



## **It REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION REFORM IN QATAR: A LOOK AT INDEPENDENT SCHOOL EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract:**

Qatar has realized that building a knowledge-based economy is mainly depended on the provision of a quality education that is capable to create creative minds. "Education for a New Era" was the attempt to create quality educational environment that enhances the students' intellectual capacity where they could later contribute in transferring Qatar's economy to an economy based on the minds of the Qatari people not on their oil.

The initiative that was launched in 2002 is now facing a critical question: Why could not it achieve its desired goals?

This article aims to answer this question by investigating and analyzing the most important reasons that were behind and led to the failure of the Initiative "Education for a New Era" in Qatar.



It also discusses the impact of the community resistance that was against the change and its consequences on the decision making process at the Supreme Education Council, the lack of qualified capacities and the impact of continues change in decisions and the gradual withdrawal of the authorities from the independent schools principals and its effect on the educational process .

The article also points out the key results achieved by initiative despite of the difficulties and challenges faced, such as developing the skills of critical thinking among students, creating the culture of taking decision based on the results among the teachers as well as the development of strategic planning skills among the school principals. Please note that these issues were not available under the umbrella of the old or traditional educational system.



## **Introduction**

At the beginning of 2016, H.H The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Al Thani issued a decision that carried out several ministerial changes which included the cancellation of the Supreme Education Council and the return of the Ministry of Education in order to be the entity that is responsible directly for the whole education process in Qatar, although the Supreme Education Council has spent nearly fifteen years carrying out this role. This decision came due to several criticisms directed to the education reform. So, has the Supreme Education Council failed in fulfilling its mission? What are the real reasons that led to this cancellation? This article is an attempt to answer all these questions.

Before answering these questions, let's have an overview about the development of education in Qatar. In the 1970s, many expatriates came to work as teachers from the Arab countries, from Egypt in particular. They used the traditional approach which was based on memorization due to the low level of education in their countries. The curricula used did not encourage students to develop their critical thinking and the pedagogies were traditional so they did not motivate students to learn. This resulted that many students left the schools especially the male students. (Al-Banai & Nasser, 2015)

Since the 1950s, State of Qatar has provided its people with lot of prosperity due to oil revenues. Free education was the stone corner of its prosperity that included all citizens. Qataris has realized the importance of education even before the discovery of oil through Quranic schools (Katatieb) where Qatari children studied the language of Quran (Arabic) in these teaching circles. In 1948, Qataris sent their children to the first public school for boys. The schools had spread afterwards and were sponsored by the government until the mid of 1950s when Ministry of Education was first established and called "Al Ma'araf" ((Education)). Later in 1956, the first school for girls was opened in Qatar. (Al- Misnad , 2007)



The Educational Reform in Qatar was not the results of researches or recommendations made by the educational experts, but it was a necessity imposed by the reality of education and its outputs and the need to build knowledge based community. The “knowledge based community” as defined by the World Bank, is measured according to specific indicators, including education and the use of technology. (Hvidt, 2014) In addition, building knowledge-based community depends mainly on the thinking skills, the ability to innovate, and being creative. Therefore, it was crucial to pay attention to the educational process because it is a cornerstone in building the brains and the development of creativity and thinking skills. Therefore, the initiative "Education for a New Era" was launched in 2002 based on a study conducted by RAND Corporation surveyed the reality of education in Qatar. Local and international experts participated in that study. It included all educational stages from k-12. RAND presented a proposal for a strategy to build an advanced educational system through the independent schools which can be run by independent managements that enable them to develop their curricula independently. This would provide a variety of options for students. Some Qatari qualified individuals were selected to run the pilot independent schools in Qatar (Al-Bayan independent School for Girls and Omar Educational Complex for Boys). (RAND, 2009)

The Independent schools were not just schools that possessed modern teaching tools and advanced curriculum, but they were supporting four important principles which were the backbone of the development of education. First principle was the “autonomy” where school principals had all the authorities to run their schools according to strategic approved educational plans supported by the Supreme Education Council. The second principle was the “accountability” where the Supreme Education Council held the schools responsible for achieving certain standards. The third principle was “diversity” where each school had its own different curriculum. “Choice” was the fourth principle that offered different options for parents.



The Supreme Education Council had implemented a new approach in managing the educational process. Separate independent bodies were established for Evaluation, Education and Media Center, to ensure the independency and transparency of the assessment. The administration structure was changed in the schools where assignments, delegation, empowering and decision making processes were allowed to be done independently even among teachers.

