Critical Thinking and Qatar's *Education For a New Era*: Negotiating Possibilities

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Abstract

In this essay, the authors use Foucauldian concepts to examine the State of Qatar's unprecedented educational reform, *Education For a New Era*. One of the key components of this comprehensive reform centers on the development of students' abilities to engage in critical and independent thought. Evoking Foucault's concepts of regime of truth and metanarrative, the article examines the seemingly contradictory relationship between the Qatari Regime of Truth and the development of students' critical thinking skills. The authors discuss the importance of embracing a language of possibility raising important educational issues and offering suggestions as to how educators might address these complex issues to increase the likelihood of the success of *Education For a New Era*.

Introduction

Dewey wrote, "skepticism is the mark and even the pose of the educated mind" (Hickman, & Alexander 1998, p. 28). As educators, we think it is safe to infer that skepticism or the relevant thinking skills are not instinctively acquired, but rather for this type of thinking to flourish, schools must develop students' abilities to question and engage in critical thinking. This perspective seems quite accurate since most modern educational systems consider the development of critical thought to be a vital pedagogical element. For example, the National Research Council (1996) states that critical thinking is at the heart of educational systems that produce research and scientific literacy. It is clear that quality educational systems that produce knowledge and depart from static and passive teaching and learning processes in favor of teaching inquiry, evaluation, and analysis center on the intentional development of critical thought. There is little doubt that critical thinking is a prerequisite for educational progress.

Critical thinking skills are not innate but are taught and fostered formally and informally in schools and universities through teaching practices that instill a critical and transformative perspective. More importantly, the development of critical thought initiates the process of teaching that moves away from telling stu-

dents *what to think* and centers on *how to think* or the process of critical thinking. Consequently, any sincere effort to develop critical thought would inevitability invoke questions about value-laden issues embedded in education, culture, power and politics such as workers rights or analyzing in a deep sense one's religion.

In what follows, we examine Qatar's educational reform by conceptualizing issues of power, culture and critical thinking in light of our experiences teaching graduate and undergraduate students and interacting with administrators and teachers in the Qatari educational system.

We structure this discussion using Foucault's concepts of regime of truth and metanarrative as a theoretical framework while situating critical thinking in terms of a weak and strong sense of critical thought, merging the strong sense with critical thought, that is, with a postmodern understanding of critical thinking. We do not limit our discussion to a postmodern discourse eliminating any modernist understandings or theory grounded perspectives (Schraq, 1992) rejected by postmodernism. Rather, we constantly struggle to apply complex postmodern concepts to a limited modernist culture that rejects any discussion that challenges a sanctified single version of truth. More importantly, the paper represents our own struggles locating ourselves in the tension between postmodernism (multiple and contested discourses and ways of knowing) and modernism (a single way of knowing) as we engage in critical reflection of the implementation of *Education For a New Era*.

Qatar Educational Reform: *Education For a New Era*

Qatar is in the midst of a systemic education reform, *Education For a New Era* (EFNE). In 2001, the government of Qatar became alarmed that the country's educational system was "not producing high-quality outcomes and was rigid, outdated, and resistant to reform" (RAND, 2007, p. iii). In response, the Qatari government approached RAND, a nonprofit research organization and requested a comprehensive examination of Qatar's K-12 education system. RAND was given the task of investigating the existing educational system and providing recommendations and options for building "a world-class system that would meet the country's changing needs" (Rand, 2007, p. xvii).

Upon the completion of their analysis, RAND put forward three options. These are as follows

(1) a Modified Centralized Model, which upgraded the existing, centrally controlled system by adding or improving the basic elements; (2) a Charter School Model, which decentralized governance and encouraged variety through a set of schools independent of the Ministry and which allowed parents to choose whether to send their children to these schools; and (3) a Voucher Model, which offered parents school vouchers so that they could send their children to private schools and which sought to expand high-quality private schooling in Qatar (Rand, 2007, p. xxi).

Based on RAND's analysis, the Qatari government elected to support a charter school model that decentralizes education and encourages the development of independent schools. The model is based on the four principles of 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. In response, Qatari officials have developed a two-pronged approach to reform: (1) the establishment of government-funded Independent Schools over a period of some years and (2) the implementation of annual assessments to measure student learning and school performance (SEC, 2009).

