

The Cooperative School: Education via Innovation

Abstract

The Iranian education system has been experiencing a number of challenges. The system officially falls within two formats of governmental and non-governmental. The former envisions its mission as extension of free-of-charge knowledge for all. However, complaining about the heavy burden of educational spending, the Government has privatized some ten percent of schools to both meet the financial challenges and promote the education quality. The Iranian memory remembers non-governmental or independent schools as the symbol of modern education. However, a hundred years old, the national modern education which was first founded with the mission of realizing systemic agility and quality enhancement, now defies its very purpose as it has turned into an economic mechanism which is based on the logic of capital increase and provides quality education only in return for money, while, on the other hand, rendering the Government complacent about upholding free-of-charge education. In other words, the privatization policy in education has only worked on the one hand to degenerate education quality in governmental schools, and on the other hand, to commodify it in the best interest of the well-off. This has obviously intensified social inequality.

A Cooperative School, however, is a non-regular but legally recognized entity in Iran that can well serve to exit the inequality challenges which the national education establishment for its own part is both fueling and grappling with. The current paper aims to answer a number of fundamental questions: In view of its intrinsic requirements of innovation and creativity, is the Cooperative School able to revive quality back in the concept of "education for all"? Are cooperative schools able to provide quality education at minimum cost? Are they able to reduce social inequality on the education side of it?

The methodology assumes a historical-documentary approach by reviewing the background of each version of governmental and non-governmental format in the nation; after which the paper will proceed to focus on the prevailing challenges of the national education system, and finally, the possible role of cooperative schools in moving out of these challenges.

Keywords: Education system, Governmental schools, Private schools, Social inequality, Cooperative school

Introduction

Although learning and education has long been functional across societies, it underwent intensive transformations after the Industrial Revolution- the dawn of the Modern Era. In traditional communities where there was not a formally defined relation between education and occupation, education and learning like most of other affairs were functions of families, workshops and religious institutions. Also, education used to be exclusive to elite class. Education in this era is usually referred to as Scholasticism- a combination of Christian-Aristotelian teachings which saw the world all destined based on a hierarchical order which God had set and hence, every being had a sacred status and objective in it.

No doubt, such a worldview, and teachings stemming from it, were at odds with scientific breakthroughs made by figures such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. Eventually, however, it was the "Scientific Worldview" that emerged victorious. Rendering divine goal and will irrelevant, the newly-fledged scientific worldview saw the universe as a mechanism, with "matter" as its dynamic which follows natural laws. Subsequently, more accelerated events such as Industrial Revolution, political revolutions, formation of nation-states, development of secularism and urban life all became instrumental in fostering an overall revolution in education.

Industrial fast-track growth which entailed separation of work from homes, also called for training specialized workforce. This could be met only through a comprehensive professional bureaucracy. Political revolutions, replacing old hierarchical arrangements by putting "citizenship rights" as the focal concept, made for "education for all". Such education, influenced by scientific worldview set to secularize its contents as well as assuming high levels of bureaucracy, which was owing to the rapid rates of urbanization. These all contributed to the rise of modern education, which continues to be considered as a vital function of today's society despite receiving myriads of criticisms from different perspectives.

In the west, with ongoing differentiation and integration of the capitalist system, education was gaining further importance as an institution that was directly in connection with better occupation and hence higher income levels. The theoreticians of capitalism have claimed right from its beginning that education system in liberalist-capitalist context is meant to prepare for social mobility, freedom and citizen welfare. The functionalist perspective, which dominated the American sociology (of education) in the 50s and 60s, emphasized social solidarity stemming from common values. The perspective mainly presumes that social institutions, including education, are interconnected and each play a vital role in the maintenance of the society. The sociological origins of the functionalist perspective may be traced back to Emil Durkheim who first set to systematically articulate a functionalist explanation on education and society. To him, education is a social fact which influences people's social behaviours and is meant to be a systematic way to encourage social members to conduct in a way which serves to balance society. As is seen, a functionalist explanation of education reveals why it is so vital to a modern society.

