

A Critical Investigation into the World Bank Recommendations for School Improvement in Oman

Saif Juma Salim Al Weshahi

University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Shinas, Oman

Email: [saif.alweshahi \[at\]shct.edu.com](mailto:saif.alweshahi[at]shct.edu.com)

Abstract: *The current paper investigates the World Bank's proposal to improve the educational system in Omani learning context. The details regarding its policies, mechanisms, and the issues with the unauthorized agencies that interfere with the education system in Oman are explained comprehensively. The current paper also describes the lack of full implementation of the World Bank's recommendations on gender inequality and its impact on global assessment and standardization.*

Keywords: World Bank, Policies and recommendations, School Improvement, Omani Educational System

1. Introduction

The interest in improving the education system has been increasing and gaining momentum worldwide and nationally. In fact, over the last three decades, there has been a growing body of literature that highlights the significance of school improvement and effectiveness, which explore the factors which bring about the change or challenges which impede it (Ainscow et al., 2006; Black, 1990; Harber & Davies, 2001; Hopkins, 1994; Levin, 2008; Murphy, 2015; Randle-Robbis, 2016; Schmoker, 2016; Woods & Brighouse, 2013). In the same vein, owing to the rapid global education reform movement, Oman's Educational system has also been influenced. What acted as a warning alarm and compelled the education sector's policymakers to respond thoughtfully was the low international competitive ranking report that the World Economic Forum published about the education system in Oman (Al-Harthi & Al-Mahdy, 2017). Consequently, raising the standards of schools has become a dominant issue, and enhancing the quality of education has been regarded as a top priority for the Education National Strategy 2020 (Yasser et al., 2015). To respond to these demands, the Government of Oman invited the World Bank to assess the school performance system and accordingly propose recommendations to render the education system in Oman more effective. The collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the World Bank addressed specific areas of improvement published in a report called Education in Oman, The Drive for the Quality (Ministry of Education, 2012). What is surprising is the quick implementation of the implications of the report's findings by the Government of Oman without scrutinizing them and the lack of previous studies to investigate the World Bank recommendations by the Omani educational researchers. A possible explanation is that suggestions presented by education specialists who work with well-known international organizations are taken for granted. There is, therefore, a definite need for revisiting the report and contesting the premises and guidelines. This paper attempts to critically examine to what extent the drive for the quality report's recommendations can play a vital role in improving school performance in Oman.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. World Bank Education Policy

It is fundamental to note that the World Bank has been regulated and managed by the liberal policies and industrialized economies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) since World War II (Abbott & Snidal 2005). However, according to Psacharopoulos (2006), the WB commenced engaging in the education sector in 1963. Notwithstanding the fact the World Bank original mission did not compress Education, it has become a key player in undertaking national education policy. Taking this as a starting point, it raises the question of why non-governmental offices such as the WB or Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) strive to influence strategies in the educational development field. Mundy et al. (2016) argue that the WB and other international agencies' robust involvement in the education reform movement is ascribed to the impact of neoliberalism and the private trade agenda. Similarly, Sahlberg (2015) insists, "It is not a formal global policy program, but rather an unofficial, educational agenda that counts on certain assumptions to improve educational systems. GERM has emerged since the 1980s and is one concrete offspring of globalization in education. It has become accepted as 'a new educational orthodoxy' within many recent education reforms throughout the world" (p.143). Furthermore, this view is underpinned by Verger et al. (2012), Benavot et al. (2016), and Mahon (2016), who claim that many national educational governments legislate and embark upon new blueprints due to the pressure of the international bodies to shift towards global benchmarking for school improvement without taking into account not only the difference between the world of evidence and the world of politics but also the distinction of the educational contexts in developed and developing countries. Dale (1999) has adopted a broader perspective, which stresses that the World Bank undertakes specific mechanisms, namely 'loan conditionalities, debt cancellation, and trade agreements to oblige policymakers to comply with some initiatives related to the privatization of education and international standards.

This is probably why the previous minister of Education in Oman did not invite education specialists from Finland or Singapore, which their education systems are considered one of the best in the world, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the education system in Oman and, instead, the World Bank was called to be involved in such a task.

Taken together, relying merely on the World Bank recommendations to steer school improvement in Oman is insufficient. Therefore, Omani educational critical scholars must look at school effectiveness from different perspectives.

2.2 The Conceptualization of Education and Quality

Even though the WB study aims to drive education and schools in Oman for quality, the report fails to discuss the mission of education from a holistic view and to define what quality means and how it is conceptualized, recognized, or measured. In terms of the purpose of education, whereas the report implies that learning outcomes and curricula should be solely aligned with the labor market needs, it overlooks personal development, citizenship, conviviality, and transmission of culture, which are underlying goals of Education (Miller, 2000; Shriner, 2005). This is evident in recommendation A.1 in the report, where schools in Oman are requested to increase student time in schools on the ground that days which schools allotted for special events, national and religious occasions, or festivals need to be compensated. In the same section of the report, Omani teachers are recommended to prioritize curricular topics over extracurricular activities. Hence, these two examples confirm that the World Bank study claims to a great extent that education only takes place in school. It disregards other empirical evidence (Beames et al.2012), which demonstrates that learning outside school is more effective than inside since it allows students to learn about culture identify, the history of the country, and traditional dances and to promote their talents and practice authentic communication skills.