Supreme Education Council had created non-centralized free system management and encouraged the involvement and participation in decision-making, trying to take over the limitations previously imposed on schools and teachers (Dr. Ramsey & Dr. Nasra's ). However, how were the reactions of the community and the educational field towards that system? And what were the obstacles that the new system had faced?

### **The ability to manage change and the community pressure:**

The change management requires the educational leadership to be able to cope with the resistance of any change in the society. Leaders should have a long-term vision in order to bring this change into reality. According to the leadership theory of social change, there are three key factors to manage any social change. Innovation or creation is the first factor where the leader should be aware of what the society needs and seeking to develop and improve it. The leaders also - if they want to lead the social change, should cooperate with all the specialists and stakeholders in order to make this change. They should also have clear and specific visions and goals and the ability to lead the society towards achieving this vision. (Jakobsen, 2012)

The community pressure that the Supreme Education Council faced at the beginning of the implementing of the initiative "Education for a New Era" was huge. Those pressures had significant impacts in changing some of the important decisions. For example, it was published in "Al Arab" newspaper that a male principal was appointed as a principal in a Model School which has female teaching cadre. This led to confusion and complaints.



Some female teachers threatened to resign, as the principal explained that his new proposal experience he introduced to the Education Institute where it was approved. This was spread in the social communication networks and was dramatically denounced. The husbands of those female teachers were against the ideas and they threatened to force their wives to resign from their works. The matter began to take crucial social dimensions. (Alarab, 2012)

However, at the beginning, Ms. Sabah Haidoos denied that in “Al Sharq” newspaper by saying “this news is totally untrue” explaining that it did not happen and that it was merely rumors. Nevertheless, after it was revealed by the husbands of these teachers via the social communication networks, she changed her statement from denial to the lack of evidence or proof proven that the plaintiff had a license from the Education Institute, through a phone call made by a famous media reporter Hassan Al Sa’ai, who in turn announced her view in Twitter. The reaction of the Education Institute was expected in response to the rejection and condemnation of the community for such a change.

Resistance for the change by the community had affected many decisions. The previous incident was not the first one, it had repeated many times. In 2009, a group of female Qatari teachers through one of the well-known newspapers complained about the mixed training workshops they had to attend. The female teachers refused to attend the mixed training workshops and filed a formal complaint to the Supreme Education Council. One of the female teachers said, “these training courses caused us problems with our husbands and our families,” Another female teacher said “organizers must respect the customs and traditions of the Qatari society,” Another one added” the training hall is very small and we can’t speak up in front of the male teachers”. (SEC, 2009)

The field of education - for many of the conservative Qatari families- is the best place for their daughters to work where they don’t have to deal with men. Many female Qatari teachers refused to work in the independent schools for many reasons; dealing with men was the first reason and the most important.



Nevertheless, when the Independent Schools had spread and the government public schools began to shrink, many female Qatari teachers found themselves in a position that they had to work in the independent schools, which led to many complaints and grumblings.

The Social pressures and resistance did not stop at this point, as it included the evaluation system and the national tests also. In 2015, parents welcomed the decision of cancellation of the National Comprehensive Assessment, which are standardized national tests delivered by Education Institute to measure the students' academic level of achievement. Parents grumbled a lot as many students could not pass these tests in 2013. Jassim Al Mohannadi- the principal/ operator of Omar Bin Abdul Aziz Secondary School for Boys confirmed that cancellation of the national tests is one of the important factors in easing the burden on students' shoulders and a response to parents' requests. He also pointed out that the Supreme Education Council has always sought to ease the students and teachers burden in the educational system, stating that the cancellation of the national tests will have a major impact on the students' hearts. Mr. Al Mohanadi pointed that there was state of joy and happiness among the families. " (Fekri, 2015)

Qatari society used to use the media and the social communication networks to complain. In return, the officials and the decision-makers used to agree on the demands of the society regardless the benefits to the educational process. For example, two female students filed a complaint to the newspaper about an abusive textbook in English Literature at the Faculty of Arts and Science. They claimed that the book contained a collection of poems and texts offending the Islamic religion and morals and preaching for the other religions.



The two students complained to their teacher who taught the course. She replied that what interested her was the level of literature in the poems and she did not care about the non-decent ones, " The two students complained to "AL Sharq" newspaper and demanded the concerned authorities in the country to open an investigation urgently on this issue, punish the responsible for that error, band such textbooks and replace them with another books which take into account all the morals and the traditions of the society and Islam.