Although the social function of education cannot be denied, there is an alternative perspective which picks up inquiry just where functionalism left off: Critical or Conflict perspective further goes on to ask, “In whose best interest is the prevailing social equilibrium?” In other words, which class, race, and gender are best served by the function of education in the society? What values are taught through this institution as “common” ones to children? Specifically, where there is opposition among the collective values of religious, racial and gender groups, which set of values are introduced as the fundamental ones, and why?

If we see value conflict as a fact in society, it immediately invites questions like “whose interests does education system best serve?” and what kind of ideology or value set tends to be reinforced through educational curricula?”

In their works, Neo-Marxists have dealt with these questions in a variety of ways. Althusser, a structuralist Marxist, argues that in capitalist societies, most social institutions including education, religion and military act in favour of state’s interests and state in turn under the control of the dominant class. The main logic of capitalism is reproducing production relations, which is contingent on the reproduction of workforce and production conditions. To Althusser, schools are not neutral in education but function as ideological state apparatus, thus playing a significant part in cultural reproduction.

On the other hand, Gramsci in his theory of Hegemony studies ruling class’s cultural leadership by arguing that in industrialized societies, modes of domination are changing as a result of ever-advancing science and technology. To him, in such societies social control is mainly exerted through values and norms rather than using physical coercive forces such as police and military. He calls this mode of domination “ideological hegemony”. It is a mode of control, which shapes one’s consciousness and thus, one’s behaviour. According to Gramsci, although intellectuals play a vital part in this regard, they also have the potential to create counter-hegemony culture (Robinson, 1981).

In fact, Gramsci, despite his elitist approach, went beyond structural Marxists’ simplistic determinism by viewing human as a subject with power to make changes within social structure frame. Therefore, unlike Althusser, what he argues is that school system while representing the values of the dominant class, can also serve as proper means for social change, especially, for subversion of the capitalist domination.

Subsequently, other Neo-Marxist thinkers further enriched Critical Paradigm perspective by various analytical works they contributed on education in relation to the capitalist system (for example, see Freire, Illich, etc.). Pierre Bourdieu’s Cultural Reproduction theory is one of the most salient of these works, which, despite critiques, continues to hold its canonical importance in the sociology of education by inspiring a great deal of empirical work. Constructing concepts such as “habitus”, “field”, “capital” (of economic, social, cultural and symbolic kinds) and “symbolic violence”, was in line with advancing a class theory of cultural reproduction. Bourdieu argues that schools reproduce class inequality through translating class distinctions into educational ones as it is dominant strata who have their culture prevail in schools. As a result, schooling system becomes just another field for socialization of dominated classes. The

dynamic, for example, is that children who come from dominant classes also bring with them to school the social and cultural capitals that truly make for their success. Therefore, to them, school feels like a natural setting while, on the contrary, feeling challenging and alienating socially and culturally to offspring of dominated classes. In short, Bourdieu explains that the dominant class turns educational system into a field for production and reproduction of the culture of its own.

It is important to bear in mind that the theories of Critical Paradigm have themselves been subject to many critiques on their various shortcomings. Despite these, however, their powerful critiques of Functionalist Paradigm have made it look too naive to talk about education as a neutral institution that would increase social mobility and hence chances of social equality while overseeing social solidarity, common values and social consensus. Therefore, that school is much more than a mere educational institution is an undeniable fact. Having advocated this, we would face two main questions: “what is the role of school in the (re)production of social, economic, and cultural inequalities in the society?” and “what are the mechanisms to such (re)productions?”

In this paper, we deal with the educational status in Iran. To do so, first we have briefly reviewed the genesis and history of modern education up to recent times while analyzing kinds of schools in terms of the negative social consequences of each from educational justice and quality viewpoints. Finally, we will discuss the cooperative school as an innovative phenomenon to move out of the present crises involved.

