



## *Applying Concepts of Critical Pedagogy to Qatar's Educational Reform*

---

*Michael H. Romanowski, Qatar University  
Tasneem Amatullah, Miami University*

### **Abstract**

*Qatar is in the midst of a systemic education reform, Education For a New Era, steered by RAND's (a nonprofit research organization) analysis and report of Qatar's Educational system. Driven by a neoliberal agenda, the reform includes international curricula, curriculum standards, teacher licensure, and professional standards for school leaders and teachers produced by international educational consulting firms. These organizations offer policies and practices often limited to an instrumental discourse where technical rules control knowledge with the purpose of controlling the environment. Furthermore, the assessments on reform are limited to post hoc explanations of failure and success centering on test scores and other accountability measures eluding some of the more critical questions and issues important for reformers to consider. In this discussion, we draw upon several concepts from critical pedagogy to raise questions regarding Qatar's neoliberal educational reform and when appropriate, call upon our own experiences teaching and researching in Qatar. This dialogue is neither intended to provide solutions to problems of the Qatari Educational reform nor to point out successes or failures. Rather, it deliberately uses critical pedagogy concepts to raise questions that may have not been considered in order to provide reformers with insight and new knowledge that could prove useful for effective educational reform.*

**Keywords:** *Critical Pedagogy, Qatar, educational reform, neoliberalism*

### **Introduction**

For over three decades, education has been a target of neoliberal reform and countries worldwide have embraced neoliberalism (Zheng, 2010). Often disguised as globalization, "neoliberalism is a complex of values, ideologies, and practices that affect the economic, political, and cultural aspects of society" (Ross & Gibson, 2006, p. 1). In education, neoliberalism emerges as a market ideology where education is viewed as tradable products to be bought and sold in an effort to develop a knowledge economy (Devos, 2003). Thus countries have opened their borders to large-scale transformations of public education creating lucrative businesses with the global education market now valued at \$4.4 trillion (up from \$2.5 trillion in 2005), with projections for rapid growth the next five years (Strauss, 2013).

Driven by a neoliberal agenda, the State of Qatar has engaged in a systemic education reform, *Education For a New Era (EFNE)*. Qatar's reform has provided prospects seized by numerous international educational consulting firms. Although knowledgeable about diverse educational theories and practices, consulting firms are limited because of their own context-specific epistemologies that are removed from local epistemologies and cultural sensitivities (Bloch, 2009). A decade has past, millions of US dollars invested and EFNE has shaped and changed education in Qatar. However, the reform's basic foundation and the majority of the modifications and revisions of the reform have centered on the structural or technical aspects of education and schooling eluding some of the more critical questions and issues. We argue the reason is the discourse guiding the reform has stark omissions of critical pedagogy and the questions asked by reformers are limited to the pragmatic aspects of teaching and learning. Denying reformers this source of knowledge is detrimental for effective educational reform because philosophies, theories and interests that underlie education are never addressed and these might prove useful in actually transforming education.

Thus in this paper, we draw upon and inject critical pedagogy into the educational reform in Qatar. The purpose is to demonstrate the importance of considering critical pedagogy as an educational discourse and to raise and challenge basic assumptions reframing this neoliberal educational reform. We argue that educational reformers have a responsibility to explore divergent and critical ideas and not limit reform to the technical or changes that be quantified and measured. In what follows, we apply five selected concepts from critical pedagogy to Qatar's educational reform. These are discourse, voice, culture, pedagogy, and social transformation. The work is not intended to provide "solutions" to the problems and concerns of reform or to point out the "successes or failures," but rather to raise questions that may have not been considered to serve as the basis for the development of an ongoing discussion regarding how critical pedagogy can be utilized to inform and guide education in Qatar.

### Neoliberalism and Qatar's Educational Reform

It is important to link educational reform to a wider global context by addressing neoliberalism and the role of exporting and importing educational products and services. Neoliberalism is a global market-liberalism that is based on a market-driven ideology affecting the economic, political, and cultural aspects of society. In the context of education, neoliberalism reflects a market ideology that desires to create an open market for educational services so for-profit educational management organizations can export their educational products (Ross & Gibson, 2006). As governments analyze their educational systems, results often lead to the commodification of the educational sector where importing educational policies and practices from another country is viewed as the means to significantly and quickly improve the educational system and economy. In this view, education policy and practices are considered tradable commodities that can be bought and sold by developing knowledge economies (Devos, 2003).

It is quite clear that Qatar "borrows" educational policies and practices evidenced by the fact that Qatar is currently one of the most active importers of foreign education providers in the world (Becker, 2009). For example, Qatar contracted *The Education Queensland International of Australia* who developed the *Qatar National Standards for Teachers and School Leaders (QNPSTSL)* applied in the 2007–2008 academic year. In addition, Cognition Education from New Zealand was highly paid to utilize the *QNPSTSL* to develop Qatar's first system for the registration and licensing of teachers and school leaders (Cherif, Romanowski & Nasser, 2011). It is important

to note that the *QNPSTSL* have been rewritten and the original licensure system no longer exists supporting the idea that one of the outcomes of the neoliberal ideology is increased control of educational systems by introducing numerous reforms and national teacher standards, curriculum and student exams (Apple, 1996).