Rand's analysis highlighted that the current Qatari educational system and curriculum is "unchallenging" and "emphasized rote memorization" (Rand, 2007, p. xviii). Because of this criticism, EFNE was designed to develop students' "questioning and critical thinking skills" and the reform would "expects teachers to promote critical thinking skills by providing opportunities for students to learn them" (Rand, 2007, p. 103).

The implementation of EFNE has drastically changed the educational landscape in Qatar. It has created a supply of high quality schools that build human capacity through training, integration of educational policies with wider social policies and continuous change and innovative pedagogical and methods that promote inquiry, discovery and critical approaches (Brewer, Augustine, Zellman, Ryan, Goldman, Stasz, & Constant 2006). Furthermore, EFNE has an interest in providing qualified employees to the Qatari workforce that requires the development of particular skills such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills (Stasz, Eide & Martorell, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, we limit our examination of EFNE to one of the pillars of the reform, namely critical thinking in the curriculum and the development of critical thought in students.

The important question that quickly emerges is whether EFNE can achieve the goal of developing critical thought in students in the midst of an Islamic state currently struggling with impending social and cultural changes. Our concern is that an educational reform centering on the development of critical thinking seems to be in opposition to the Qatari Regime of Truth and metanarrative (defined below) that operate in a manner that limits both the *way* people think and *what* they think about.

Critical Thinking

The purpose of this section is not to engage in an in-depth discussion of what signifies critical thought but to define critical thinking in terms of a weak and strong sense and develop a postmodern understanding of critical thinking. Elder and Paul (1994) provide an understanding of critical thinking that serves this discussion well.

> Critical thinking is best understood as the ability of thinkers to take charge of their own thinking. This requires that they develop sound criteria and standards for analyzing and assessing their own thinking and routinely use those criteria and standards to improve its quality (p. 35)

Differentiating between a weak and strong sense of critical thought, Paul (1994, 1983) explains that the weak sense does involve the skills of thinking critically but individuals seldom challenge their own thinking. The essence of the weak sense of critical thought is that individuals engage in logic, recognize false inferences and fallacies are able to distinguish bias from fact, opinion, and evidence and can apply knowledge. These are all worthy skills to possess but they are limited in their capacity to examine institutional contexts, social relations and issues of power and interests. The weak sense of critical thought is also used to maintain their own positions and controversies are avoided or dismissed especially if these arguments challenge the current discourse. Those who limit critical thought to the weak sense are limited to examining evidence that strengthens their position and weakens oppositional knowledge or raises questions only about beliefs assumptions and inferences that have already been rejected.

On the other hand, a strong sense of critical thought involves the skills and disposition to engage in critical thinking and individuals deliberately incorporate critical thought throughout their lives. The strong sense of critical thought moves beyond knowledge application and the distinguishing bias from fact to enable students to develop 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. This awareness begins the process of questioning and can lead to active struggle against cultural and moral inconsistencies.

For this paper, we want to place the strong sense of critical thinking into a postmodern context by evoking a postmodern sense of critical thinking. Critical thinking can be characterized as a way of approaching and thinking about issues by not centering on concrete answers by accessing the values, motivations and assumptions embedded in a particular discourse (Palmquist, n. d.) and by considering ontological and epistemological questions. This type of thinking is intended to provide an awareness of the hidden motivations in our thinking and to unveil the hidden politics within the socially dominant, as well as all other discourses (Palmquist, n. d.).

Critical thinking demands that students be active, skeptical and aware of their own understandings of the world and the ideologies and knowledge that govern life experiences. This requires both the desire and ability "to disengage themselves from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations in order to exert more conscious control of their everyday lives" (Kincheloe, 2000, p. 24). At times, the knowledge produced through critical thinking can be disturbing because individuals develop the insight that the world is often not what it

seems to be. More importantly, individuals gain a comprehensive understanding of important issues and an understanding of themselves in relation to those issues.

