

Educational Change In Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this article is to discuss the possibility of adapting the suggestions by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) in their book "The Fourth Way." This paper will discuss the topic of educational change and reform through three main points. First, it will review the most important advantages and disadvantages that characterize the three periods of change, as presented by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009). Second, it will extract the main principles proposed by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) as the fourth way (the principles of how education should be changed in the future) and discuss whether or not officials in Saudi Arabia will be able to apply it. Third, it will review the movement of change and reform that has taken place in the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia (MESA) in order to reform education.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; Education; Change; Teachers; The Fourth Way

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia places great emphasis and importance on education, as it is the field that prepares future generations who are the nation's true fortune (Al-Mousa, 2010, p. 7).

Education, in general, is a process of changing and evolving and it should continue to do so, not stopping at a certain point; the claims for reforms are part of this process as long as this life continues to change. Education has gone through major stages of change worldwide in the last century, which took a lot of time, and learning from experiences and mistakes makes it useful to study these changes and start building on them. It is important that the officials responsible for educational reforms in Saudi Arabia study and understand the major stages of change that have taken place at the international level; such an understanding will facilitate the advancement of the reform process and help to avoid problems experienced by other nations.

This paper discusses the topic of educational change and reform through three main points. First, it will review the most important advantages and disadvantages that characterize the three periods of change, as presented by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), so that officials in Saudi Arabia can avoid making the same mistakes and adopt a successful model. Second, it will extract the main principles proposed by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) as the fourth way (the principles of how education should be changed in the future) and discuss whether or not officials in Saudi Arabia will be able to apply it on the ground. Third, it will review the movement of change and reform that has taken place in the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia (MESA) in order to reform education.

THE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL CHANGE CONTINUUM

Educational change is one of the vital topics in the education field nowadays. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) discuss the educational change continuum that took place internationally; they divide the series of changes in different countries into three phases (or ways, as they refer to them).

The First Way of Innovation and Inconsistency

The first way lasted from the end of the Second World War to the mid-1970s when the social movements and the growing voices of civil rights influenced the way education was provided, and led to more professional freedom, which was one of the advantages of this period from the perspective of advocates for more flexibility for teachers who also believed that freedom encouraged innovation among teachers.

On the other hand, this period facilitated innovation but without any consistency or cohesion. There were huge variations in quality depending on the school, due to the freedom that was given to teachers who varied in their performance and work, especially in the absence of references. As Jacobs (1997) notes, "If there are gaps among teachers within buildings, there are virtual Grand Canyons among buildings in a district" (p. 3). Also, this period was characterized by limited public spending and financial rigidity, in general.

The Second Way of Markets and Standardization

This movement started in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in the late 1980s with the launch of a detailed and prescriptive National Curriculum (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). In this period, government centralization and standardization of educational goals were growing - a situation that is similar to what is taking place nowadays in Saudi Arabia and will be discussed later on in this paper. In this period, schools fortunately gathered comprehensive data on students' achievements from the perspective of advocates for standardized tests that help teachers understand in order to give assistance to students who have difficulties. On the other hand, some believe that professional autonomy was lost during this time because of standardized goals and tests, which leaves no margin of flexibility for teachers' innovation and have a negative impact on professional motivation.

The Third Way of Performance and Partnership

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) describe this third way as the period that 1) balanced professional autonomy with accountability, 2) combined the best state support and market competition, and 3) blended top-down control, bottom-up initiative and sophisticated lateral learning. For Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), the Canadian province of Ontario represents an advanced version of Third Way thinking, but they believe that the United States has just entered into the Third Way. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) state that even with all positive characteristics of this period, there are three paths of distraction that have betrayed the Third Way's promise - the autocrat, the technocrat, and the effervescence - which led them to propose their fourth way.

The Fourth Way

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) believe that Finland and Singapore are the two countries that are advanced enough to be in this level. They believe that one of the things that helped Finland is that they no longer have a system of standardized testing. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) described the Fourth Way as a way of inspiration and innovation, responsibility, and sustainability that pushes beyond standardization and involves a trade-off for educators. Their proposal consists of the following:

1. Six pillars of purpose and partnership: 1) an inspiring and inclusive vision, 2) strong public engagement, 3) achievement through investment, 4) corporate educational responsibility, 5) increased student voice, and 6) learning for life.
2. Three principles of professionalism: 1) high quality teachers, 2) positive and powerful professional associations, and 3) lively learning communities.
3. Four catalysts of coherence: 1) sustainable leadership, 2) integrating networks, 3) responsibility before accountability, and 4) differentiation and diversity (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

To discuss the possibility of applying these principles emphasized by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), in Saudi Arabia there is a need to address the main principles, which are the basis of this proposal, with some analysis according to the situation on the ground. So, from this standpoint, four main ideas contained in this proposal (the fourth way) will be discussed - accountability versus responsibility, standardization, high quality teachers, and students' voices.