In addition, a campaign was launched on Twitter to expel one of the teachers at Qatar University and to cancel her lecture just because she presented views that were different and in contradiction to the thoughts of the conservative society. The Director of Qatar University responded the public pressure and the lecture were cancelled. (AlDerham,2016)

These examples reveal that the reform in the educational system is fundamentally a process of social change. The Officials in charge should be able to stand against some of these public demands that adversely affect the community. The educational organizations are the ones who lead the community and make a change and not vice versa. The continuous attempts to gain the satisfactory of the community led to the blocking of all development plans in educational organizations.

### **Lack of sufficient preparation before the implementation of the reform;**

In order for any initiative to be successful, it must be preceded by adequate preparation that provides the key requirements for success. Thus, what was needed for "Education for a New Era?" The truth is that what the reform needed for this initiative was the qualified professional educational cadre. The skills and experience required from the teachers in this initiative are completely different than the skills required from teachers in the public schools. For instance, the teachers in the independent schools must be able to design curricula that meet the standards and improve at the same time the students' higher thinking skills.





In 2004, the Faculty of Education stopped accepting new students for 8 years. The faculty merely offered diploma programs in primary education, special education programs and Masters in Education. So, there were no sources that may provide the Supreme Education Council with efficient teachers. Therefore, the Supreme Education Council had plans for rehabilitation and training of the independent schools teachers. The number of those teachers – who came from Arab countries, was large. Those teachers used to teach in traditional pedagogies. So the training and rehabilitation coincided with the introduction of this initiative, which form a large burden and pressure on the teachers in these schools and had a negative impact on their performance. The Supreme Education Council took over the process of preparation of the teacher instead of the Faculty of Education which is something rarely seen in any country. It is known that the faculty of Education grant teaching license for its graduates, but what happened in Qatar is that the Education Institute has established programs for practicing the teaching profession in the field of education. The training to obtain this license was first started in 2008. Mrs. Hamda Al Sulaiti stated that "starting from the next year there will be an assessment for the teachers in order to have a license to practice the profession of education. No one will practice the teaching profession unless he/she gets this license which has various levels: beginner, proficient and advanced. According to the programme, there will be also criteria to evaluate each of these levels. The concerned authority to give and renew such licenses was the Education Institute". (Sulaiti, 2008)

Since the beginning of the implementation of this new experience in 2002 until 2009, there was no profession license to these teachers or majors in the Faculty of Education. There was lack of national staff in the training which was provided to expatriate teachers who were recruited through temporary employment contracts. So the government was benefit from them for short term and the training efforts went in vain once they left for their countries.



The investment in the national experiences in the field of training and rehabilitation is more useful and sustainable, Naima Khalifa Bocherbak Al-Mansouri – principal/ operator of Al Quds Independent Primary School for Boys - commented on the absence of the national cadres by saying” Education Institute began to encourage the employment of the female Qatari teachers in schools, especially since their numbers reduced in this sector, which threatened the lack of the Qatari individuals in the educational process in future”. She also explained that” lots of school principals/operators had to complete the staff working in the educational organizations by non-citizens, as the number of schools in Qatar is increasing and percentage of the Qatari female teachers who want to work in this sector is very small, in addition to the difficulties that they have face while working in this field. The principal/ operator of Al Quds Independent Primary School for Boys pointed out that the absence of the Qatari teachers was predictable as the existing old teaching cadre nowadays can’t be filled by the Supreme Education Council as long as the citizens keep refusing to work in this field. She hoped that organized mechanisms be set out between educational organizations in order to reduce the duties and responsibilities burden the teachers’ shoulders since the salary in this field is very rewarding. (Rashed, 2008)

### **Withdraw of authorities and powers gradually from the independent schools.**

During the past fifteen years, authorities and powers were withdrawn gradually from the independent schools’ principals, as the leadership of the Supreme Education Council reflected its lack of confidence in these principals. In 2009, the budgets management was withdrawn from principals, it followed then by withdrawing the ability to do direct recruitment and employment which means returning back to centralization in management. The school staff lost their independency and freedom to make independent decisions. Al Bassam – one of the principal/operator – commented on this matter by saying that the experience of the independent schools is heading towards failure unless the concerned authorities interfere.



He also described the situation that we have reached as "dangerous" and that the current situation is no longer encouraging to continue working, as the four pillars of the reform which are they autonomy, diversity, choice and accountability, begun to shake, shrink and ended on the ground. Al Bassam hold a press conference after his resignation in which he explained that the main reason for his resignation was his feeling that he was tightened and surrounded. His options circuit also became very narrow. In addition, the powers and the authorities began to withdraw from the principals/operators gradually. This meant the absence of "independency" or "autonomy" principle, which was one of the pillars of the education reform in Qatar. That pillar was granting the principal/operator the ability to choose and decide what is best for the school to achieve its vision and mission, which was no longer existed. Therefore, the principal/operator was no longer choosing the criteria he deemed appropriate. However, these criteria were developed in the Supreme Education Council. The recruitment of teachers also was no longer in the power of the principal/operator.