In relationship to EFNE, the major issue is that the development of critical thought requires a space where teachers and students can engage in the freedom of thought and inquiry, where criticism and evaluation is fostered and where critical approaches are applied to the economic, political and social aspects of society. However, is the development of this type of thought hampered by a powerful Qatari Regime of Truth and metanarrative and does these work to reduce the space needed to foster critical thought?

Discourse, Regimes of Truth and Metanarratives

In order to provide a theoretical framework that serves as a guide to view the relationship between critical thought and EFNE, we evoke Foucault's "power/knowledge" nexus and the concepts of discourse, regime of truth and metanarrative. We will briefly address each concept in order to provide clarity and then place them into the context of EFNE.

Discourse in the simplest sense is conversation or information. For Foucault, it is through discourse or knowledge that our identity and our understandings of the world are shaped. Discourse gains its power because of the acceptance of the "reality" that is presented. For example inundating students with information about the Arab Israeli conflict means they are never exposed to or never develop any understandings of peace. Most importantly, discourse (knowledge) is created and perpetuated by those who have power and the means to control communication. Those in control decide what is included and what is hidden. This is particularly true of education where the discourse legitimized by schools construct the understandings of teachers and students and their identities through the exclusion and inclusion of knowledge, values and skills. Regarding EFNE, the question that must be considered is who holds the power to shape the discourse, who interests are served by a particular discourse and how are students understandings of the world is shaped by that particular discourse?

Closely linked to discourse is the nexus of Power/Knowledge. For Foucault (1977),

Power/Knowledge can be described as "the single inseparable configuration of ideas and practices that constitute a discourse" (p. 27). Within this perspective, "knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, becomes true" (p. 27). The essential concept is that power is always intertwined with knowledge and it is this power that can grant knowledge in the title of truth.

When we consider schooling and knowledge, Foucault argues that power "consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome to govern, in this sense, to structure the possible field of action of others"

(Foucault, quoted in Giroux, 1997, p. 107). Clearly, knowledge excluded from and included in schools and legitimized by appropriate authority has the power to shape students thinking and actions. Power in this Foucauldian perspective is not an exertion of force but rather the ability to control knowledge and shape how individuals think in a particular cultural and political context. Those who possess the power to control knowledge have the probable force to rule over others by manipulating them towards or against particular courses of action. This is especially relevant in education where knowledge claims are granted authority as truths that are seldom questioned but that actively shape students identities and thoughts.

When discourse is effective in practice, evidenced by its ability to organize and regulate relations of power, it is called a "regime of truth." Foucault (1980) constructed the term regime of truth to explain how powerful groups control knowledge and shape individuals' worldviews by the transmission or communication of knowledge. According to Foucault (1980), a regime of truth is representative of a particular set of fundamental beliefs, traditions, ideas, theories, images, values and ways of understanding the world that has been legitimized and upheld by powerful institutions such as government, media and entertainment organizations, traditions, religious institutions and education systems.

Regimes of truth can be understood within a tacit structure that distributes, produces, manipulates, and circulates truth claims. Regimes of truth legitimize knowledge and ways of understanding by calling upon a particular authority. For example, the regime of truth can claim religion or tradition as authority and impose upon individuals an acceptance of a particular version of truth. Foucault (1980) argues that:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (p. 131)

In this sense, regimes of truth consist of socio-political powers that exist in a societal system perpetuated by people unconsciously internalizing and accepting a particular version of reality. A critical aspect of a regime of truth is that it does not render individuals as passive. They have the ability to resist or become active. People define themselves according to the metanarrative espoused by the regime of truth. These people believe the leadership's moral and intellectual authority and embrace a particular discourse accepting it as truth and allowing it to define numerous aspects of their identity and understandings of the world.

The essential aspect of the regime of truth is that it acquires power by developing a metanarrative or grand narrative. In postmodernism, metanarrative or grand narrative is an abstract idea that is considered a total explanation of experience and knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). The term means "big story" and can be considered an explanation for all that happens in a society. For example, there

are religious metanarratives in the USA such as Christian fundamentalism or economic metanarratives such as capitalism, liberalism or socialism that frame the different narratives of people, systems and structures. Metanarratives contain a powerful discourse that operates to reinforce or normalize a particular view of the world and accounts for and justifies the status quo, maintaining current inequalities, privileges and lifestyles that exist in that particular culture. The discourse is considered to be common sense and serves to crystallize what is right, wrong, marginal, normal or deviant and what views, thoughts or actions become unthinkable and unacceptable.

