Impacts of Educational Macro-Policies on Developing Creativity in Iran

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Abstract

Many educational and training approaches aim at improving creativity in students. In today's world, tremendous need for individuals who can adapt to rapid changes, and also help bring rapid developments into their societies have made educational systems place more importance on creativity. However, developing creative minds may lead to criticism of the status quo, which is considered a threat by ideologue governments. Hence, to ensure their survival, ideologue governments tighten the scope for individuals' creativity by implementing uniform education systems that can be directly and strictly controlled. Violation of academic freedom is one of the methods implemented by such governments in order to narrow the space for creativity. The stifling educational environment suppresses creative and critical thinking. This paper examines how educational macro-policies affect creativity development process in Iran. The main objective of this study is to identify the factors resulted from educational macro-policies, which suppress creativity development process and critical thinking in students. The results indicate that lack of freedom in educational system of Iran leaves long-term devastating impacts on individuals' creativity development process. The research methodology is qualitative, and observation and in-depth interviews are used to collect the data. The research sample includes teachers of four schools and faculties of three universities in Tehran.

Keywords: creativity, education, academic freedom, creative thinking, critical thinking, educational environment, Iran

Introduction

Education has always aimed at increasing the community's knowledge. It has also sought to help individuals with utilization of their knowledge in their day-to-day life. In the process of its expansion and evolution, education has regularly been reformed and has become more efficient in order to comply with the society's current requirements. In the recent years, the increase in accessibility to education and educational resources has had a major impact on education and its structure. One of the main changes is that education is no longer seeking for the mere transferring of knowledge. Instead, educational systems are trying to find the best ways of developing creativity in individuals. In other words, easy access to the various sources of knowledge has changed the main role of education from transferring knowledge to developing creativity and innovation.

Tremendous need for individuals who can adapt to rapid changes, and also help bring rapid developments into their societies have made educational systems place more importance on creativity. Moreover, creativity improves individuals' ability in developing new knowledge and gaining new achievements. It has also been realized that increasing the level of knowledge without developing creativity does not lead to contribution to the existing knowledge, but to reproducing it. Creativity can also help remove barriers to conception and recognition of the latest issues in different fields. The need for specialization in today's world is another reason for placing more importance on creativity.

However, education may play a very different role in some countries. In many societies where educational systems are under the direct and strict control of the government, especially in the countries with ideologue regimes like Iran, government uses education as means to reproduce and institutionalize the dominant ideologies (Monfared & Khayati, 2011). In fact, the ideologue regimes' efforts to strengthen and stabilize themselves lead to such an approach to education. Developing creative minds may lead to criticism of the status quo, which is considered a threat by ideologue governments. Hence, to ensure their survival, ideologue governments tighten the scope for individuals' creativity by implementing uniform education systems that can be directly and strictly controlled. In fact, the implementation of the methods and techniques that help improve creativity in the educational system is not only prevented but also considered a threat and a barrier to the institutionalization of the ideological values.

This paper studies how educational macro-policies negatively influence creativity development process in Iran. The main objective of this study is to identify the factors resulted from educational macro-policies, which suppress creativity development process and critical thinking in students.

Literature review

Creativity is probably one of the most studied topics of the last twenty years (Pisanu & Menapace, 2014). However, most of the research studies on the lack of creativity have targeted the educational methods and structures, and attempts have been made to suggest different mechanisms and methods of teaching and developing creativity as a solution. Hence, the fact that some systems do not implement these methods

purposely and prevent developing creativity systematically has been ignored in the relevant studies.

In the present study, a wide search for publications on the topics related to creativity has been conducted. As Pisanu and Menapace (2014) argued, the study of creativity can be put in four theoretical dimensions that are: 1- organizational structures, 2- individual characteristics, 3- training methods and pedagogical practices, and 4- training content. Many studies have been done in all these dimensions and many methods and techniques to help develop creativity have been recommended. However, the literature review shows that how and why some obstacles are deliberately placed in the way of developing creativity have not been studied.

The influence of the Islamic Revolution on education in Iran

Education has gone under dramatic changes since the Islamic Revolution (1979) in Iran. Educational system was the first target of the fundamentalists who believed that it had to change totally and thoroughly. In Iran, educational institutions are under direct government administration. Government has significant control over the education system.

The Cultural Revolution (1980–1987) that followed the Islamic Revolution (1979) in Iran, was aimed at purging academia of Western and non-Islamic influences. Directed by the Cultural Revolutionary Headquarters and later by the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, the revolution initially closed universities for three years in 1980 to 1983, and, after reopening, banned many books and purged thousands of students and faculties. More than 40% of university professors were expelled from Iran's academic institutions in a very short time (Paivandi, 2012).