Responsibility and Accountability

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) state "accountability is the remainder that is left when this responsibility has been subtracted" (p. 168) and they give an example of how the Finns work together with a full sense of responsibility and without the pressure of accountability all the time. Accountability and responsibility are two

things that are important in any type of work, but the question is what the nature of the relationship is between them and what should come first. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) believe that responsibility should be a prelude to accountability. Here we are in front of an idealistic viewpoint that is difficult to apply in most cases, especially in Saudi Arabia at this time. Furthermore, that responsibility can mean different things depending on cultural differences, contexts and the interests of the stakeholders (Valor, 2006). Also, "professional responsibility becomes more complex in real world settings" (Solbrekke & Heggen, 2009, as cited in Solbrekke & Enghmd, 2011, p. 7).

In Saudi Arabia, the situation is totally different than Finland, which Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) provided as an example; the lack of accountability for teachers' performance is one of the obstacles that Saudi Arabia is facing nowadays in many fields of work, particularly government jobs. For instance, Altayar (2003) states that there are shortages and imbalances in the qualities that must be displayed by teachers, such as the lack of a sense of responsibility, desire, and enthusiasm for teaching, which reflects on their students. She also believes that teachers, in general, display a lack of patience and discipline. Another problem is that teachers exhibit poor lesson planning skills and classroom management. Therefore, there is a need to raise the level of accountability first. The issue here is that the sense of responsibility is a consequence and result of the accumulation of culture and values over generations, not something that can be taught to people. These values require a long time to be absorbed by the society and this absorption can happen through the instilment of these values in children at young ages. Without accountability, improving educational outcomes will be difficult. On the other hand, the motivation and rewarding of outstanding teachers are necessary to enhance competition among teachers and to make them put forth their maximum abilities and efforts.

One of the initial steps in this direction is the 2011 announcement by the Ministry of Education about the new strategy that will put 80% of the weight of evaluating teachers' performance on their students' performance on standardized tests. The results from this process of evaluating teachers will determine who deserves incentives for their outstanding performance (Almadina Newspaper, May 29). Although this new procedure will not achieve its goals without a strict and followed-up implementation, it is a step on the right track.

High Quality Teachers

Teachers are the backbone of the educational process as a whole; when teachers have a degree of responsibility and proper training, then the educational process moves in the right way. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) emphasize the quality of teachers as essential in educational reforms and uphold Finnish teachers as an example of high quality teachers (Sahlberg, 2010) who have contributed to the success of the Finnish educational system.

In Finland, teaching is surprisingly rated as the most admired profession among young Finns (Sahlberg, 2010). However, in Saudi Arabia in the past few years, teachers no longer have the social status of previous time periods when they had special respect and status. In addition, the economic benefits from teaching are much fewer than those provided by the private sector. Nevertheless, some people choose to be teachers because it gives them lifetime job security, since there is no danger of losing a government job. This job security leads to the entry of people who are not interested in education or do not believe in the importance of the subject they are teaching. For instance, Alheezan (2009) surveyed 203 Saudi male art education teachers and administrators in middle schools in Riyadh and found that 33.5% of the teachers who participated in this study think that students do not benefit from this course. Also, more than 92% of administrators reported that art education courses are not beneficial.

Under these current circumstances, it will be difficult to find "high quality" teachers in the near future who are willing to take this job, unless it is one of their last options. Gradual and realistic solutions should be reached through workshops and training courses for teachers and by motivating them to participate through financial benefits and promotions, as well as forcing them to constantly develop their skills. For instance, teachers need to be trained in developing instructional materials for their own purposes and using them in classrooms, and the common perception that this is beyond their capability and responsibility needs to be changed (Massialas & Jarrar, 1983).

However, the Ministry of Education has started working to create standardized tests and assessment tools to examine teachers' preparation and competencies in different subjects based on professional standards and basic skills

required for each subject, and these tests and tools will be used to assess applicants for teaching jobs in the future. These kinds of arrangements will ensure the avoidance of teachers who are unprepared to adjust to new trends and knowledge in their field.

The Standardization of Goals and Tests

Assessment is critical in determining students' growth and their skill acquisition level, which is defined by Popham (1999) as "a formal attempt to determine students' status with respect to educational variables of interest" (p. 3). Popham (1999) divided the reasons why teachers need to know how to assess students into traditional reasons and today's reasons. The traditional reasons are to 1) assess students' weaknesses and strengths, 2) examine students' growth, 3) assign grades, and 4) verify instructional effectiveness. Today's reasons, according to Popham are that 1) test results determine public opinions of educational effectiveness, 2) students' performances are part of the process of evaluating teachers, and 3) assessment devices can develop instructional quality.

Standardized tests are one way of conducting assessment. Popham (1999) believes that standardized tests generally test either students' achievement or their aptitude, which he describes as their potential. Teachers often differ in their ability and knowledge in the development of tools to assess their students, which calls for standardized tests as a unified reference. In this context, Nassif (2007) surveyed 292 teachers in 18 public and private pre-schools in Jeddah City in Saudi Arabia and interviewed six of the participants in depth. Teachers reported that they lack knowledge, skills, and confidence in the use of different assessment techniques in classrooms, which, as the researcher believes, is due to the low level of assessment training they received.