There are consequences of neoliberalism and the exporting of educational products. First, the motivations of the market and education are opposite. The market's motivation is to satisfy the consumer who has the means to purchase products. However, the motivation of education is the development of sound understandings of knowledge (McMurtry, 1991). Hill (as cited in Cherif, et. al., 2012, p. 473) states,

The method of the market is to buy or sell the goods it has to offer to anyone for whatever price one can get . . . The method of education is never to buy or sell the item it has to offer, but to require of all who would have it that they fulfill its requirements autonomously . . . Everything that is to be had on the market is acquired by the money paid for it. Nothing that is learned in education is acquired by the money paid for it. (p. 47)

Second, another criticism of educational borrowing is that the influence of culture is omitted or understated. Steiner-Khamsi and Quist (2004) point out, "implicitly, the semantics of globalization promote de-territorialization and decontextualization of reform, and challenges the past conception of education as a culturally bounded system" (p. 5). An important element of borrowed educational products is that "outsiders" develop these educational policies and products. These organizations might have some knowledge about the particular culture but cannot provide the needed in-depth understandings of subtle and important cultural aspects of the leading to mistaken conclusions and generalizations (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). More importantly, these borrowed educational policies provide "cultural exchanges and conflicts that challenge the cultural values and norms of both sending and receiving countries" (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004, p. 12). The outcome is the receiving culture often passively incorporates the imported policies and products to improve the educational system without necessary reflecting about ways to genuinely strengthen their schools and possibly the agendas of the program importation (Halpin & Troyna, 1995; Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000).

Finally, Hill (2004) and McMurtry (1991) argue that neo-liberalism suppresses critical thinking because of the control of the curriculum, teachers and schools through the use of common practices. Although the ideology of the market encourages learning, this learning is limited to the required and essential skills needed for the particular educational product that has been implemented. This, in turn represses critical thinking allowing little space for raising economic, political, educational and ethical questions that might cast doubt on the product or the process.

### **Qatar's Educational Reform**

In 2001 because of the poor outcomes of the country's educational system based on Secondary students' lower scores in the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Programme for International Assessment*, the Qatari government grew concerned about the quality of their educational system. The government was alarmed that the country's educational system was "not producing high-quality outcomes and was rigid, outdated, and resistant to reform" (Brewer, et. al., 2007, p. iii). In an effort to shift this trend, the Qatari government contracted *RAND* to conduct a comprehensive examination of Qatar's K-12 education system.

*RAND*'s analysis of the *Qatar Educational System* pointed out "the education provided was of low quality as attested by the proliferation of private tutoring and the high rate of grade retention" (Brewer, et. al., 2007, p. 37). Furthermore, the curriculum was outdated and graduating students did not perform well in either postsecondary education or the workplace and often needed remediation. In addition, the current Qatari educational system "emphasized rote memorization" and the curriculum is "unchallenging" (Brewer, et. al., 2007, p. xviii). Specifically, *RAND*'s analysis centered on 14 Confirmation of System Weaknesses identified as the cause for the poor system performance. Very few graduates gained entry into prestigious postsecondary institutions abroad or into the most selective programs at Qatar University and other concerns were employers' complaints of graduates lacking computer, mathematic and leadership skills in addition to the skills to converse and write in English (Brewer, et. al., 2007).

The Qatari government chose a charter school model designed to decentralize education and develop independent schools. Four principles serve as the basis of this model: 1) autonomy for schools, 2) accountability through a comprehensive assessment system, 3) variety in schooling alternatives, and 4) choice for parents, teachers, and school operators. Qatari officials developed a two-pronged approach that included the establishment of government-funded independent schools over a period of several years and the implementation of annual assessments to measure student learning and school performance (Supreme Education Council, 2011). This led to the State of Qatar launching their educational initiative titled *Education for a New Era (EFNE)* that was designed to reform public education in 2003 (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016, 2011).

Brewer, et. al. (2007) point out that one essential standard of Qatar's reform is "that no matter what else was to occur, the basic educational elements of a standards based system had to be put in place" (p. xviii). This required element of the reform led to the development of the *National Curriculum Standards for English, Science, Math and Arabic* and the *Qatar National Professional Standards for School Teachers and Leaders (QNPSTSL)*, a set of professional standards for teachers and administrators (SEC, 2007).

Consequently by utilizing standards produced by western educational organizations, it is evident Qatar has embraced the global phenomenon of standards-based education reforms that includes importing educational commodities and incorporating internationally driven definitions of education, curriculum, instruction and assessment. Over the past decade, *EFNE* has made various changes "incorporating curriculum standards that meet international benchmarks, establishing autonomous schools that foster creativity and critical thinking, and developing evaluation tools that provide the ability to report and track school progress" (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016, 2011, para.2). Qatar has implemented a wide spectrum of reforms. However, our concern is that many of the fundamental educational questions that should be asked about educational reform have been eluded.

### **Critical Pedagogy and Educational Reform**

Despite the perceived problems and failures of education systems, engaging in educational reform demonstrates a persistent faith in the potential of education to improve society, economics and solve some of the pressing social problems. Neoliberal educational reforms are limited and often accepted as a quick solution to complex educational and cultural issues and often any analysis or critique of the imported educational policies and products is limited to the technical aspects of schooling—raising questions that center on the "how to" of education or "what works." Bullough and Goldstein (as cited in Romanowski, 2013, p. 8) argue that "when emphasis is placed on the

technical effectiveness of knowledge, the end result is the reduction of ‘moral, aesthetic, educational and political issues to technical problems: why and what are reduced to how’ (1984, p. 144). Neoliberal standards-based educational reforms reduce the educational process to “facts” and “laws” that allow for prediction and control. Using these laws, the goal for educational reform is understanding how we should precede eradicating discussion of other more important issues.

We found that in Qatar “teachers are serving the standards, often times in superficial ways. More importantly, there is a concern that the educational system itself has become obsessed with professional standards losing focus of other essential aspects of teaching” (Romanowski & Amatullah, 2014, p. 112). From our experiences, teachers in Qatar seldom address educational discourses that move beyond the technical aspects of teaching and learning omitting or pushing outside the margins important aspects of schooling such as cultural or economic issues. Although acknowledging the importance of educational reformers to consider the effectiveness and “practicality” of education and certainly concerns about the “how to,” we argue it is imperative that there is a well-established critique of all aspects of any education. Especially, when educational reform is generated from a neoliberalism agenda.