Within the regime of truth, the metanarrative places boundaries around knowledge limiting what knowledge is allowed to enter the discourse. Subjects outside the boundaries are considered illegitimate forms of knowledge and are placed beyond question or debate. Furthermore, the metanarrative also determines what perspectives can be used to interpret reality. In sum, a metanarrative is a story about ideologies and worldviews that is used to prevent oppositional narratives from upsetting or subverting the cultural order.

Subjugated knowledge is an element that must be addressed within the metanarrative framework. Foucault (1980) defines subjugated knowledge as "disqualified knowledges." That is knowledge that it is labeled as deficient or invalidated and is suppressed. Individuals or groups who align themselves with the dominant knowledge, share privileges and advantages that are culturally, economically and politically legitimized. Those embracing disqualified knowledge are marginalized, experience inequities and are undermined in their efforts to challenge the regime of truth. All disqualified knowledge is evaluated within the framework of the regime of truth to determine its truthfulness and to decide whether it is meaningful or nonsensical (Keeley, 1990).

An example of how the regime of truth and metanarrative operate is the media outlet Al-Jazeera operating out of Doha, Qatar. Al-Jazeera has been successful in bringing to the forefront political and social criticism that no other news outlet in the Arab world has confronted. However, Al-Jazeera has never challenged Qatar's Regime of Truth, power relations, or the dynamics of Qatari national interests. According to critics, the station never directly criticizes Qatar political or economic policies and avoids criticizing its powerful neighbor, Saudi Arabia (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2001).

The Qatari Regime of Truth and Metanarrative

Before fully examining EFNE and critical thinking, it is important to place Foucault's concepts in a Qatari context. Islam serves as the central basis of the Qatari Regime of Truth and the guiding metanarrative. Religion and tradition influence people's lives, government and politics ironically, more strongly than it affects the spiritual life of people; it governs the political, economic, social, legal and educational aspects of society. We have had numerous discussions with colleagues and

students where it is argued that Islam is not necessarily or accurately reflected in some of the religious traditions and some elements of shari law. That debate is for another paper. However it is clear that in a number of Arab states civil laws run parallel with well-defined Islamic laws known as the sharia law. Under sharia law, general affairs are conducted within limits that cover the minutest details of personal and public human life. It also plays a dominant role in education.

The Qatari metanarrative, defined using Foucault's concept of power/knowledge gains the status of truth. This becomes problematic in the sense that it prevents inquiry because within the framework of religious tradition, doubt and questioning are discouraged. The metanarrative is considered truth and accepted as the legitimate way of understanding the world, thus shaping individual thoughts and actions. Whether one raises questions about equality or discrimination in education or how schools might approach critical thought, the discussion often finds its way back to religious traditions. Placing these inquiries beyond question elevates the metanarrative "truths" to a privileged status outside the arena of academia and represents a serious impediment to the development of critical thought. These limitations can prevent teachers and students from engaging in critical thought and fall short of the epistemological conditions necessary for the production of knowledge and for an educational reform hinging on the development of critical thought.

For some, the boundaries of the regime of truth are set limits that extend to thinking about "taboo" topics. As quickly as these topics are raised, they are swiftly brushed aside signing off any debate or discussion as inappropriate. Individuals often have never considered oppositional knowledge because of the fear of disciplinary actions and more importantly, because silencing and state censorship prevents them from considering alternative perspectives. For example, the State's Internet censorship prevents access to knowledge or perspectives that lie outside the Regime of Truth boundaries. The key issue is that the regime of truth sets the boundaries around legitimized knowledge and shapes individuals' life experiences and opportunities for critical thought. As long as individuals in society accept with minimal questioning the knowledge and beliefs embedded within the dominant metanarrative the status quo remains intact. So the question remains, how can critical thought be developed in this context or how can some form of critical thought be negotiated within the Qatari Regime of Truth?