Moreover, the lacks of the "choice" pillar. The Supreme Education Council began identifying the schools for the students as it followed the automatic movement or flow of students without referring to the principal/operator or even involving the students and their parents in this process, since the education process should be based on partnership. Thus, how were the students directed to schools that neither they nor their parents choose?

In a study conducted regarding the opinions of independent school principals, the participants agreed that that experience had changed and developed the concept of leadership they have. They added that the concept of power and central decision-making was no longer existed in the educational environment in their schools. It was replaced, however, by the atmosphere of democracy, empowering and involving the teachers in decision-making process. There were also competitions among the independent schools to provide the best practices and the quality education to attract a larger number of students.



Some principals/ operators said that the experience increased their sense of responsibility towards the students and led to raise the teachers' level of performance. (ELLILI-CHERIF & ROMANOWSKI, 2013)

In respect of the key difficulties that they faced, the principals mentioned the intervention of the Supreme Education Council in all the decisions, which caused confusion in the schools. Such bureaucracy exercised by the Supreme Education Council in decision-making led to wasting teachers' efforts due to the change of plans and decisions randomly and unexpectedly. (ELLILI-CHERIF & ROMANOWSKI, 2013)

The success of any change and reform process depends on patience, careful planning and giving the process the time required in order to achieve the expected and desired results. Qatar's initiative to reform its education is not an exception. Principals needed support; confidence, empowering and encouragement instead of punishing them by withdraw of powers and authorities. They should participate in the process of decision-making with the Supreme Education Council instead of receiving the commands suddenly. Achieving the educational vision requires the participation of all stakeholders and parties (teachers, principals, leaders of the Supreme Education Council). Without this participation and involvement, the principals and teachers would feel as they mere implementers to educational plans they did not have the right to express an opinion or have a say about them which is something reduces motivation and their optimism to work.

However, has this initiative achieved positive results with the students despite all these challenges? The report issued by the World Bank regarding the establishment of a knowledge-based economy, Qatar was ranked on 101 as 3.41 coming behind some of the Arab and Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Jordan. (Hvidt, 2014)



Despite the low ranking, studies showed that this experience had resulted in promising results, despite the difficulties encountered. These results will be reviewed in detail in the rest of this article. One of the most important of these results as mentioned in the report of RAND Corporation in 2007 was the development of the critical thinking skills among students.

### **Development of critical thinking skills among students:**

The study carried out by Dr. Anderson on 2010 in the first annual research fair showed that the students gained research and analytical skills that even surprised their teachers. This fair came after the Supreme Education Council had launched the educational Initiative "the researcher student". Research clubs were established in some of the independent schools under the supervision of the Research Unit of the Supreme Education Council. The aforementioned study included number of students who participated in this conference to talk about that experience. They expressed their happiness to participate in that conference, although they were not lucky to win one of the first rewards. One of the students said that they had done everything by themselves and that the teacher had just given them some general guidelines. Another student added "my family trust my skills now more than before and believe that I am able to achieve my goals after my participation in this fair". A female student pointed out "Yesterday was one of the greatest days of my life because I have submitted photosynthesis experiment where many visitors interacted with it. I was happy with this" (Anderson, 2010)

RAND report pointed out when evaluating and assessing the educational reform in 2007, that the students of the independent schools exceeded their peers in the Ministry of Education schools. The detailed reports showed that students in grades 4-6 in the independent schools excelled their peers in the public schools in mathematics and science. The report showed also that teachers of the independent schools tried effectively to engage students in the learning process more than the teachers of the ministry. They also designed curricula that require higher thinking skills among students. (RAND, 2007)



### **Data- Based Decision:**

The Supreme Education Council was able to create a culture of decision-making based on data within the independent schools by encouraging teachers to evaluate their performance through action research. The Supreme Education Council had organized- in cooperation with Faculty of Education- an annual conference under the name of “Reflective Practices” in order to present the action researches implemented by the teachers of the independent schools. In this conference, teachers shared their experiences, present the researches they had done and the results obtained in order to develop their professional performance or improve the educational process within their schools.