Critical pedagogy finds its roots in critical theory. Quantz (2015) refers to critical pedagogy as an educational philosophy that calls for transformation of “curriculum and teaching” instead of reproducing the “status quo” (p. 100). Kincheloe (2004) echoes that critical pedagogues challenge the status quo through numerous ways in order for understanding the dissemination of power and politics involved in the system. Furthermore, Burbules and Berk (1999) remark that critical pedagogues foster a “critical capacity in citizens” to identify and “resist such power effects” (p. 1). Giroux (2010) argues that critical pedagogy presents the best opportunity for students to “develop and assert a sense of rights and responsibilities” to reflect on the practicalities of education (p. 1). Critical pedagogy creates awareness of power dynamics and education is a key that can help transform the society and this education ought to be free of inequities.

Freire (1970) coined the term *conscientizacao* that is concerned with the development of “critical consciousness” and may also be called as an *inner voice* that urges the oppressed to work towards liberation. Freire not only called for education to be critical, but also emancipatory (Freire, 1970). For Freire, the “banking method” of education where education is fed to students passively by “receive, memorize, and repeat” is a means of oppression because students are informed on what knowledge to acquire rather than constructing their own knowledge (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Vassallo (2013) also draws from Freire (2000) and distinguishes *adaptation* versus *integration* by arguing that teachers in the current scenario follow adaptation as they tend to transmit knowledge as banking method that is “disconnected from the realities of communities and their struggles” (Vassallo, 2013, pp. 565-566). This is often the case in neoliberal educational reforms where there is an intense focus on passing standardized tests based on curriculum standards in order to provide accountability. Administrators, teachers, parents and students become so concerned with students acquiring predetermined knowledge that there is little time spent on developing students’ skills in constructing their own knowledge. More importantly, the knowledge in neoliberal reforms too often lacks the cultural context and epistemologies of the local community—this is often the case in Qatar. On the other hand, integration is what Freire is advocating. For Freire (1987), “Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality” (p. 4). Vassallo (2013) further argues that if an individual is not capable of influencing his or her own realities and are forced to adapt to “existing configurations” then, as per Freire, their humanity is in crisis (p. 566).

Quantz (2015) posits that the critical pedagogues claim that the “institutions of society work to create narratives that work in the interest of the privileged and against the interests of the less privileged” (p. 103). This creates hegemonic influence in the society as reforms reinforce the status quo. With regards to schooling, Quantz (2015) clarifies that,

This hidden curriculum assumes that the purpose of schools is to train workers for the economy, that learning is a technical enterprise requiring clear objectives that can be measured on standardized tests, that students need to be led step-by-step through a series of tasks to master the material, that education is about knowledge and skills, that what works is more important than what is ethical, and that education is a private consumer good accruing to the individual and not a public good benefiting the society as a whole. (p. 106)

Critical pedagogues argue that although schools are responsible for “technical education,” they can also function as sites of transformation. Freire (as cited in Vassallo, 2012, p. 565) states that:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity [a pedagogy of dehumanization] or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (2000, p. 34)

With that in mind, five foundational concepts of critical pedagogy are developed and applied to the current Qatar Education by raising a series of questions that serve the purpose of beginning the process of applying critical pedagogy to educational reform. Our hope is that these questions will begin a dialogue guided by critical pedagogy that raises important issues to be considered in an effort to improve teaching and learning.

### **Education as a Discursive Practice**

In order to comprehend educational reform, it is important to understand the concept and the workings of discourse. Discourse refers to communications reflecting how knowledge, values, ideas and experiences are organized based on language and context but also as ways of thinking and making sense of ideas and thoughts. Foucault (as cited in Thomson, Hall & Jones, 2013, p. 3) describes discourse “as texts and utterances but also as ways of thinking and sense-making and as behaviours, relationships, interactions, and arrangements of signs and material objects. Discourses therefore are not just what is said, but they are also practices.” McGregor (2004) explains that discourse is used to build power and knowledge and to regulate and normalize. More importantly, “the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power. The discursive power to construct a common sense reality that can be inserted into cultural and political life is central in the social relationship of power” (Fiske, 2010, p. 120). The power embedded in discourse allows for the claims and words of those in power to be taken as truth and the words of those not in power, are dismissed as irrelevant, inappropriate, or without substance (Van Dijk, 1993).

Considering education, discourse includes and excludes particular pedagogical practices and knowledge, renders some aspects of education more important than others, and defines what practices and knowledge are legitimate, worthwhile and correct. For example, educational reform

in a neoliberal era utilizes a “traditional” language about schooling that is affixed to a limited worldview. Giroux (1988) argues that the traditional language is embedded in a worldview that centers on “the discourse of behaviorist learning psychology, which focuses on the best way to learn a given body of knowledge, and from the logic of scientific management, as reflected in the back-to-basics movement, competency testing, and systems management schemes” (p. 2). The key point regarding educational discourse is that each discourse defines goals and priorities and includes key elements while neglecting others. This discourse puts forth values in the selected goals and assumes that the particular approach to education is superior to others providing benefits that are not provided by other approaches.

From our experiences in Qatar, we realize the importance of understanding not only the educational but also the social, cultural and economic discourses that impact education. Too often, educational discourse is void of the social, cultural and economic aspects placing many of these beyond critique and outside of the discourse. Furthermore, when it comes to educational reform, the language is vital since the terms selected and used define the many aspects of education and reform. Williams (1985) notes that there are keywords that have multiple meanings and uses. Terms and concepts that find their way into purchased educational products such as capacity, school culture, authentic assessment, educational rigor, equity, high expectations, multicultural education, parent voice, social justice, shared mission and vision, professional development and 21st century skills (just to name a few) have multiple meanings and are open to numerous interpretations that are articulated differently within different contexts. For example, critical thinking is an important concept in the Qatari educational reform with a concern for developing students’ “questioning and critical thinking skills” (Rand, 2007, p. 103). Romanowski and Nasser (2011), using Elder and Paul’s (1994) work, suggest the way critical thinking is understood in *Education for a New Era* centers on a weak sense of critical thought keeping cultural positions intact while avoiding or dismissing controversies. This prevents students from “developing what Freire (2000) termed a critical consciousness, that is the ability to analyze and critically examine social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against the oppressive elements of society” (Romanowski & Nasser, 2011, p. 121). This illustrates how discourses and the language embedded in those discourses can take a different form as they are applied in various contexts.