The Qatari Metanarrative, Critical Thinking and EFNE

EFNE has drastically changed the educational landscape in Qatar. Many scholars are aware of the archaic educational system prior to the 2003 reform. The missing ingredient in Qatari education was a well thought out deliberate attempt to define and develop critical thought in students and this was evident in the Qatari educational outcomes. These include student results as those measured by the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (*TIMSS*) or higher edu-

cation output measured in terms in scientific achievement and publications. For example, while nine Arab countries registered 244 patents over a six-year period, South Korea registered 29,270 (Hall, 2008) and the number of educational journals published in the Arab academic world is less than 1 percent the number of U.S. academic and scholarly journals (Nasser & Abouchedid, 2001). The system itself is problematic. Arab education includes an unimaginative system where "the grade book, the frigid academic discourse, and the power relations between student and teacher, combine to create an oppressive educational process" (Nasser & Abouchedid, 2007, p. 4). Sheikah Mozah Bint Nasser Al Missned[1] (2006) confirms this viewpoint.

> Scholars have affirmed that the "traditional" system of education in the Arab world, built upon the absolute power of those in authority, encourages learning by rote, and blind acceptance of power. In such schools, girls and boys, are taught not to question their teachers, just as individuals in society are taught not to question their rulers. In short, the type of education prominent in the Middle East sustains autocratic regimes and inequalities - racial, class and gender.

Even as EFNE is progressing, there is still a number of forces limiting the development of critical thought. For example as professors addressing issues of curriculum and the implementation of critical thought in schools, our discussions are limited. One quickly sees student reactions when questions or viewpoints push against the borders of legitimate knowledge. Even to question practices and traditions is inadmissible. Discussions quickly die and a somber climate develops. For example, one graduate student stated, "we don't want our students to question traditions . . . certain foundations should not be questioned." "Taboo topics" are answered with absolutes and students often respond with statements like "This is our culture and this is how things are." We as foreign academics are painted as uniformed expatriates who lack understanding and appreciation for local and traditional culture. Even when pushed on issues, students "hold the party line" so to speak and seldom question the metanarrative. These examples demonstrate how the metanarrative is ingrained in individuals and the difficulty involved in penetrating these borders. Even to unearth these issues runs the risk of being ostracized or facing repercussions from the national intelligence entities known for their crude and demeaning actions. In these ways, issues begging for discussion remain buried under the discourse of subject matter teaching.

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1   Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al Missned is the second wife of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of the State of Qatar. Unlike many other monarchical wives in the Middle East, Sheikha Mozah is a high-profile figure in Qatar's politics and society. In particular, she is actively involved Qatari education where she has many roles within the Qatari educational system. She serves as Chairperson of Qatar Foundation and its innovative Education City campus where six U.S. universities have branch campuses. She is also Vice Chair of the Supreme Education Council (SEC) and President of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs (SCFA). She has been named as #79 on the Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Women.

Qatar's EFNE engages in an educational discourse using terms such as students as "researchers," "critical thinkers," "critical spirit," "creative expression" or "independent thinkers" all pointing to a particular understanding of critical thought. Teaching Bloom's taxonomy and the levels of critical thought is accepted and encouraged as long as Bloom's work is applied to appropriate topics and issues that lie within the metanarrative. However, the Qatari Regime of Truth and metanarrative seem to be at in opposition to EFNE's aim of developing critical thinking.

At the heart of critical thinking is questioning, doubt and contradictions. However, any questioning of societal, economic, judicial or cultural issues can be considered as a direct criticism of religious traditions. Let us provide an illustrative example. Recently one of the authors conducted a workshop addressing various teaching strategies. During a discussion of her school's vision, a teacher commented that the school encouraged students to be open-minded, appreciate diversity and develop critical thought in step with EFNE. When asked for an example, she responded that the school tells their students about various religious and national holidays outside of Islam. Since several staff members are Westerners, the classrooms have a small party to celebrate the Easter holiday. When asked if they tell students the meaning of Easter, she was quick to say that this was not allowed and that this clearly goes against their religion. The first question that comes to mind is; how students can develop critical thinking skills when some knowledge is excluded or when particular issues are above criticism?

