries in Qatar (Al-Misnad, 2007).

2.0 EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND REFORMS

The educational sector in Qatar followed the British system with three levels of general education including primary grades (grades 1-6), preparatory (7-9), and secondary (grades 10-12). Schools are segregated based on gender. Students attend school about 7 hours per day, 5 days a week. According to a recent report of the Supreme Education Council, 2012 there are 89,200 students which are served by 12,358 teachers. Students are admitted to public schools based on their living local.

Qatar has experienced a number of reforms. In the 70s and 80s with the increased development to a largely nomadic community it was then important to have a large illiterate group reach basic literacy standards with little attention paid to quality and there was little vision in what schools wanted to achieve except to a basic education. The most recalled reform was the Gulf Union initiative which drew not only of bringing the currencies closer together but also the unification of the schooling through one unified curriculum in all subjects. One of the most significant reforms was in the late 1990s in the establishment of the scientific schools, which had complete independence from the Ministry of Education; Mathematics and Science subjects were taught in English, they were set to be as models of change for other schools to follow (Brewer, Augustine, Zellman, Ryan, Goldman, Stasz, & Constant, 2007).

At the same time the quality of the education system became subject to government concern and public discussion. A desire to improve the educational system in light of some developing nations was seen on how and why the inherent knowledge-creating capacity could start with the development of the educational sector (Donn and Al Manthri, 2010) that would provide young people with the skills needed to participate in a knowledge-based economy.

3.0 CURRENT EDUCATIONAL REFORM

A new national educational system in Qatar was triggered by reports from the RAND Corporation (Brewer et al., 2007) that recommended improving the quality of teaching in order to raise student achievement. RAND led the reform by an initial assessment study. The RAND group in Qatar (Brewer et al., 2007) identified a number of weaknesses; key among them was school's lack of vision and mission, in the development of the educational system. Further the organizational structure of the school was totality hierarchical, initiatives were generally piecemeal linking little with the overall improvement. There were no clear lines of authority and generally no clear leadership or decisions. With that there was missing leadership; schools reverted to higher authority and top down decisions. The curriculum detailed from the Ministry of Education and incrementally developed grade by grade, this all done at the teacher own time, effort and expense. The curriculum from the Ministry of Education was not written in such ways where students and teachers could interact and have highly student centred classroom. Schools were overwhelmed by the high overturn among expatriate teachers and lack of professional development among teachers (Zellman, Constant & Goldman, 2009).

The more surprising finding is that with the accumulating wealth in Qatar to many outsiders schools in the early 1990s would be seen as run down and lacked the basic technology to support instruction. From our own anecdotal evidence, we had students at the university which told us of the cramped classrooms, a ratio of at least 40 students to one teacher and often two persons to one chair with temperatures reaching 40 Celsius having no cooling. With a larger appetite to change drawn from knowledge about international experiences and international schools in Qatar. Questions arose as to the kind of schools that needed to be developed, the kind of curricula and instructional approaches. Other questions as outcomes and quality raised issues about evaluations and student achievement outcomes (Brewer et al., 2007).

4.0 CHANGES WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

RAND came out with a number of options for the schooling system. There were a number of possible school designs proposed. RAND presented three main options for Qatar. In January 2002, RAND presented the first option being: Government funded independently operated schools with limited government control, the second option was a voucher system in which the parent had the choice to use coupons to place students in private schools. The third option was the modified centralized system in which schools remain under the oversight of the government with modification to governance. The leadership in Qatar selected the Independent School System which many thought to be an ambitious and particularly, unusual for the Middle East— an educational system traditionally runs by the public sector to be turned over completely to the private sector. Nevertheless, with the appetite to increase foreign ways believed to be efficient and progressive, the implementation began 2002 and the first schools to be converted was in 2004. The

leadership in Qatar decided on advancing this model by encouraging private local and international organizations to run and manage schools funded by government. With that decision in place, a conceptual frame was developed and used as an umbrella to operate and run the Independent Schools. Four rationalized frames or dimensions were drawn by RAND and educational authorities (a national steering committee). These were recognized to be the “driving frames” behind the Independent School system. The four frames included *autonomy*, which allowed the schools to make decision about hiring teaching staff, curriculum, professional development, pedagogy and internal policies. Second, was *variety* which decided on what schools should offer in terms of their programs or curriculum. The intentions was to have a great variety of programs that schools could offer. Third was *choice* which initially conceptualized as parents being able to choose the school to which their child could enrol based on the variety of programs school could offer and fourth and lastly was *accountability* in which schools could be accountable for what they produce in terms of outcomes. RAND recommended a standard based system which naturally aligned with it a set of assessments at each grade level. These standards were made of the curriculum standards which covered initially four subject areas: Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science. Then followed by other subject areas. Beside the curriculum standards there were also performance standards in which the assessments were developed in parallel. The curriculum were internationally benchmarked linked to the standards and national assessments.