In conclusion, not understanding education as a discursive practice limits educators’ ability to seriously examine the ideologies, assumptions and the language of educational reform. Instead, they become victims who passively accept the dominant education discourse and the resulting practices. This ability is needed in order to analyze neoliberal and traditional view of schoolings but also should be able to offer new and culturally relevant possibilities for schooling.

### **Considerations for Qatar’s Reform**

Educational reformers in Qatar need to be able to engage in discourse analysis that is skeptical of imported educational products while at the same time remaining aware of and skeptical of their own discourses. Reformers must be able to raise questions that allow for the interrogation of taken-for-granted and dominant discourses and at the same time be able to offer countering discourses. Questioning of discourses allows for other discourses to emerge that create new possibilities and choices, and in turn, different actions and a different language. The following questions might be considered when interrogating educational discourses, specifically in Qatar:

1. What are the Qatari economic, social, cultural, and political contexts in which the educational reform is taking place? What role do these play in shaping education?
2. What type of discourse(s) is favored by the *Supreme Education Council* and others involved in the reform?
3. How do particular discourse(s) define key educational concepts and theories?
4. How do these educational theories play out in the actual implementation of the reform? Are these appropriate and relevant to the Qatari context?
5. What assumptions are embedded in the particular educational practice, theory or policy?
6. How are specific practices understood and are they aligned with Qatari culture, values and goals?
7. If concepts and theories are aligned and changed, what has this modification done to the actual concept or theory?
8. How can this educational policy or product be adapted to better suit the educational context and purpose of Qatar without losing its fundamental elements?
9. What are possible alternatives to this particular educational product and practice?

### Voice

Simply stated, the concept of voice means the values, opinions, experiences, perspectives and the socioeconomic and cultural background of the school and community. McLaren (2007) writes,

*voice* refers to the multifaceted and interlocking set of meanings through which students and teachers actively engage in dialogue with one another. *Voice* is an important pedagogical concept because it alerts teachers to the fact that all discourse is situated historically and mediated culturally and derives part of its meaning from interaction with others. . . . The term *voice* refers to the cultural grammar and background knowledge that individuals use to interpret and articulate experience. (p. 244)

Voice can be a formalized part of organizational structure and/or informal, taking the opinions of students, teachers, and parents with no formal obligation. However, the concept of voice is based on the belief that by empowering teachers and students schools can improve

e.g., that teachers will be more effective and professionally fulfilled, that students will learn and achieve more, and that parents will feel more confidence in the school and more involved in their child's education—if school leaders both consider and act upon the values, opinions, beliefs, and perspectives of the people in a school and community. (Hidden Curriculum, 2014)

The concept of voice has grown in popularity in recent decades and is viewed as a movement away from the hierarchical forms of school leadership, or the top-down decision-making that often plagues schools. These hierarchical leadership styles offer trivial, little, or no input from teachers, parents and students—voice provides an alternative. It is vital that schools understand and realize the value of different lifestyles, ethnic backgrounds, belief systems, life experiences and ways of understanding the world. These differences are at the core of critical pedagogy. Although we refer to the term voice in this discussion, it is worth noting that we are not arguing or



promoting the idea of a singular concept of voice that applies to one particular group, i.e. teachers, because rarely is there a unified set of values, beliefs, perspectives, or cultural background representative of any one group. Rather, we advocate that underrepresented voices be heard—student voices, teacher voices, and parent voices.

### Considerations for Qatar's Reform

Most of the time educational reforms are a top-down process and top-down reforms not only silence stakeholders but also hamper desirable reform (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996). This is the case in Qatar where the educational sector is experiencing a rapid developing top-down reform (Ibnouf, Dou & Knight, 2013). In addition, a lack of communication and shared vision among educational stakeholders in *Education for a New Era* has resulted in a top-down decision-making policy (Brewer, et. al. 2007). Not to over generalize, but this top-down approach is common in Middle Eastern organizations. Danielewicz-Betz (2013), notes “Middle eastern organizations are characterized by a one-way top-down flow of information and influence from authoritarian leader to subordinates” (p. 142). This is not different in schools where leadership is neither totally authoritative nor modern; however there *is* an issue of protecting power. The work culture in the Middle East focuses on following set policies and procedures because “questioning orders and policies is considered a mistake. Consequently is the difficult to get things done until the boss explicitly says to do so” (Danielewicz-Betz, 2013, p. 141). Hence, there is little room for the concept of voice to develop in many of these institutions, including schools.

### Teacher Voices

We would argue that one of most significant factors in critical pedagogy is the teacher's voice because teachers are the gatekeepers between knowledge, culture, the school and the student. Teachers need to learn the language of critical pedagogy and begin to ask important questions to inject critical pedagogy into the educational discourse. However as previously mentioned, the top-down approach to educational reform in Qatar has silenced teachers' voices rendering them insignificant. More importantly in Qatar, teachers have expressed their feelings of alienation regarding their lack of involvement in decision-making (Nasser & Romanowski, 2011). Several questions should be considered:

1. What role do/should teachers play in the leadership of Qatar Independent Schools?
2. What role do/should teachers have regarding the design and use of school curricula and assessments, selection of academic texts, and learning technologies?
3. Do teachers have a say in teacher-performance evaluations, including the criteria used to define effective teaching?
4. Are teachers directly involved in selecting the types of professional development offered? Why or why not?
5. What roles do teachers play in school-leadership decisions?

Fullan and Miles (1992) point out all large-scale change is implemented locally and the only way that change happens is through the effective daily implementation by principals, teachers, parents and students. In order for teachers' voices to emerge and play a significant role in Qatari

schools, there is a need to rethink the role of teachers toward one that views teachers as an important part of the education making process in schools.