Educational System in Iran: History

In the late Qajar times, as a result of trends such as the local population growth and the society’s further contact with the Western egalitarian values, Iran had begun undergoing some transformations. Cities gained more importance owing to the industrial mode of production, which was replacing the old ones. This in turn gave rise to changes in cultural and social terms. In fact, industrialization put the city as the focal point of development. Also, establishment of institutions such as the Ministry of Justice and the Parliament was a manifestation of the fact that public rights- including education which was formerly an elite privilege- were to be respected.

On the one hand, social transformations required educated people, and on the other hand, people demanded it as their birthright. Therefore, the social sphere of the country was in the midst of a sweeping change. New occupational arrangements were being introduced which people increasingly felt obliged to meet as they had learnt that it would be impossible to find a decent job in case they continued to ignore education. In other words, in such a historical context, education was regarded as a surefire way to provide a living in the future (Bahirai, 2016).

Modern schools were highly instrumental in raising public demand. Budgeted by the Government, they were institutions which replaced old religion-based learning centers as part of the government’s modernization policy. Still, they continued to be an elite phenomenon.

Dar-all-Fonoun was the first modern school established in Iran and involved disciplines such as politics, military sciences, and medicine. The institution, which initially functioned to train educated forces for the government, gradually went on to expand its branches to also a number of other cities than the Capital. However, this caused overloads of expense. As the budget challenge was going on between Dar-al-fonoun schools and the government, another kind of schools, known as Roshdiyeh Schools, had already started appearing. These ones belonged neither to the elite class nor, unlike its state counterpart, required huge land lots. However, its main characteristic was facilitation of the alphabet, which made literacy more publicly available. Entering state schools demanded, as prerequisite, traditional (Maktab) literacy, which was much based on difficult religious themes and Arabic grammar. In Roshdiyeh schools, however, these were not a priority as they taught the language right from the scratch, thus, making literacy available to the public. Not being under governmental supervision, the educational content was either compiled from free and independent sources by Mr Roshdiyeh himself, the founder; or suggested by independent scholars. Roshdiyeh schools, later to be known as National Schools, were typically financed through the voluntary donations of the well-to-do. Despite having financial prospects, the establishment of these schools did not follow profit-driven goals but was meant to educate deprived children (202: 1393ام رینگر:)

In addition to donations, Vezarat-e- Ma'aref (Ministry of Sciences) used to devote some budget to National Schools until they, like state schools, gradually imposed expense overloads on the Government. Furthermore, the democratic style of these schools and their considerable independence from the government would render them a potential political threat. Public budget which was at the disposal of the government mostly tended to be spent in State Schools where only attended the children of the well-off. This clearly left out National Schools. In fact, the government having all financial and human resources under its control was endeavoring to eliminate the lower strata of the society from the education and to dominate the entire arenas of the society.

It was in the monarchy of Mozaffaraddin Shah that an ordain was issued which mandated supervision on National Schools. Although National Schools were already subject to supervision to a lesser extent by the Association of Sciences, seeing these schools gaining further power and independence, the king ordered the Ministry of Ma'aref to supervise these schools in terms of the process of establishment and education content. This was the first official step toward centralization and homogenization of education. On the other hand, with further growth of State Schools, a centralized credential system was created. Such a system was able to provide employment for the graduated of the modern disciplines that it introduced. Therefore, National Schools, which were increasingly being left without state support, were forced to resort to financing themselves through collecting tuition fees from students- a process, which would gradually have them defy their original purpose (Bahirai, 2016).

Iranian Schools in Recent Times

Over decades, the Iranian education system saw changes which stemmed from political transformations. After the Triumph of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, it was decided through the Iranian Constitutional Law that the Government shall provide for free-of-charge education for all. One decade later, after the Iraqi-Imposed War, the idea of Government downsizing, with a focus on social service sector, was raised. As a result, education was also one of the main subsectors which were ceded to the Private Sector.