5.0 EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE

In addition to the school system, the RAND introduced a new organizational structure to oversee the school system. As mentioned with the creation of the new education school structure, a new system which required, eventually led to the development of a parallel structure to the ministry of education, the creation of Supreme Education Council would operationally and structurally different than the Ministry of Education. Within the Supreme Education Council, three main organizations would be under its umbrella. The first two established offices were the Education Institute and the Evaluation Institute and later the Higher Education Institute. It was clear that new structure would work in parallel with the Ministry of Education with direct administrative connection with the Independent Schools.

The Independent Schools were established in 2004 which then followed by the establishment of the Supreme Education Council. The most significant changes felt in schools were the development of the curriculum standards of four subject areas: Arabic, English, mathematics and science. As part of the school autonomy, schools were given the opportunities to develop their curriculum that aligned to the standards. Many teachers were given the role not only to teach in the program but also start to develop their own curriculum. Many teachers were overwhelmed by this process and much of the curriculum i.e., content was not up to par with the quality needed to transform the educational spectrum. Teachers were not proficient or had the knowledge and skills to develop curriculum material. The idea of autonomy which translated into teachers making autonomous choices on the curriculum to provide accountability to these programs.

The Education Institute took the responsibility to assign the management companies to run schools, developed the curriculum and performance standards and started the process of providing professional development for school staff. The Evaluation Institute would develop the assessment, assess the students, monitor student and school performance. While the Ministry of Education had no direct control over the new established school. They retained control over the Ministry Schools until they were transformed to Independent Schools. The two school systems would run in parallel: The Ministry Schools and the Independent Schools. Not until 2010 all Ministry Schools were all transformed into Independent Schools but the Ministry of Education remains to this day with no executive powers over the Independent Schools.

The first thing a governmental school would have, once transformed is a new Independent School is a principal i.e., director known in legal terms, an “operator.” The school should be able to use the standards, and new curriculum and assess the student through the national exams. A decision was made through the government executive powers to delegate the Evaluation Institute to run the assessments in private, government and private Arabic schools. This was also done to see difference in performance among the different schools using unique assessments.

Many educational companies also known by the School Support Organization (SSO) flocked to Qatar to provide support to the newly formed schools. Mostly these companies helped schools to deal with the standards. In being able to read the standards, group the standards for the appropriate unit or lesson, identify appropriateness of standard to grade and age level, writing of objectives aligned with the standards

according to content, being able to identify the cognitive level according to objectives (viz., Bloom's objectives), knowledge and skills targeted in the objectives and content assessment aligned to the curriculum content (Nasser, Zaki, Allen, Al Mula, Al Mutawaha, Al Bin Ali & Kerr, 2014). In addition to School Support Organizations, prepared teachers to start new teaching methods that were student centred. They worked with leaders and strategic planning, curriculum development and myriad of other teacher support programs.

The Evaluation Institute in 2004 developed the first set assessment based on the four subject areas in which the curriculum standards were existing in i.e., Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science. The assessments were performed prior to the establishment of the Independent Schools and the full development of the standards. Later the assessments were aligned to the curriculum standards (Arabic, English, mathematics, and science) for students in grade 1 through 12. In addition to the assessment system the Evaluation Institute included a data system about the school system in general, parents, students, teachers and principals.

6.0 REFORM OUTCOMES

Currently in its totality schools have been transformed into Independent Schools. While the basic principles of variety, autonomy, choice have waned (with exception to accountability). The schools have made substantial pathway towards adopting a standard based system that now guide schools, curriculum assessment and teacher professional development. The idea of the school being an autonomous entity is now relegated to a government-led authority with some flexibility in hiring, professional development and budgeting. While earlier schools has shunned the Supreme Education Council to retain most of its control in deciding the operator and funding. There is however decision left to the school regarding teaching methods, teacher incentives, professional development plan and hiring of staff. Schools are now monitored to address changes in student outcomes with frequent and extensive testing and systematic school evaluation.