### **Parent Voices**

Parent involvement in school activities and support of their children is important for all students and particularly important for students who struggle in school, such as students from lower-income or students with physical or learning disabilities. Traditionally, parental voices are limited consisting of parent-teacher organizations to serving on school committees and volunteerism in elementary schools. Our concern is that parental voice is authentic and not simply trivialized. There are several questions that should be considered:

1. What role do/should parents in Qatar play in school leadership and instructional decision-making?
2. What role do/should parents in Qatar have regarding the selection, design and use of school curricula and assessments, as well as the selection of academic texts and learning technologies?
3. How do principals, teachers and parents understand parental involvement and its role in education?
4. Do parents and teachers agree or disagree about parental engagement in school and learning?
5. What are the attitudes, perceptions and cultural factors that might interfere with parent access to schools?
6. What is required to find meaningful ways of involving parents in their child's education?

One of the major concerns for principals and teachers in the Qatari independent schools is the lack of parental support and involvement (Romanowski, Cherif, Al Ammari & Al Attiyah, 2013). There is a need for a cultural change in the role of parents in education. This requires that parents in Qatar do not see education as isolated to the school building but rather that they play a significant role in their child's education.

### **Student Voices**

Student voice in schools is usually limited to student-led government where most activities deny students any authentic contributions to the school. Regarding educational reforms in *Gulf Corporation Countries (GCC)*, "students have not played a role as their voices have not been heard" (Booz & Company, 2013, p. 44). We argue that the voices and needs of students are often absent from the educational discourse that surrounds them. In order to begin the discussion of the potential role of students' voices in the school, the following questions should be considered:

1. Are students' experiences considered in curriculum?
2. Does student voice play a role in instructional decisions?
3. Do students make authentic contributions to the school?
4. Do students have opportunity to contribute to leadership decisions?
5. Are students' perspectives included in the larger policy and practice influencing decisions from which students are generally excluded but which determine their lives in school?
6. Are there ways that students can be involved in selecting educational resources and materials?

7. Can students be given more choices over learning content, products, and processes in the classroom?

### **Culture**

One of the key criticisms of educational borrowing is that the process denies or understates the influence of culture. Culture is “a form of production, specifically, as the ways in which human beings make sense of their lives, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and wider society” (Giroux, 1997, p. 125). Culture plays a significant role in shaping student identities, values and how they live out and make sense of the world. Included in culture are practices, ideology and issues of power, therefore they must be considered vital elements of schooling and education. McLaren (2007) argues

schooling always represents an introduction to, preparation for, and a legitimation of particular forms of social life. It is always implicated in relations of power, social practices and the favoring of forms of knowledge that support a specific vision of the past, present and future. (p. 188)

Thus, particular forms of culture and knowledge are legitimized within schools. Darder (1991) states,

Unlike traditional perspectives of education that claim to be neutral and apolitical, critical pedagogy views all education theory as intimately linked to ideologies shaped by power, politics, history and culture. Given this view, schooling functions as a terrain of ongoing struggle over what will be accepted as legitimate knowledge and culture. In accordance with this notion, a critical pedagogy must seriously address the concept of cultural politics by both legitimizing and challenging cultural experiences that comprise the histories and social realities that in turn comprise the forms and boundaries that give meaning to student lives. (p. 77)

Since Qatar considers its culture with immense pride and importance (Seddiqi, 2012), the concept of culture should be at the center of educational policies and practices. “According to the Qatari Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development, prioritizing and maintaining the cultural and national identity of the Qatari people is essential when coping with the changing dynamics resulting from globalization” (Seddiqi, 2012, p. 5). There is a concern in Qatar that the country “is facing a loss of such an identity due to having to adhere to global educational standards and policies that neglect their own culture” (Seddiqi, 2012, p. 3).

Regarding schooling and culture, a fundamental aspect of culture and schooling is that if educators fail to acknowledge students’ culture as a legitimate form of knowledge they “often devalue students by refusing to work with the knowledge that students actually have and so eliminate the possibility of developing a pedagogy that links school knowledge to the differing subject relations that help to constitute their everyday lives” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 3). Furthermore, there is a need to move culture beyond the individual student and develop a cultural analysis in order to gain complex understandings on how culture and traditions impacts education and learning.

### **Considerations for Qatar’s Reform**

1. What are the academic, social, and behavioral expectations established by independent schools and educators?
2. What relationship is there between classroom work and the diverse lives of students outside the school?
3. Are students from different cultural backgrounds held to the same expectations?
4. What are the values promoted by independent schools, educators, and peer groups?
5. Do independent schools recognize, integrate, and honor diversity and multicultural perspectives in the school and curriculum?
6. What are the ideological, cultural, or ethical messages conveyed to students by teachers and the curriculum?
7. How do the political, social and cultural pressures impact education?
8. Are there cultural limitations that impact education in Qatar?
9. How can we incorporate students’ culture without trivializing it?

### **Pedagogy: Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals**

There is little doubt that educational reform ultimately relies on teachers. Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) argue that most of the time educational reforms are a top-down process and these top-down reforms not only silences teachers’ voices but also hamper reform. More importantly, “the major concern with standards-based educational reforms is that educators’ work is in jeopardy of being reduced to technical activities or skills designed to produce outcomes based on professional standards eliminating discussion on important political, social, ethical and educational issues” (Romanowski, 2013, p. 6).

We know the work of teachers is not neutral and teaching is not just technical. Educational reform has the tendency to emphasize the technical or practical aspects of teaching that reduces teachers to simple technicians: “uncritical, “objective,” and “efficient” distributors of information who neglect the more critical aspects of culture and schooling (Giroux & McLaren, 1996, p. 304). This is the case with most educational reforms where “successful teaching is defined as treating knowledge as objective; avoiding moral and political controversy by remaining neutral; mastering a predetermined sets of teaching methodologies; and accepting and maintaining the political and economic status quo” (Romanowski & Oldenski, 1998, p. 112). The problem is that too often educational reformers lack confidence in the ability of teachers.