Considering the EFNE discourse and this discussion on metanarratives, educators are forced to think about the central questions: What type of critical thought does Qatar's EFNE desire? Is strong critical thinking the goal or is the weak sense sufficient or more desired? Can quality education set parameters regarding what knowledge students can engage and what knowledge is off limits and still develop the strong sense of critical thought? How can critical thinking be negotiated or slowly developed in Qatari schools? Finally, can Qatari education develop qualitatively and maintain a balance between their local cultural heritage, values and beliefs and the freedom of thought that critical thinking demands?

EFNE, Social, Economic, Political Issues and Critical Thinking

In order for EFNE to be successful in achieving the postmodern view of critical thought, there must be a climate or a space within the Regime of Truth where critical thinking can develop and flourish. However when critical thinking emerges, political, social and economic issues will inevitably be challenged through what is termed subjugated knowledge. This oppositional knowledge always percolates and challenges traditional thought by questioning, seeking out new information and naming the discourse. Colley (2003) points out that "naming a discourse can challenge the unconscious acceptance of it, and able resistance to its disciplinary function" (p. 98). As long as subjugated knowledge is discussed

within the metanarrative borders and poses no real threat, the knowledge is accepted and accommodated. However when issues gain momentum and popularity, the regime of truth must delegitimize these perspectives or make room for the transformation.

Here in Qatar, a number of relevant issues need to be addressed in classroom discussion but we exercise self-censorship not crossing the boundaries of the metanarrative. More importantly, we believe that these issues will certainly surface as students and teachers develop the skill of critical thinking. In fact, in this paper, we thought it was important to examine contradictions, injustices, nepotism equity, equality, tribalism and protectionism however, after having this paper reviewed by a Qatari national, we were informed that these topics push too hard on the metanarrative boundaries. Clearly as professors, this should have not been the case in places were the development of critical thought thrives.

If critical thinking is fostered in Independent School classrooms, there are issues that could possibly be considered and raised by our interaction between teachers and students. For example, Cordesman (2001) pointed out that since the beginning of the oil era, there has been an understanding between the Qatari regime and the people. The state controls the wealth and in return the wealth is shared with the people. This has created a massive welfare state with entitlements for housing, education, health care, jobs, services and subsidies. Privilege and entitlement are deeply embedded in the Qatari Regime of Truth and are beyond question.

The seemingly endless unearned oil wealth appears to make citizens passive consumers who do not contribute to Qatar's rapid growth and development which instead requires foreign and cheap labor involving a large sub-Asian work force (workers from the Philippines, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka) living and toiling in labor camps (Solidarity Center 2006). Our experience with students who are asked about possible contradictions or double standards fall quite short of any thoughtful response to justify these cultural patterns. For example, Qatari students are quick to point out inequalities and discrimination in salary and hiring practices but seldom question or acknowledge the entitlement polices that privilege Qatari citizens by granting them unearned social and economic entitlements. It is not that these students have considered the issue of entitlement but rather this is the norm. The government should "protect" and "take care" of Qatari citizens. Non-Qataris usually remain quiet for fear of the repercussions. As a student told one of the authors " You can question traditions and Qatari society, but you have to watch who you ask and how you ask." His inference was that if we asked the wrong individual or in the wrong manner, we would suffer consequences such as dismissal of employment, being labeled as a troublemaker and would not reaping the benefits available to those who remain in the bounds of the metanarrative boundaries.

Throughout our time interacting with students, teachers and administrators other social issues have been raised that may be called into question if critical thinking emerges. For example, the view of and rights of women would likely

be examined within Qatar's Independent School classrooms if critical thought develops. The current laws and conditions that affect women place restrictions on interactions between men and women and many areas of the public sphere such as workplaces and schools are largely segregated. These could be called into question when critical thinking develops and the Qatari metanarrative must respond. Although most students will limit the discourse and remain comfortable with the status quo because of fear of a loss of benefits, others will engage in resistive behaviors, employing critical thought and questioning the basic beliefs and assumptions of Qatari society. As critical thought emerges, women could begin to consider currently unquestioned traditional viewpoints of women within the frame of equality, equity, and women's rights allowing for other narratives to emerge.