The most important aspect of the reform has been a standard-based system implemented to guide schools, curriculum assessment and professional development (Zelman *et al.*, 2009). Both the standards and assessment are internationally benchmarked into school selected curricula. There is consensus now that students are doing work are learner-centered. Partially Qatar's children are now in student-centered classrooms within improved facilities where better-prepared and better-trained teachers guide them in accordance with internationally benchmarked standards.

At the same time the reform was taking place, Qatar University has gone through its own reform especially the College of Education at Qatar university closed all its programs and restructure along the reform lines. Qatar has also recently developed an Education City having top universities from all over the world opening sister universities among them Weil Cornell and Texas A&M to promote higher levels of achievement for Qatari students (Stasz *et al.*, 2007). As the reform progresses, these benefits should extend to more children (RAND -Qatar Policy Institute, 2009). With positive aspects in the reform there have been serious parental and stakeholder concerns about the Independent Schools and resourcing in Independent Schools. The Government response has been to resort to increasingly regulatory approaches, thus possibly jeopardizing performance improvement (Zelman *et al.*, 2009). Researchers concluded that the education system K-12 still did not adequately prepare Qataris for work or post-secondary study and that the reforms would take time to bear fruit (Stasz *et al.*, 2007).

7.0 THE PATH FORWARD: CHALLENGES

Initial results showed that in most subjects students did not reach 10% of the required standards. This results in a serious reflection about where Qatar might be heading in the next two decades. This has imputed for further reform of the education system has come from the *Qatar National Vision (QNV)* which seeks to create an advanced, self-sustaining country by 2030.

The subsequent vision rests on four pillars - human development; social development; economic development and environmental development. The QNV recognises that post oil era must center on a knowledge-based economy tackling education, health and extending the rights and safety of expatriate labour. It calls for:

- A curriculum responding to labour market needs, individual aspirations, and access to lifelong learning

- a network of programmes that foster Qatari ethical and moral values and heritage, a sense of citizenship, innovation, culture and sport
- self-managing, accountable institutions
- research, including an international role in science and cultural activity.

There is a realisation in the QNV that participation of Qataris in the workforce will involve investment in training for all citizens, incentives for Qataris to enter professional and management roles in both the public and private sectors, increased opportunities and vocational support for Qatari women, recruitment of the right mix of expatriate labour.

The post reform a first stage of the QNV is the National Development Strategy (NDS) (2011–2016). The NDS identified five important challenges for education and training:

- underachievement in maths, science and English language
- poor administration and poor preparation of teachers
- insufficient alignment with the labour market
- low standards in some private schools
- inadequate pathways beyond secondary school level.

The five programmes comprise core and cross-cutting education and training; improving K–12 general education; improving higher education; strengthening technical and vocational education and training and enhancing scientific research. Initiatives draw on several thought after outcomes with drawn out strategic plans that reflect the future of the educational sector in a drawn out plan which develop:

- A national structure of evaluation, testing and certification
- The arrangements and structure for governance of education and schools
- Provision for enabling students with additional educational support needs to participate fully in education
- The extension of mandatory education
- Creating new streams of secondary education able to meet business and industry sector needs while being responsive to individual student needs
- Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness and quality of the overall integrated education service.

8.0 CONCLUSION

Qatar has made major fundamental changes in the past 10 years and improved standards considerably but it now needs to consider a second step-change which may involve extended patterns of education; new streams and options at the secondary stage; a cohesive post K-12 sector linked to higher education; a single effective management structure; the introduction of innovative options for students; and the development of a high quality staffing body both centrally and in schools; all combined with a single effective monitoring and evaluation process.

Any future steps in education reform need to be aligned with established directions of policy development, and must be consistent philosophically and operationally, with policies and conceptual frames and consistent accountability system. There is now knowledge, mistakes and successes which provides a wider perspective in terms of finding practical opportunities and constraints that will put ahead a pathway of possible options for the next reform phase.

At the same time, the review of the international literature suggests clear focus on teaching and learning; a similar focus on teacher professional development; the use of collaborative professional systems of peer review and mentoring; very clear support and direction provided by government agencies; institutional autonomy balanced by professional sharing and a focus on distributed but inspirational leadership. These success features and the need to engage in policy learning rather than policy borrowing suggest that the national culture of reform should be supplemented by a more participative and collegial professional approach so that teachers are able to exercise creativity and fully understand the reforms and their role within them.

In 2000 at outset of the reform Qatar has made important choices about a standard based system. Now there is a need to see these standards aligned to life- long learning outcomes and work-based competency and effective way to fulfil these outcomes. A new reform is on the horizon in which Qatar sees the importance of developing quality and new qualification systems that draw much closer to international long life competency benchmarked outcomes.

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