Educational reforms assume and present pedagogy in an unproblematic way centering on the improvement of teacher “training” and methodologies omitting the idea that teaching demands the integration of thinking and practice. The role of teachers is often that of a passive recipient of professional knowledge similar to Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of banking where professional development programs serve as depositors of information. More importantly, too many reformers and teachers think that schools can be reformed through a process of merely developing curriculum, implementing new modes of instruction, and improving classroom management.

However, critical pedagogy points out that teaching is more than simply carrying out pre-determined lessons. Rather, teachers develop into what is termed “transformative intellectuals who combine scholarly reflection and practice in the service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens” (Giroux, 1988, p. 122). When considering teachers as intellectuals, it is important to illuminate the idea that all aspects of teaching involve thinking regardless of how routinized

teaching may become or how technical teacher education is. Teachers must be reflective practitioners and not performers professionally equipped to realize effectively any goals that may be set for them. In this sense, teachers must critically engage and challenge the discourses and practices that shape them moving beyond the simple mastery of techniques and methodologies.

We would argue that teachers in independent schools are more concerned with mastering particular pedagogical techniques rather than analyzing the historical, economic, social, cultural and philosophical underpinnings of the schooling process. Too often they are passive recipients of professional knowledge (Zeichner, 1983). Bombarded with needed professional development programs and heavy demands in the school and classroom, teachers are more concerned with developing these technical teaching skills rather than developing into reflective practitioners who engage in reflection that moves beyond the technical aspects of teaching. However in Qatar, there are two other elements that hamper developing teachers into transformative intellectuals. First, there is a lack of space where teachers can engage in critical inquiry applied to more than pedagogical concerns. Second, Many teachers in the independent schools are unqualified. According to the *Supreme Education Council* (2011), more than 30% of teachers in Qatar are not qualified to teach and 31% of teachers in Qatar have no formal qualifications to teach (Supreme Education Council, 2011). Not only do these teachers lack the pedagogical skills but they also often have limited experience engaging in meaningful reflection.

### **Considerations for Qatar's Reform**

1. Do teachers reflect on the purpose of education?
2. Are teachers able to critically analyze the ideologies, values, and interests that inform their roles as teachers?
3. Are teachers able to question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate them?
4. Have they developed a critical stance and interrogate existing norms (e.g., curriculum and academic achievement)?
5. Do teachers understand the power of knowledge?
6. Consider the following:
  - A. What counts as curriculum knowledge?
  - B. How is such knowledge produced?
  - C. How is such knowledge transmitted in the classroom?
  - D. Who has access to legitimate forms of knowledge?
  - E. Whose interest does this knowledge serve?
  - F. How do prevailing methods of evaluation serve to legitimize existing forms of knowledge (Giroux, 1988, p. 17-18)?

These questions begin to develop an alternative discourse that teachers can utilize to understand why things are the way they are. Teachers gain insights into the reasons for some of the pedagogical problems they face and although teachers may not be able to “solve” problems that occur in schools, understanding why these issues emerge and localizing the issues provides them with an understanding of the impact of the larger society of schooling and them as teachers.

### Social Transformation

For many philosophers such as Dewey, Freire, Greene, Horton and Banks, the relationship between education and society is that knowledge and society keep changing and people learn from their experiences in society (Singer & Pezone, 2003). Further, it was Durkheim (1897/1951) who argued that “education can be reformed only if society itself is reformed . . . [education] is only the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter . . . it does not create it” (pp. 372-373). Hoenisch (2005) draws from Durkheim and states that society influences the educational system that constructs “what a human should be” especially the way a human being ought to function in a society. Furthermore, as an educational system, its practices and policies are a collective act and not individual. Durkheim believes that education is shaped by the society and when the society transforms, education can also be reformed. Barber (1987) argues from a Durkheimian perspective that society influences education considerably. Further, he states “Institutions passively reflect and reproduce the culture of the society. Institutions such as schools, do not transform or change society but they are changed by it” (Barber, 1987, p. 216).

In contrast, for Freire, dialogue is a prerequisite that ought to be a crucial part of the education process that helps people to acquire knowledge that in turn transforms the society (Shor, 1987). Freire (as quoted in Singer & Pezone, 2003) shared Dewey’s desire to stimulate students to become “agents of curiosity” in a “quest for . . . the ‘why’ of things,” and his belief that education provides possibility and hope for the future of society” (p. 9). Singer and Pezone (2003) add that the dialogic communication between the student and the teacher creates opportunity for student-centered educational practices that helps actively generate knowledge and students begin to realize their responsibility as active citizens in the society.

The correlation between education and transformation is well articulated by Manzoor Ahmed who emphasizes the need for understanding the interaction between society and education. Through a pragmatic lens, he argues that education and learning are “both the means and the purpose of building sustainable societies, where human potential is unlocked and human dignity and rights are cherished” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 511).

Unlike Durkheim, Barber (1987) argues that society is not the only factor that influences the education system, rather the relationship between the two is more complex and is “not a simple one of the cause and effect” (p. 225). Barber (1987) further believes that “the social conditions of an age certainly influence education but society speaks to education in many conflicting voices, and schools themselves define and pursue their own goals” (p. 225). Barber (1987) argues that education serves as an influential force in transforming the society. From our experiences in educational settings, we believe that there is a lack of awareness of societal impact on education from many stakeholders. Based on our previous critical pedagogy concepts discussion, we see that there is a lack of teacher voices, parental involvement, and the need to embed culture that are the prerequisites to social transformation. Therefore, we argue that schools should be seen as more than information factories. Rather schools should be viewed as a resource for society where social problems can be addressed. Especially since education and society are intricately interwoven in a way that there is a mutual influence on both, education influences society and society influences education.