During the 2000s the privatization of the education system accelerated. State schools are legally required to provide free-of-charge service; however, in view of insufficient state subsidization they have resorted to collect informal sums of money from students under benign titles such as “donations”. State schools are facing on the one hand the obligation of collecting money from students’ families, and on the other hand, unmotivated human resources, all of which have negatively impacted these schools.

Based on a general categorization, the Iranian schools fall within two groups i.e. governmental and private (A.K.A “non-profit”). A governmental school is one whose entire educational, financial and administrative affairs are performed by government employees. It is almost free of charge to enroll in governmental schools. However, a private or non-profit school is one that are established through public contribution according to the bylaws provided by the Ministry of Education. In non-profit schools, educational staff and students are selected at the discretion of the School Board, compared to the governmental ones where no selection is in place. Accordingly, educational quality, extra-curricular and entertainment activities are different in these two types of school.

The idea of education for all is the legacy of centralization policy followed by Pahlavi Dynasty. Poor economic development and intensive social inequality of those days required education- a cornerstone of development- to be made publicly available, although all through the nation’s history, centralization of education in the hands of the state as part of cultural, religious, ethnic and political assimilation policy has hampered its emancipative properties.

On the other hand, in recent decades especially after the Iraqi-Imposed War and the dawn of reconstruction and development policies, privatization and commercialism were fostered and officially legitimized. It was in 1993 that free-of-charge characteristic of public education became a hot controversial topic at the high-ranking circles of the government. The leftists, who are politically known as the Revisionists, strongly advocated free-of-charge public education which would cover up to the end of higher education. However, the rightists, politically famous as the Fundamentalists were mostly in favour of restoring private religious schools such as Alavi and Refah schools, which used to exist before the Islamic Revolution.

Eventually, the Establishment of Non-Profit Schools Act was passed by the Parliament in June 1998. The Act provided a legal context whereby privatization of social services, including education, was accelerated; so much so that in recent years, we have been witness to mushrooming of kinds of schools in Iran. Although in pre-revolution times schools were categorized as Governmental and Private, they shared the same curricula and differed only in programming and methodology. However, after the Revolution, these two concepts were an

outstanding "representation of discrimination and inequality." Reports show that after almost four decades since the Islamic Revolution there are over twenty kinds of schools in the nation's formal education system, Shahed, Tiz'houshan, Isargaran, Nemouneh Mardomi, and Ghor'ani to name just a few. According to the Research Center of the Parliament "school categorizations have moved well beyond family income criteria, reaching power and social group differences."¹

In a developing country like Iran where growth and development have not been going proportionately, there is a clear difference and inequality observable. Although education authorities mostly tend to deny this, it is a fact that huge differences is to be found between a private school in the luxury part of the capital city, and a school in a remote village, the latter being even deprived of the most basic facilities. The Director General for Supervision on Enrollments in Tehran Province explains

"Rest assured that same financial and educational facilities are distributed to schools across the country. The observed discrepancies in quality are not something to have been intentionally arranged by the Ministry. Sometimes it is that a school simply has a better administrative or educational board, and accordingly its achievements are better. We have by law banned Grade Point Average as a criterion for student selection in governmental schools. Therefore, handpicking top students is totally a baseless claim."²

Hazeri (1998) on his research on private schools and social mobility in Iran shows that private schools have much better quality than governmental ones in both facilities and educational standards, which is why most parents prefer to enroll their children in private schools regardless of so much difficulty involved- such as heavy financial burdens and long travel distances.

Such chasms in the society clearly show that the national education system has failed in its missions. Despite the stipulation of Paragraph 30 in the Constitutional Law that the Government shall provide free-of-charge education for all until the end of high school period, state schools have been struggling in provision of educational facilities, renovation of constructions, equipment of schools, etc. so much so that inequality in access to educational chances is outstanding.