Concerning the quality of education, in a report comprising around 300 pages and wherein the Drive for Quality is the main title, the report does not elucidate or even allude to what good quality is and who will regulate it, and how? Moreover, it is unclear what kind of quality the report attempts to achieve since quality has many definitions (Rowley, 1996). The World Bank study does not explain whether the quality is perceived as fitting for purpose, meeting the requirement, or reaching academic standards. The report also does not consider that different stakeholders have different perspectives on good quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). While quality from teachers' and students' perceptions is more likely about teaching and learning, parents might take it from a prestigious or instrumental view. However, for employers and neoliberalism, a good education means equipping students with valuable skills in their companies; otherwise, teaching is a waste of time. The commentary on the notion of quality could be neglected deliberately in the report owing to the term being loosey and problematic, and historically it has been used interchangeably (Rowley, 1996). Therefore, it is hard to determine good quality as no unanimous definition exists. Another shortcoming concerning the conceptualization of

quality is that the World Bank educational specialists have not addressed explicitly how the quality would be gauged.

Nevertheless, by analyzing chapter three in the report, which underscores curriculum and assessment in schools of Oman, it could be seen clearly that student outcomes are predominantly measured through the high-stakes exam system. Although the business quality control model is ineffective in the educational context, the report has no attempt to challenge it. According to West (2020), it is illogical when teachers let students take exams at the end of the year to find out how much they do not know, and when the results come out, teachers say, 'Look how much our students do not know.' By that time, it would be too late to learn anymore.

Overall, the World Bank study would be more valuable and convincing if the researchers had not underrated education's overarching aim and explained the notion of quality in depth.

2.3 Closing the Gender Gap

One of the most significant issues that the World Bank study has identified is that the gap between males and females in Oman is very high in performance. The report reveals that girls' outcomes remarkably outperform boys in all content areas. The World Bank researchers attribute boys' under achievement to how both genders use out-of-school time. In other words, they claim that girls score better because they study more at home than boys. However, there is oversimplification with this assumption because the study has not tackled the gender disparity profoundly. To understand why girls and boys do not have the same interest in education in a conservative society like Oman, it is essential to examine the socio-economic factors, cultural mindset, and power of religion. A likely explanation for the female's high educational attainment is the male supremacy and female subordination phenomena whereby female students lack autonomous decisions on account of the impact of social construct on gender identity (Al-Azri, 2013). Thus, girls have no choice but to prove themselves academically; otherwise, they might spend most of their time doing trivial work, especially since Omani society's tolerance of girls' failure is low. As the education system in Oman is somehow sex-segregated, outputs could also be ascribed to female school effectiveness.

Concerning boys' poor performance, it could be imputable to the high-income country context of Oman, with a population of fewer than 3 million residents and a GDP of \$167.8 billion, and where is the government revenue heavily dependents on oil and gas resources (Al-Mawali et al.2016), and therefore there is less awareness of the value of Education. An example is the study carried out by the Ministry of Education (2019), in which the figures show that more than 7, 000 students drop out of school annually due to employment or lack of motivation. But why do boys not have the motivation to study? Is it because of the curriculum, teachers' approach, school working conditions, or beyond school drivers?

Besides the above interpretations, the World Bank recommendation gives rise to asking two essential questions in relation to gender inequality in Oman. Firstly, is the status quo prevailing in urban or rural areas? Secondly, why even though females' results surpass males', the proportion of women's involvement in the labor force is still under-represented, around 30%, compared to over 80 % for men in a country where 51% of the working-age population is females (Al-Lamky, 2007; Donn & Issan, 2007) ?These statistics imply the difference between rhetoric and reality regarding gender issues. In short, although the World Bank study has not offered adequate analytical investigation into the gender gap in Oman, it has uncovered tentative conclusions. It has paved the way for Omani researchers to dig deeper to explore the main drivers behind it.