Action researches as defined by Al Qattan “is the outcome of development in the educational and humanitarian theories. So it is a social process resulted from the need of individuals for change and improvement. The key factor of this process is the self-reflection including building and raising your knowledge and awareness through direct interaction with others (AL Qattan 2:2000). Action research consists of two different words to some extent. The word action means deeds and intervention while the word research means introspective and reflection. The two words together have many meanings as the action research means the committed action that new knowledge is based on and it also means experimenting ideas in practices as a tool for developing and increasing knowledge ( Actaggar & kemmis 1982) .

At the press conference held by the Faculty of Education in 2011, Dr. Hessa Hassan Al Binali, assistant professor in Math Pedagogies at the Educational Sciences Department, said that she worked as a reviewer for the researches presented for the mathematics and contributed in organizing this conference, in addition to being the chairman of the Public Relations Conference. “I can say that many teachers will benefit from this conference as I noticed that one of the teachers who presented her research paper in the first year of the conference, has developed her skills a lot this year after she had committed with the required criteria and was improving without doubt” Dr. Hessa explained.(Al Binali ,2011)



Sheikha Al-Hajri - Curriculum Specialist in the Action Research Skills Development Unit of the Supreme Education Council – said that they -in the Supreme Education Council- “announced this important conference, and awaited the presence of a large number this year”. “We trained 151 teachers in cooperation with Tribell company where 29 of them are currently conducting training sessions for their colleagues”. “We hope to spread the culture of action researches among all staff in the field of education as it helps to achieve many goals if it is used effectively and will solve many of the problems and clear many of the issues”. (AlHajri ,2012)

The teachers’ thought changed through that conference and gained new Analytical skills that enable them to assess themselves and improve their performance. It is something that was not previously possible under the umbrella of Ministry of Education and in the public schools. The goals for holding such conference were not only to share and exchange knowledge, but rather to encourage teachers to continue reflecting on their practices and to celebrate their effort through their works.

### **Improving Strategic Planning thoughts at Independent schools’ principals:**

The selection of principals for the Independent Schools was not a random process. However, the process aimed to ensure the existence of clear visions and applicable strategic planning, in addition to leadership skills. Therefore, the process of obtaining a license for an independent school passes through several phases. First phase is the provision of the educational plan for the Supreme Education Council where it is reviewed, assessed and approved. After that having interviews with all applicants where the best ones are selected. Training programmes are also designed and provided to train the educational leaders, including principals, vice-principals, mentors and supervisors who are interested in occupying leadership positions in the independent schools.



These programmes consisted of advanced courses in Leadership and English, in addition to field training in the independent schools. They included also educational lectures in order to prepare the trainees to be contracted and worked with the independent schools. To ensure the highest degree of objectivity and fairness in choosing the best applicants, a committee was formed that included academic experts from Education Institute, Evaluation Institute and Faculty of Education at University of Qatar. The committee held final interviews with the candidates. Moreover, Education Institute may recommend some educators who successfully passed its "Aspiring Leaders" program that was provided for the staff working in the independent schools.

Mrs. Aisha Al- Khulaifi, principal of Al-Duhail Independent School said in an interview with her, that the development of an educational and operational plan was a new experience that added a lot to her. It is a comprehensive plan that reflects the principal's vision and his/her way to use the financial resources of the school in achieving the school's vision. It also includes the evaluation methods that will be used in the school. (Kulifi, 2008) The educational plan would be the basis for establishing the school as the selection of the principal/operator was no longer based on his/her qualifications, but only on his/her ability to plan effectively and to provide a long-term vision,. Nevertheless, she complained about the interference of the Supreme Education Council later in her authorities which was an obstacle in implementing her educational plan.





## **Conclusion:**

As we can see that the independent schools experience was not totally unsuccessful. Some failures may have occurred, but it added a lot to the students, teachers and principals who participated in that experience. They gained new skills and a new educational culture was created particularly in the schools and in the community as well. However, the rapid speed in converting the public schools into independent schools did not provide the sufficient time for this experience to mature. According to RAND's report of 2007, Qatar needs another ten years to see the results of this initiative.

So the return of the Ministry of Education with the same centralized management system have wasted all the efforts that have been made for years and ruined all the educational projects that cost millions of dollars. The investment in students and teachers over the past years; will not be benefited from under the umbrella of the current system (Ministry of Education). The independent schools lost its four principles or pillars: accountability, autonomy, diversity and choice. The standardized curricula are now developed by the ministry. The principals have almost lost all their authorities that they acquired during the past years.

Was the return of the Ministry of Education a corrective step for the track of the educational process? Or was it just a hopeless feeling to achieve an educational reform and bouncing back to the traditional practices in leadership and teaching? The education in Qatar returned to the fist square and most of the efforts made by the educators, who were enthusiasm for the initiative "Education for a New Era", went in vain.



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