

Main Challenges in Education in Iran

Education is a process by which the students' body, mind, heart, and personality are formed. It is a lifelong and continual process with which everyone is in need of updating his/her knowledge and skills on a regular basis from the childhood to the elderly period. Education and training today, has become an integral part of one's personal, social, cultural, and working life. It takes place in a myriad of contexts: in general education, in specialized education, on the job training, in higher education, or even at home by the media and the Internet. Schools are highly complex environments and public education is an enormously complex undertaking. To think otherwise is to ignore the cultural, social, political, and economic influences that come to school with every child, teacher, administrator, and education related program and organization.

The fundamental challenge to changing education in our country arises from the fact that, apart from the general slogans about ideal education, there is little agreement about where education is really going and what and how exact efforts should be carried through to achieve the goals and how all of the components of the education system should relate to one another. Strategic reform in our education system is indispensable but the current social, cultural, and philosophical environment have pushed many educators away from participating in solving the problems while many others are engaged in vain efforts. There is not a clear and enlightened discussion about the theory, research, content, and method that best addresses or explains how people learn and what the role of learning in our lives is. Another problem is that most of our school teachers

and other school-based staff are not educationally, scientifically, and practically certified in the areas for which they have responsibilities.

At the same time, in this era of human rights education, democracy, and media & digital technologies, we are in need of social, economic, and cultural development and this is possible by enhanced education. There are, however, some important elements which are most needed for all students and every citizen's development. It is in these areas we confront the most challenges: knowledge, correct thinking, life skills, applying media and ICT, and human's rights and fundamental freedom.

Knowledge. It is well recognized that the cultural, social, and economic development is strongly linked to the ability of a country to acquire and apply knowledge. In other words, knowledge is highly important to solve any type of economical, industrial, social, educational, cultural, and environmental problem. Countries need to have the capacity to understand local, national, international, and global issues to be able to solve problems. Fifty years ago, as an example, South Korea and Ghana had the same level of social and economic development. Today, we know how much progress South Korea has achieved, while Ghana has not achieved that much at all. According to investigation carried out by the World Bank, if Ghana had benefited from the same endowment of capital and labor inputs, it had the same level of social and economic development of South Korea.

According to investigations¹, South Korea has been able to encourage scientific and educational innovations, make the right political, social, and economical decisions, acquire advanced technology and then develop and apply its own technologies over the past few decades. The results of these is that you may probably own a Samsung cellular phone, a LG television, or drive a Hyundai but you have not heard of any industrial and economic progress in Ghana. Also, you may know that while per capita GDP in South Korea is more than 20000 US dollars, the GDP in Ghana is less than 1000 US dollars.

Knowledge is also important to solve the type of natural and environmental problems such as earthquakes or to deal with safety

¹ - World Development Report 2005/2006. Knowledge for Development. New York: Oxford University Press.

issues such as deadly road traffic incidents. With today's scientific advances in the field of architecture, health and medicine, and road safety rules and controls, there is no excuse but to be better prepared to confront with such incidents. As an example, by a simple comparison between Japan and Iran with regard to the earthquake and road traffic incidents, it will be recognized that Iranian government is not well prepared and do not practically heed the advice of scientists and experts.

Another point to mention is the acceleration of the speed of knowledge creation, which has serious implication for what and how to investigate, plan, and work in Education System and in schools. The level of knowledge and skills of our students, in comparison with those in Japan or South Korea, makes it clear that our students need much higher knowledge and skill than what they acquire today in schools. This means that the shortages in knowledge and scientific works in our schools are a real challenge and that we need changes and reforms in this field.

Correct thinking. Another dimension of challenges and changes is the need to train young people to be logical, aware of different fallacious reasoning, be flexible, and acquire the capacity to adapt easily to a rapidly changing world. Our students need, first of all, to think correctly and critically. We should prepare them both in schools to think scientifically and critically and to solve problems for which there are no rule-based solutions such as diagnosing the illness of a patient whose symptoms are out of the ordinary.

Our students are in extreme need of methodological knowledge and skills, or the ability to learn in an autonomous manner. The learning process of today's schools needs to be increasingly based on the capacity to find, access, and apply knowledge to problem-solving. This is a type of learning to learn, learning to transform information into new knowledge, and learning to transfer new knowledge into applications. Furthermore, competencies such as learning to work in teams, peer-teaching, creating, resourcefulness, and the ability to adjust to change are also among new skills which are highly important for individual, social, and economical development.