2.4 International Assessment and Standardization

The World Bank has emphasized that to improve schools in Oman, it is necessary to upgrade the standards to compete globally. The report points out that the international assessments have demonstrated that Omani students' outcomes are below the Government's expectations and at the bottom of the league table ranking. The influence of global assessment has been exemplified in chapter 3 of the report, Quality for Students Learning, by comparing Omani students' results in TIMSS (Trends in International Maths and Science Study) with students from Singapore. The report indicates that an outstanding student in Oman would be considered close to being a poor student in Singapore in mathematics. But how much do these international testing comparisons tell us about students' knowledge and skills, and to what extent are these measurements reliable and valid to evaluate the quality of schooling in a country? Do not culture and context matter, and is it rational to predict the effectiveness of schools based on learners' sampled performance in reading, science, or mathematics? This assumption is not feasible and unfair because most students in East Asian countries do well in international exams competitions because they go to after-school 'crammers.' Therefore, their scores are not just a result of formal schooling. Moreover, it is not overstated to ascribe this, at least in part, to the deep-rooted cultural values such as obedience and hard work, which act as extrinsic motivations for East Asian students. This view is advocated by Goldstein (2004), Leung (2001), Thomas and Goldstein (2008).

Furthermore, many critical scholars have argued that using the Rasch model to generate results and accordingly determine country rankings is based on 'plausible estimates', not actual results, which undermine the undertaken methodology in international test competitions. By the same token, Baker (2007) and Ravitch (2013) assert that international comparisons of education systems lead to conformity and compliance and more likely encourage teachers to focus on testing on the expense of creativity, ingenuity, humanities, arts, and music, social sciences, and physical education. A broader skeptical perspective has been adopted by Zhao (2015), who alleges that PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) is a Western conspiracy to deviate Chinese education reform from the route of creativity, diversity, confidence, and happiness. Although Meyer and Zahedi (2014) believe that OECD's

experts are driven by a sincere aspiration to improve education, they maintain that the vogue of international testing on a global scale and homogenization of education would kill the joy of learning. Along the same lines, much uncertainty still exists about the relationship between international test performance and economic performance (Kamens, 2015; Klees, 2016; Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017; Stromquist, 2016).

Therefore, policymakers in Oman should not see the international examinations as the sole and dominant feature through which school effectiveness is monitored and measured and instead take advantage of international comparisons to learn from other countries philosophies, approaches, and models to have a diversity of educational experiences.

2.5 School Improvement and Professional Development

Can the World Bank suggestions work precisely the same with 1124 schools in Oman regardless of each school's context and culture? When it comes to school improvement, no recipe fits all. Although the World Bank experts have identified the essential ingredients, they have provided neither the sequential steps nor the guidelines on using, ordering, and mixing the ingredients appropriately. For instance, the World Bank report concludes if the Ministry of Education in Oman seeks to improve the quality of education, it is substantial to embrace a professional development approach to enhance educators' leadership and management skills and develop the quality of teachers. Nonetheless, the report fails to identify a conceptual framework of professional development that school leaders in Oman can refer to when evaluating teachers' progress in a particular area. In claiming so, the Government of Oman must understand that the process of change is socially complex (Earley, 2013), and it entails figuring out what motivates Omani teachers to develop self-efficacy, taking into account the significance of behavioral, attitudinal, and intellectual components of professional development (Evans, 2000). Morrison (1998) states that teachers respond to change initiatives differently. While change might be welcomed and adopted by some teachers, it could be resented and resisted by others. This perspective is supported by Marris (1974), who assumes that change in organizations is perceived as a threat or opportunity by job-related attitudes. Since the report has not explained precisely how people develop professionally in the educational arena, further work needs to be done to contribute towards addressing this shortfall. Thus, there is a need to investigate the micro-level professional development process. Each school in Oman should work independently but collaboratively with other schools and the quality assurance team to determine training programs based on teacher needs analysis. In contrast, it is crucial to remember that effective professional learning can occur implicitly through social interaction and sometimes appears in an everyday experience without intention (Adger et al., 2004; Eraut, 2004; Smylie, 1995). Therefore, promoting an understanding of professional development and how it takes place consciously or spontaneously is indispensable.

3. Conclusion and Implications

This paper set out to meticulously examine the World Bank's propositions for improving the education system of Oman. It has discussed the World Bank's education policy, mechanisms, and the reasons for the unofficial agencies' interventions in steering Education to conformity. It also clarified how the report lacks a theoretical understanding of the purposes of education, what the definitional concept of quality is, and how it is measured. Then, the author has explicated how the World Bank recommendations have not plumbed the depths of analysis of the gender inequality issue and have not adequately articulated the impact of International assessment and standardization. On top of that, this essay has shown that the World Bank study has not treated the narrow notion of professional development in much detail, and therefore, this lacuna is still not filled in Oman. It is not possible to include all the World Bank recommendations here. Thus, a greater focus on the remaining recommendations could produce interesting findings that account more for school improvement in Oman. A natural progression of this paper is to analyze the influence of non-school factors on school performance in Oman and to investigate more closely the links between school leadership and change management. Further empirical studies could usefully explore how to bridge the gender achievement gap, identify the barriers that impede learning and teaching in Oman, and propose other measures of real potential or attainment. Finally, despite the fact that the World Bank's external inspection has not provided deeper insights into school improvement in Oman, the study's findings have certainly highlighted the weaknesses of the education system of Oman and raised important questions about the nature of school effectiveness.

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