However, this does not negate the existence of studies in which researchers opposed standardization, including Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) who believe that one of the reasons why Finland is the highest scoring nation on some national tests is that they no longer have standardized tests.

Saudi Arabia began to adopt the concept of standardization a few years ago in order to define the critical skills and knowledge that need to be mastered by students in each subject for each level of school. This makes it necessary for Saudi Arabian officials to recall the importance of studying problems and difficulties that other countries have gone through in adopting such a system. As in any other system, there are people who are in favor of it and others who are not, and the standardization of educational goals and tests is not an exception. Despite criticisms directed at standardized tests, there remain some who believe that it helps to promote a sense of urgency, increase teachers' skill levels, and move the profession in an accountable direction (Barber, 2007, as cited in Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Students' Voices

The proposed fourth way indicates that students should be engaged in making decisions and that their voices should always be heard (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009); schools should take students' preferences into consideration. Unfortunately, in Saudi Arabia students are faced with totally fixed schedules, which gives them no time for favorite activities. Altayar (2003) states that the content of the curriculum in Saudi Arabia, as a whole, does not satisfy the needs of the lives of individuals or the specialized needs of the community. Nevertheless, its study is compulsory for all students, without any consideration of their inclinations and preferences (Al-Sadan, 2000). Therefore, students' voices need to be heard in any future reform of the school curriculum.

SAUDI ARABIA WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL CHANGE CONTINUUM

Saudi officials should always remember that the process of educational reform is a complex, difficult, and very slow process and that the chance of seeing tangible results quickly after applying reforms and changes is minimal. For instance, Finland started a comprehensive school reform in the 1970's; this reform and change took more than 30 years and went through three phases (Sahlberg, 2009):

1. Reviewing the theoretical and methodological foundations of education (1980s)
2. Improving through networking and self-regulated change (1990s)
3. Maintaining the efficiency of structures and management (2000-present), as cited in Sahlberg, 2010

With Saudi Arabia facing the real challenge of catching up with developed countries in education, reforms must be well thought out, and it is important to benefit from the experiences of other nations. Reforms should include all aspects related to education and not be fooled with the idea that education is just the content within the textbook. The Ministry of Education has attempted many previous projects in this area, but, unfortunately, most of them had the goal of changing the content of the textbook only.

In response to the demands for developing educational curricula to keep pace with economic and social developments (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2006), which required that learning outcomes be consistent with these changes, the Ministry of Education formed committees to review the topics that are taught in all levels of school, as well as issues relating to adult education, measurement and testing, special education, and student counseling (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2006). These committees encouraged the Ministry of Education to revise their goals for education and they expressed their new vision for the characteristics of the developing educational curricula as 1) balanced, flexible, and sophisticated to meet the needs of students, the requirements of national development plans, and the needs of the labor market of the future; 2) increasing positive attitudes toward learning, thinking, using technologies, and the use of different sources of information; and 3) emphasizing Islamic values and principles, the spirit of loyalty to country, moderation, and social coexistence (The Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, 2007).

The government of Saudi Arabia embarked upon a giant project with a budget of billions of dollars in 2010, called King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, for the development of public education (KAAPEDP). One of the good points that has been mentioned as part of the development program of public education (KAAPEDP) in Saudi Arabia is teachers' development of practical skills and theoretical knowledge to fulfil the new requirements and standards of teaching, which are still being developed; but it is also important to clarify the mechanism by which this process will be accomplished.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabian officials should study all three ways of educational changes that took place in countries around the world, as described by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), along with the main principles that they proposed to be the base for a fourth way. The focus should be on studying the ideas in each way (or period) and combining them in a manner that can gradually improve the outcomes of education in Saudi Arabia. High expectations in the adoption of a new system will be a heavy burden on the officials, in the first place, and on teachers. There is no arrangement that can change the entire system - which has been administrated and managed in a certain way for decades - immediately or even in a short period.

Having standardized tests and identical goals all over the country is important at this time, especially for high schools. One reason for this, besides having a unified reference for all teachers, is that based on students' high school grades, they will have options in their lives. These standardized tests will ensure justice among students, as well as give officials in education a chance to examine educational outcomes, which help in making any further decisions.

The perception toward teaching as a profession needs to be enhanced to encourage people with high competencies to consider it as one of their future choices. There are no short answers of how that can be achieved, but, undoubtedly, it is something that needs to be studied. Certainly, strengthening the economic side should be one of the main and initial steps in changing the perception of teaching; then it is possible to raise the ceiling of the standards and requirements for this job. In addition, it is important to adopt new ideas that have proven their effectiveness in raising the performance of teachers, such as those carried out in Singapore's "Teach Less, Learn More" experiment, which mandates 10% free time (they call it white space) for teachers to come up with new initiatives and become more creative in their teaching. Discussing educational reform in the twenty-first century cannot be completed without considering the integration of technology, which has been ignored in the proposed fourth way. Technology should become an essential aspect of education (Wan & Gut, 2011).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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