Life skills. Researches indicate that there are skill shortages in key areas of our students' and our citizens' life including individual

and social responsibility, respect for all others' life and decisions, citizenship and civic responsibility, effective communication, health and hygiene, self-esteem and matured identity, teamwork and collaboration, moral behavior, critical thinking and problem solving, and most importantly, practical respect for human rights.

Public education is supposed to be the great equalizer but, as we all are aware, millions of our children, adolescents, and youths are not experiencing equality and human rights. They are in need of character, moral, and value education to find out their right place in the national and international human life. Processing from the principle that "there is no such thing as value free education" character development is as necessary as academic achievement, and that parents and school administrators are increasingly aware of this need. In this view, two great values of respect and responsibility should define the public school's moral agenda. This will help to solve the ethical illiteracy of school students.

Character life skill education is a major force in responding to our many students and citizens identity crisis and basic shortages in correct thinking. Education for character should be made available to students, parents, teachers, and administrators. In addition to character education, we set about the important task of creating a recommended curriculum including cognitive ability, innovative thinking, analytical reasoning, higher-order thinking, and many other life skills.

Right application of media and ICT. The media, Internet, and related digital resources have revolutionized education and changing the traditional "brick schools" to be replaced by "click schools". It is certain that schools are called upon to change drastically under the pressure of increased competition and growing demands for accountability. The need to integrate real human science and technology into education requires clear strategic vision in support of a new educational innovation.

Many people of the world have reinvented their routes to be able to answer the problems of contemporary societies. This is partly due to the massive development of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). However, this massive influence has not reached most people of our country, so it is realistic to talk about "info-

excluded” majority of Iranians. This has also led to a sort of dichotomy in favor or against the ICT.

As educationalists, therefore, we must think of ICT not only as strategies for motivation in the learning process nor as sheer source of information, but as tools for the cognitive, social, and cultural development. This will help to bring up free and critical-thinker citizens so that they will be able to actively participate in needed changes of the society they live in.

The role of media and ICT is so huge today that we should define children, adolescents, and youths of today through the kind of interactions they have with media, including electronic ones. The media and ICT really interpret and reconstruct national and global culture through international filters. These are representing a more and more important role in the definition of culture, society, and education. The worst is to prohibit the students’ access to electronic media by warning them and exaggerating the dangers of new technologies (i. e. techno-phobia).

The fact is that new media presents a set of new challenges to everybody’s intervening in the educational process. It can either be an instrument of liberation, power, development, and innovation, or a tedious demagogical and oppressive object. Experiences clearly show, however, that there is a lot to expect from these educational tools. The problem, as indicated by Hutchly and Moran-Ellis¹, lies in how the media and ICT should be integrated in educational environment in order to develop the students’ cognitive, social, and cultural competencies. If an education system aims to connecting as much as possible to real life, and if everyday life is full of references to media and ICT universe, schools must grant their students contact with the most fascinating and complex universe the human being ever has had.

Human rights and fundamental freedom. Educators are emphasizing that everyone has the right to education... and education should be directed to the full development of human personality, to the strengthening of respect for human rights, and fundamental freedom including freedom of thought and expression, cultural diversity, multilingualism in education, peace and non-

¹ - Hutchly, Jan; & Moran-Ellis, Jo (2001). Children, technology, and culture: The impact of technologies in children’s everyday lives. London: Rutledge Flamer.

violence, sustainable development, and the full development of the students' personalities.

Education for all and human rights education is at the heart of quality education. A quality education requires that the human rights are implemented throughout the whole education system and in all learning environments. It is about developing an understanding of what it means to treat other people with dignity and respect for their rights.

The reality of right educational change is that it is a collective endeavor, requiring the collective intelligence of every citizen, and needs to apply the scientific and pure wisdom in response to educational challenges. But the nature of our socio-political status-queue and the ongoing influence of governing groups that have differing ideas about education and about the goals, plans, and curriculum make that impossible. What is need is a democratic opportunity for free discussions and broadminded opinion expressions to come to a consensus that education reform is more about freedom of ideas, research, and scientific efforts to solve the current problems and to prepare ourselves to meet today's and future challenges with a repertoire of strategies, policies, and rationales. This means that our education system must be a locus for inquiry and conceptual understanding from national and international perspective for all of the nation's citizens.

We need to define first the new pedagogical approach that our schools want to implement and then to look for the most appropriate educational and curriculum planning and proper technology to prop up that pedagogy. We either should go the same way as Ghana has gone, or redirect our way toward the way of Japan or other developed countries, as mentioned in the beginning of this editorial. We should clearly know where we are and where we are going. There is no favorable wind for those sea-travelers who do not know where they are going.