Privatization and Its Consequences

Before privatization led to its current status, schools were mostly governmental; therefore, almost all the Iranian students went to governmental schools. However, as the Privatization took off, it offered an alternative for those not satisfied with the current education quality. These were the better-off who naturally were also more concerned with and more critical to the quality of education. With the rise of private schools, this class of society which could have been the critique force to the poor quality of the conventional education, was hushed and satisfied. However, the privatization had started a polarization of the formal education system where on the one side low quality education and on the flip side, quality one were being

¹ . RCP available at <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/news/show/1011939>

² . Keyhan Newspaper, Aug. 23, 1999 available at <http://vista.ir/article/333406>

provided. Naturally, those who were financially able (to exert themselves even at a cost) would go for the private option where better standards are expected.

Such a context would virtually render state's accountability and its competition with the private sector obsolete, causing it to continue providing substandard education. In other words, privatization of education has not only failed to strike a competition in quality between private and state schools, it has also caused degeneration on the state side of it. Meanwhile, private schools need to finance themselves through tuition fees to the extent that over the years they have turned into economic enterprises with profit-driven mechanisms which act on the basis of higher prices and lower costs- a *volte-face* from what their genesis was meant to be.

Tuition collection over the years has led to capital concentration as it is more than the current costs of a private school. The outcome of such a mechanism is the privatization of knowledge whereby only the financially privileged can take educational advantage, unlike those who are on low financial status. The persistence of the *status quo* ensures the reproduction of class inequality in the society by reproducing the offspring of the lower class in the same parental status.

The polarization also takes place by sifting top students which propels private schools at the cost of slowing down governmental ones. Based on the Iran's Statistics Center (ISC), in 2013, 37 percent of students who dropped out of schools came from lower classes and studied in governmental schools.

Another consequence of privatization of public education is the segregation which is based on families' socioeconomic statuses. This is how a sense of superiority or inferiority is institutionalized in students. Although the supporters of privatization believe the more non-governmental education system, the better³, the policy has virtually landed the national education system directly in escalating socioeconomic inequalities which may be on its way to structural class conflict.

Governmental and Private Schools: Common Aspects

Despite categorizations of the Iranian schools, they tend to have commonalities both structure and content-wise. A number of them are as the following:

1. Application of old educational methods: schools of both Governmental and Private versions are very much based on classes of long hours, parroting of books, traditional procedures of punishing and encouraging, commanding approach of schools' authorities toward students, all of which could be framed as a mechanistic system of education. Teachers, following traditional pedagogy, do most of the teaching by lecturing and demand students to rehearse orally the scientific concepts that need to be practiced on a hands-on basis while in education circles authorities talk about active students and their free mind, intellectual growth also about necessity of enhancing cooperation spirit and friendship among students. On the contrary, so often what

³ . <https://meidaan.com/archive/14352>

appears on the ground tends to be some sort of negative competition which leads to disappointing levels of jealousy and animosity among them.

2. Absence of social skills and values

Education system lacks key social components such as creativity, toleration, cooperation, trust, responsibility, and respect to people and to nature. Although these themes are thrown in educational contents superficially, students don't really acquire lived experience on them.

A total pyramid, the decision making system in the Iranian education is a one-way and authoritarian one, where community cooperation contributed by parents (if any) is just a formality. The pedagogy's commanding nature leaves little room for mental challenge whereby students and teachers would have a cooperative and communicative way of learning. This situation has caused a tendency to replace cooperation with competition whereby students gradually feel aversion toward their school and classmates (Karamati, 2007).

3. Poor motivation for learning and teaching

Today, human resource planning is one of the key elements of education development. Teachers are strategic assets in education. Therefore, poorly motivated human resources may leave hampering effects in the dynamism of educational entities (Hasani, 20016: 94)

4. Reproduction of social inequality

The current status of education tends to make available quality educational and occupational chances to those who are able to pay significant tuitions to "buy" education. This *per se* serves as a main cause of social inequality. Great economic disparities are the root cause of a wide range of social disorganization, representing themselves education-wise. Understandably, a person who has not had proper educational facilities at his or her disposal would also not have chances to find a job with sufficient income. Such is how the vicious circle goes on. The education system which is meant to be responsible for human resource development, in practice turns to an unfair institution which serves to widen class gaps.