### Considerations for Qatar's Reform

Educational reform is always considered as a crucial component for social transformation. However, it is essential to understand that there are several other factors that influence an educational reform prevalent in any society (Michingambi, 2014). From the *Qatar National Vision 2030*, it is evident that Qatar is making progress transforming on a wider platform including economic, social, human, and environmental development (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008). However, it is necessary to understand that schools alone cannot transform education. Questions to consider:

1. What is the role of Qatari society, culture and traditions in educational reform?
2. What is the purpose of education and what does it mean as a process of social self-formation?
3. Are all stakeholders represented in the educational system?
4. Are leaders, teachers, parents and stakeholders aware of the influence of society on educational practices?
5. Is there an emphasis in schools on the development of responsible active citizens? How does the Qatari educational system define and develop responsible active citizens?
6. Do schools develop students who embrace human rights?

### Conclusion

The purpose of this work is to serve as a beginning for considering and constructing an analysis of Qatar's educational reform guided by critical pedagogy. Those involved in educational reform in GCC's might have little experience or knowledge about critical pedagogy and this effort might be the first step in injecting critical pedagogy into educational reform. Toward that end, we provide some guiding question throughout to serve as a catalyst for the interrogation of discourse and borrowed educational policies and practices. In this context, Giroux (1994) raises an important point: "educational reform warrants more than appeals to glitzy technology and the commercialization of curricula; it needs a public discourse that makes an ethical, financial, and political investment in creating schools that educate all students" (p. 57). Failing to question Qatar's fundamental cultural, economic, and social issues is detrimental for effective educational reform because gained insights could prove useful in developing effective reforms. Educational reform cannot be a top-down activity but that it must circulate throughout the school, communities, and society. Reformers and all stakeholders must scrutinize taken-for-granted ideas and practices. There is a need to engage in cultural reflection, develop a language of possibility, and develop schools that they believe are effective and appropriate for their particular context and not defer to outsiders who sell their educational products.

### References

- Ahmed, M. (2010). Education as transformation - Education for transformation. *Dialogue Development*. Retrieved from <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v53/n4/full/dev201070a.html>.
- Apple, M. W. (1996). *Cultural politics and education*. Columbia University, Teachers College Publishing, New York.

- Barber, N. (1987). Education: A reflection of social change? Durkheim on Jesuit education. *An Irish Quarterly Overview*, 76(302), 216-226.
- Becker, R. F. (2009). *International branch campuses: Markets and strategies*. London: Observatory for Higher Education.
- Bloch, G. (2009). *The toxic mix*. Tafelberg, Cape Town.
- Booz & Company (2013). *Listening to students' voices: Putting students at the heart of education reform in the GCC*. Retrieved from <http://www.strategyand.pwc.com/media/file/Listening-to-students-voices.pdf>.
- Brewer, D. J., Augustine, C. H., Zellman, G. L., Ryan, G. W., Goldman, C. A., Stasz, C., Constant, L. (2007). *Education for a new era: Design and implementation of k-12 education reform in Qatar*. Rand Corp, Santa Monica, CA Retrieved from <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG548>.
- Bullough, R. V., & Goldstein, S. L. (1984). Technical curriculum form and American elementary school art education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 16, 143-154
- Burbules, N. C., & Berk, R. (1999). Critical thinking and critical pedagogy: Relations, differences, and limits. *Critical Theories in Education*, Routledge.
- Cherif, M., Romanowski, M. H. & Nasser, R. (2011). All that glitters is not gold: challenges of teacher and school leader licensing system in a GCC country. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32, 471-481.
- Danielewicz-Betz, A. M. (2013). Globalization of leadership and cultural implications for higher education: A German-Saudi case. In J. Rajasekar & L. S. Beh (eds) *Culture and gender in leadership: Perspectives from the Middle East and Asia*, 138-157. NY: Palgrave Macmillan
- Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom: A critical foundation for bicultural education*. New York, Bergin & Garvey.
- Devos, A. (2003). Academic standards, internationalization and the discursive construction of the international student. *Higher Education Research and Development* 22 (2), 155-166.
- Dimmock, C. & Walker, A. (2000). Developing comparative and international and management: a cross-cultural model. *School and Leadership Management*, 20 (2), 143-160.
- Durkheim, E. (1897/1951). *Suicide, A study in sociology*. New York: Free Press.
- Elder, L. & Paul, R. (1994). Critical thinking: Why we must transform our teaching. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 18, 34-35.
- Fiske, J. (2010). *Reading the popular*. Boston: Unwin Hyman. 149-5
- Foucault, M. (1981). The order of discourse, In R. Young (Ed.) *Untying the text: A poststructuralist reader*. Boston, Routledge and Kegan-Paul).
- Freire, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Freire, P. (1987). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Fullan, M. G., & Miles, M. B. (1992). Getting Reform Right: What Works and What Doesn't, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73(10), 745-749.
- General Secretariat for Development Planning. (2008). Qatar National Vision 2030. Retrieved from [http://www.gsdp.gov.qa/www1\\_docs/QNV2030\\_English\\_v2.pdf](http://www.gsdp.gov.qa/www1_docs/QNV2030_English_v2.pdf).
- Giroux, H. A. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*, South Hadley, MA: Bergin Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A. (1994). *Disturbing pleasures: Learning popular culture*. London: Routledge.