In summary, when critical thought develops, conflicting narratives flourish, raising questions about lineage, nepotism, injustice, morality and human rights issues that must be addressed within a strong sense of critical thought. We understand that process of cultural change is slow but the questions remain, how welcome are the counternarratives in the current political and cultural climate and is Qatari culture open to the interrogation of these social and economic issues?

The Language of Possibility: Developing Critical Thinking

Considering a language of possibility, Giroux (1988, 1983) makes a clear distinction between a "language of critique" and a "language of possibility." Giroux points out that a common failure of radical critics is that they offer the former but not the latter. He argues that the aim of critical educators is not just to offer a critique but "to raise ambitions, desires, and real hope for those who wish to take seriously the issue of educational struggle and social justice" (Giroux, 1988, p. 177). Consequently, our critique would be incomplete if we did not provide some discussion of other possibilities of educational reform with critical thinking at the center. By no means are we arguing that critical thought cannot or is not being developed in Qatar and EFNE. There is evidence to support the development of critical thought.

For this paper, the development of a language of possibility is by no means a solution or the "how to" of developing critical thought. Furthermore, it is not a discussion or a development of an idealistic version of free democratic thinking. Rather it is a discourse "that is capable of thinking risky thoughts, that engages a project of hope and points to the horizon of not yet" (Giroux 1991, p. 52). The language of possibility "is a precondition for nourishing convictions to summon up the courage to image a different and more just world and to struggle for it" (p. 52). Our concerns are how we can point out when critical thought emerges and guide EFNE as it negotiates the boundaries of the Qatari Regime or Truth while slowly enabling the development of critical thought.

As previously mentioned, Qatari history, religious orthodoxy and cultural traditions have served as the foundations of society. As a result, the development

of any critical thought that challenges the norm must be gradual and evidence of this movement is found in the Qatari leadership. Al Missned (2006) begins to provide space for negotiation when she argues that if we want to change narratives "we must weave new threads into the discourse, stories of success, hope, freedom and empowerment. In Qatar, we are trying to do this by investing heavily in education and reviving our forgotten traditions of dialogue and openness" (p. 7).

Her words raise what Foucault termed an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges," that is "knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task" (Foucault 1980:81-82). The Regime of Truth and the Qatari metanarrative have delegitimized these "forgotten traditions" or discourses and it is these knowledges that will challenge the very regime of truth that disqualified them. It is Al Missned's dialogue and openness that provides a terrain of struggle or a place where knowledge can be negotiated and the possibility of returning to and revalidating of traditional knowledge about empowerment, dialogue and openness. The question is how we can empower individuals if we do no teach them how to engage in critical thinking and debunk and unveil the truth behind the regime of truth and metanarratives?

Our concern is that critical thinking framed within EFNE, must be negotiated within a Qatari Regime of Truth and metanarrative that claims truth beyond question. Is that a possibility? There is clearly evidence of a transformation or at least an accommodation in Qatari culture. For example, the Doha Debates[2] have opened "spaces for negotiation" have emerged where the Qatari metanarrative is challenged. Here we see glimpses of challenges to the Qatari metanarrative with topics such as: Arranged marriages should end for Muslim women; Gulf Arabs value profit over people; and Progress towards democracy has halted in the Arab world. The objectives of the debates are to change minds, re-examine conflicts and project new solutions. Although this might appear trivial to readers, this is a major step toward the beginning of the development of an educational climate that allows critical thought to flourish.

What is possible for EFNE and Qatari schools? Educational change follows cultural change. We believe that EFNE and educational reform cannot be effectively positioned within the status quo. Rather schools must move away from blind acceptance of the societal metanarratives and position themselves as counter public spheres where students can recognize and understand their voices and the voices of the oppressed within a set of narratives. It is our hope that this article and other discussions will produce counter narratives that intersect with the Qatari

2   *The Doha Debates* are a forum for free speech in Qatar addressing the region's controversial issues, providing a battleground for conflicting opinions and arguments about the major political topics of the region. While governments around the world tighten restrictions on press freedom, the Doha Debates openly dissect the vital issues of the Middle East in front of its people and on global TV. For the first time in their life, many young Arabs are having their say on key political questions – challenging politicians and experts face to face (Doha Debates, 2009).

metanarrative. Rather than avoiding them, schools should embrace the conflict, contradictions and oppositional perspectives that will surface when a strong sense of critical thinking evolves because this is the essence of critical thinking.