5. Commodification of education

In the last few decades, the Iranian education has greatly commodified. On the demand side, are some groups who are able to use educational services by paying high tuitions. Also, there are a vast majority who equally need education but don't lay demand because they can't meet the financial requirements. However, on the supply side, are education service providers who increasingly regard education as a matter of market exchange. Accordingly, their behaviour is governed by profitability of education. This is how education succumbs to the logic of commodification by being 1) produced, 2) sold on the market, and 3) profit-driven.

Reification of education is another consequence of the vicious circle which can make it devoid of any valuable content so that education *per se* becomes irrelevant. Commercialization of education simply renders it pedestrian and unworthy by itself.

Conclusion- Cooperative Schools: Beyond Governmental and Private

Wide range of school versions in Iran, unequal distribution of education facilities, poor content of the curricula, and undemocratic structure are some of the most important weaknesses of the national educational structure. Of the objectives of the nation's 2025 Vision- an upstream document- are poverty eradication and better social justice status. It seems that establishment and promotion of schools which operate on the basis of cooperative principles, will offer chances to move beyond prevailing challenges and open new horizons.

Given the prevailing circumstances, it seems tapping into cooperatives' egalitarian mission and structure would well work for an "affirmative action". Introducing a cooperative structure and philosophy to schools where students (their parents) and teachers are in membership would lead to pooling capital and workforce organization which would also lower education costs. Meanwhile, the profit earned would be used to further improve education quality. Also, such a mechanism is well able to attract deprived students who are in dire need of education, which is why cooperative structure is well expected to soften the stiff inequality circumstances. Global successful experiences of cooperative-oriented educational endeavors made in similar conditions bear this out.

Thus, given clear signs of inefficiency in the nation's education system, it seems unavoidable to move beyond the conventional domains of knowledge and practice. Age-old teacher-centric, individualistic and despotic methods which have even been intensified thanks to privatization are in need of fundamental changes which would put education both in theory and practice on the way to more cooperative and values-driven concept.

Cooperative approach may have a dual importance in education. Promotion of cooperative values would democratically attract more participation from students' parents, school board and the local community in running caringly the affairs which are their own. What's more, such phenomenon by setting trend would help its own reproduction and would further give way to more cooperators coming forward. This could ultimately find a significant niche for cooperative and democratic values in the larger culture.

In Iran a limited number of cooperative schools have been set up and have proved to be successful despite difficulties in their way. In 2006 based on an MoU between the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Education, it was decided that in privatization of governmental schools, cooperatives enjoy priority, provided the government continue to subsidize them so that the newly-fledged cooperative schools would be able to compete with private ones. In order for coop schools to be formed and stay in business field, they need to start out relying on governmental facilities- mainly premises and low-interest loans- to skip the bulk of the educational expenditure and hence make it possible to ask for

lower amounts of tuition while being able to meet their costs. The members of coop schools can be teachers as their employment has become a great challenge to the Government.

Promoting coop schools across the country seems to involve great steps toward realization of the following:

- Better educational justice, less school drop-out, all by involving students as stakeholders in the revenues,
- Decommodification of education by expanding coop values, teacher, student, and community involvement which could bring about lower costs;
- Organization of workforce through enhancing collective work spirit. Also, coop schools have the capacity of hands-on education and entrepreneurship;
- Involvement of community in shaping need-based education. This linkage has been permanently ignored in the prevailing education system. Communal involvement in the mission and vision of education would intensify interaction between education and community culminating in useful local knowledge and strengthening of civil society.
- Training of cooperators who can keep the educational cooperative though ongoing.

Resources

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