- Giroux, H. A., & McLaren, P. (1996). Teacher Education and the Politics of Engagement: The Case for Democratic Schooling. In *Breaking Free: The Transformative Power of Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Pepi Leistyna, Arlie Woodrum and Stephen A. Sherblom, 301-331. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review.
- Giroux, H. A. (1997). *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture and schooling*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Giroux, H. A. (2010). Lessons From Paulo Freire. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 57(9), B15-B16.
- Giroux, H. A., & Simon, R. (1989). *Popular culture, schooling & everyday life*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Halpin, D., & Troyna, B. (1995). The politics of education policy borrowing. *Comparative Education*, 31, 303–10.
- Hargreaves, A., & Goodson, I. F. (1996). *Teachers' professional lives*. New York: Routledge.
- Hidden Curriculum (2014, August 26). In S. Abbott (Ed.), *The glossary of education reform*. Retrieved from <http://edglossary.org/hidden-curriculum>.
- Hill, D. (2004). Books, banks and bullets: controlling our minds-the global project of imperialistic and militaristic neo-liberalism and its effect on education policy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 2 (3 & 4), 504–522.
- Hoenisch, S. (2005). *Durkheim and educational systems*. Retrieved from <http://www.criticism.com/philosophy/durkheim-on-education.html>.
- Ibnouf, A., Dou, L. & Knight, J. (2013). The evolution of Qatar as an education hub: Moving into a knowledge-based economy. In J. Knight (ed) *International Education Hubs: Student, Talent, Knowledge-Innovation Models*, 43-61. Netherlands: Springer.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). *Critical pedagogy primer* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- McLaren, P. (2007). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- McGregor, S. (2004). *Critical discourse analysis – A primer*. Retrieved from <http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/15-1/mcgregorcd.html>.
- McMurtry, J., (1991). Education and the market model. *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 25 (2), 209–217.
- Michingambi, S. (2014). The paradox of using educational reform as an instrument for social transformation: a Marxist analysis. *J Sociology Soc Anth*, 5(3), 331-338.
- Nasser, R. & Romanowski, M. H. (2011). Teacher perceptions of training in the context of the Qatari national educational reform. *International Journal of Training and Development*. 15(2): 158-168.
- Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016 (2011). Doha, Qatar: Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning.
- Quantz, R. A. (2015) *Sociocultural Studies in Education: Critical Thinking for Democracy*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Romanowski, M. H. (2013). The Qatar national professional standards for school leaders: a critical discourse analysis using Habermas' theory of knowledge constitutive interests. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2013.814808>.
- Romanowski, M. H. & Amatullah, T. (2014). The impact of Qatar national professional standards: Teachers' perspectives. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*. 3(2), 97-114.

- Romanowski, M. H., Cherif, M. E., Al Ammari, B. & Al Attiyah, A. (2013). Qatar's educational reform: The experiences and perceptions of principals, teachers and parents. *International Journal of Education*, 5(3). ISSN 1948-5476
- Romanowski, M. H. & Nasser, R. (2012). Critical thinking and Qatar's education for a new era: Negotiating possibilities. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 4 (1) pp. 118-134
- Romanowski, M. H. & Oldenski, T. E. (1998). Challenging the status quo of teacher education programs. *The Clearing House*, 72 (2), 111-114.
- Ross, E. W. & Gibson, R. (2006). Introduction. In E. W. Ross & R. Gibson (eds) *Neoliberalism and Education Reform*, 1-14. New York: Hampton Press.
- Seddiqi, R. A. (2012). *Preserving Qatar's cultural and national identity in design*. (Unpublished masters thesis). Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia.
- Shor, I. (1987). Educating the educators: A Freirean approach to the crisis in teacher education, in I. Shor, (Ed.s), *Freire for the classroom* (pp. 7-32). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Singer, A. & Pezone, M. (2003). *Education for social change: From theory to practice*. Retrieved from <http://louisville.edu/journal/workplace/issue5p2/singerpezone.html>.
- Steiner-Khamsi, G. & Quist, H. O. (2000). The politics of educational borrowing: Reopening the case of Achimota in British Ghana. *Comparative Education Review*, 44, 272–99.
- Strauss, V. (2013, February 9). Global education market reaches \$4.4 trillion and is growing. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answersheet/wp/2013/02/09/global-education-market-reaches-4-4-trillion-and-is-growing>.
- Suarez-Orozco, M., Qin-Hilliard, D.B. (2004). *Globalization: Culture and education in the new millennium*. University of California, Los Angeles, CA.
- Supreme Education Council. (2007). *National professional standards: Creating a benchmark for excellence in teaching*. Retrieved October 5, 2013 from: <http://www.sec.gov.qa/En/Media/News/Pages/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=2436>.
- Supreme Education Council (2011). *Above 30 % teachers not qualified*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/qatar/163929-above-30pc-teachers-not-qualified.html>.
- Thomson, P, Hall, C., Jones, K. (2013). Towards educational change leadership as a discursive practice—or should all school leaders read Foucault? *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice* 16(2). Reterived from [http://www.academia.edu/2390437/Towards\\_educational\\_change\\_leadership\\_as\\_a\\_discursive\\_practice\\_or\\_-\\_should\\_all\\_school\\_leaders\\_read\\_Foucault](http://www.academia.edu/2390437/Towards_educational_change_leadership_as_a_discursive_practice_or_-_should_all_school_leaders_read_Foucault).
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4, 249-283.
- Vassallo, S. (2012). Critical Pedagogy and Neoliberalism: Concerns with Teaching Self-Regulated Learning. *Stud Philos Educ*, 32, 563-580.
- Williams, R. (1985). *Keywords*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zeichner, K. M., (1983). Alternative paradigms on teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(3), 3-9.
- Zheng, J. (2010). Neoliberal globalization, Higher education policies and international student flows: An exploratory case study of Chinese graduate student flows to Canada. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 2(1), 216-244.

**Michael H. Romanowski** is Professor of Education and Coordinator of the Masters of Education in Educational Leadership at Qatar University. He earned his PhD from Miami University. A former high school teacher in the American Public School System, Professor Romanowski brings to the classroom diverse educational experiences including academic positions in the United States, China and currently Qatar. He has published his research and scholarship in various academic books and international journals and has managed external and internal research grants examining various important educational issues, recently addressing the national education reform in Qatar. He continues to research and write on various educational and culture issues.

**Tasneem Amatullah** is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University. She has over 8 years of teaching experience in K-12 settings in International Schools in Middle Eastern Countries. Her research interests include women and leadership, Islamic leadership, feminism, curriculum and instruction, educational reforms, Rasch psychometric analysis, and policy analysis. In addition to these, she also researches on textiles and fashion designing that stems from her other graduate degree earned before embarking on a teaching career. Amatullah currently teaches a course on the socio-cultural foundations of education at Miami University.