In an effort to slowly develop critical thought in Qatari schools, we offer several suggestions. The curriculum itself must provide students with opportunities to engage in critical thinking. Loewen (1995) suggests that teachers provide students with the ability to critically analysis text by putting five questions to work: 1) Why was a particular event written about?; 2) Whose viewpoint is presented, whose omitted and whose interests are served?; 3) Is the account believable?; 4) Is the account backed up by other sources? and 5) How is one supposed to feel about what has been presented? These questions provide opportunities for students to begin to grasp the meaning of a "frame of reference" and how this plays a role in selecting, and organizing the information that makes up the curriculum. This type of questioning and thinking can be integrated throughout the EFNE curriculum

Finally, the teachers need to begin to raise questions about the status quo and unquestioned beliefs and assumptions and introduce new knowledge for students to consider. The earlier example of the teacher introducing the Easter holiday to students is an example of a beginning. The simple raising of the existence of the Easter holiday is a significant step in the slow process of cultural and educational change.

Another example solidifies this point. While a colleague was teaching, questions developed regarding how justice is attained in the US. When the professor explained how the jury system is used and how an individual's peers determine guilt or innocence, the students were surprised and troubled that peers who are not qualified to make such an decision were given such a degree of power. Their belief was that only individuals in authority are capable of these decisions and these students believed that it is better to have one "knowledgeable" person making such evaluations. One could argue that this example supports the lack of critical thought. We would say that these students did not consider alternatives because of the powerful regime of truth and metanarrative that limits the consumption of knowledge. Furthermore, we see the simple inclusion of this knowledge as a progressive step towards becoming more critical. Students must have access to alternative discourses in order to develop critical thought. They key is that there are many opportunities for teacher and students to take steps to become critical thinkers and achieve the desires aims of EFNE. When the possibilities are considered, knowledge cannot be view as harmful but rather as a medium for critique based upon the beliefs and values of the culture.

Conclusion

Our concern is that on the one hand true freethinking, innovative ideas and critical thought will produce an educated citizenship that will make available the desired economic and cultural benefits but on the other hand, critical thinking will force

the Qatari Regime of Truth to face cultural, political and religious challenges. The key issue is that EFNE is deterministic in the sense that the model is design within a functionalist framework that arranges specific inputs expecting particular outputs such as higher academic achievement as determined by standards and test scores.

However with this understanding of critical thought and educational reform, EFNE might limit critical thinking to a weak sense that will push on the borders of the regime of truth but will be prevented from challenging particular ways of thinking or meeting the goals of educational reform. While teachers are encouraged to interrogate and question (Carr, 2008), we think it is important to raise key questions that would initiate discussion and allow for some negotiation as to what type of critical thought can be developed. First, does Qatari educational reform simply wear the label of critical thinking or is it a sincere effort to develop a strong sense of critical thought based on social justice that does not simply challenge the metanarrative but rather uses religion and critical thought as a basis for developing a fair, just and equal society?

Second, is EFNE intended to examine the important social issues or simply to develop a weak sense of critical thought that fails to question any knowledge that serves individual interests? Is the critical thinking component of EFNE for "show" or is the Qatari educational reform serious about developing students who can engage in critical thinking? From our experiences at this point in the educational reform, the social issues have been cast aside and the weak sense of critical thinking dominates. However, we realize that the development of critical thought is a long process and we are hopeful that there is a movement toward critical thought.

Finally, is the critical thought desired by the Qatari reform a type that questions only beliefs and assumptions that have already been rejected and does not desire to seek truth but instead to maintain current viewpoints? A key problem for EFNE is that Qatar has to determine how its traditions, values and beliefs can coexist with the shifting winds of cultural and educational change. Students can no longer simply consume knowledge but must move beyond managing and mastering knowledge to producing new knowledge and ways of thinking requiring critical thinking and questioning. Without a sound understanding of how change and culture interact, educational reform might lose direction suffering unwanted economic, educational and cultural consequences.

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