The "Committee for Islamization of Universities" carried out the task by ensuring an Islamic atmosphere in all institutions. With the help of theological schools, the curricula were Islamicized, especially in the social sciences and humanities (Kamyab, 2014). Ideological and Islamic subjects were added at all levels of education. Since then, the council has been controlling the affairs of educational institutions through supervising the selection of faculty and tertiary students, controlling the formation of institutions, and in many other ways.

Training faculties and teachers who were loyal to the government was the Islamic regime's first priority. Therefore, universities were the first institutions that underwent radical changes. After the ideological policies were stabilized in higher education, the second priority i.e. primary and secondary education were targeted. Since then, the school textbooks undergo changes every year to comply with government's ideology and views.

The ideological changes were first applied to organizational structures, training methods, pedagogical practices, and training content. The next step was to ensure that the recruited teachers and faculties have the individual characteristics considered 'desirable' by the government. Thus, as a result of all these changes, creativity development was negatively influenced in all the four dimensions discussed earlier.

Statistical data indicating the outcomes of suppression of creativity

In recent years, Iran has taken wide strides in science and technology, particularly in medical and medicinal fields. According to the latest statistics released by several international scientific centers in 2013, Iran ranked 15th in the world, and 1st in the region in terms of science production (Fars News, 2013). In the same year, the number of articles by Iranian universities and research centers indexed in Scopus scale was over 39,000 (Iran Review, 2014). Iran has the world's fastest-growing scientific output, measured by the number of peer-reviewed papers published in international journals. In addition, Iran ranked first in scientific growth in the world in 2011 (Akhondzadeh, 2013).

However, the statistics show that the rate of knowledge production in Iran, in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences is not compatible with this fast scientific growth. The global statistics indicate that social sciences and humanities comprise only 1.5 percent of all Iranian scientific papers published worldwide (Aminpour & Kabiri, 2009). According to the experts, humanities and social sciences are in a sorry state in Iran. Hassan Rouhani, the new president of Iran, believes that political 'red lines' that prevent both the students and faculties from expressing their opinions candidly are the reason behind this problem (Adib, 2014).

It can be concluded that suppression of creativity in social sciences and humanities, in addition to lack of academic freedom have led to such a low knowledge production in these fields.

Research methodology

This research is a qualitative one, using in-depth interviews and the observations of the researcher- as a former faculty in Iran, for the primary data collection. The research has covered three levels of education i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary. The study covered two primary and two high schools, as well as three universities in Tehran. Fifteen teachers and faculties were purposively selected from both the sexes and the age group of 30-50 to be interviewed. Due to the stifling educational environment in Iran and lack of freedom of speech, any other type of research might affect the reliability of the findings. Hence, this research methodology was the only one found appropriate for pursuing the study.

Findings

The main findings of this research are as follows:

- The result-oriented or exam-oriented education in Iran has a negative impact on creativity. This approach makes students view education as nothing more than merely passing examinations. Result-orientation has stifled students' imagination, creativity and sense of self-qualities crucial for their ultimate success in and out of the classroom.
- Since exams are based on the material given by the educators and the textbooks, students depend highly on the teachers and the faculties. They are followers rather than participants in the educational process.

- Some boards that are assigned by the Ministry of Education and Training, and the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology design most of the exams and the questions. This is one of the ways in which government controls the pedagogy directly and strictly. The questions are based on textbooks; hence the students have to follow the information provided in these books, without using their creativity to respond to the questions in different ways or their critical thinking to analyze different issues.
- Ideological subjects like religion, and Islamic studies are taught across every grade and at all levels of education. The content of these subjects must be learnt and followed, giving students no right to ask any question that is in conflict with the beliefs, or even analyze the material. This can be considered as another barrier to students' creative and critical thinking development process.
- The boards of authors present the syllabi and the contents of education to the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution for its approval. The council checks the contents thoroughly to make sure that they comply with the Islamic ideology. In this way, the ideological values are reflected in the contents of education. It also limits teachers and faculties from bringing creative ideas to the class.
- There is a filtering process in selection and recruitment of teachers and faculties that is based on the ideological values. Those who are selected either believe in the dominating ideological values, or have to pretend it. This recruitment policy is purposely adopted to suppress academic freedom and to prevent criticism of the status quo. Teachers and faculties selected in this manner are less likely to encourage creative and critical thinking in their classes.
- In the selection process, teachers' and faculties' ideological beliefs and their loyalties to the regime are given much more credit than their scientific and academic qualifications. This may lead to recruiting candidates who lack enough knowledge for the teaching positions. It is less likely that a teacher or a faculty who does not have a vast knowledge gives enough opportunities to the students to discuss on different issues or ask different questions. This can be considered as another factor hindering creativity development among students.
- The government's efforts to ensure an Islamic atmosphere in educational institutions and to islamisize the curricula, as well as its strict control over the affairs of all institutions have resulted in an environment of fear wherein educators engage in self-censorship. To insulate themselves from charges of subversion, educators usually avoid using creative teaching methods, or even providing opportunities for the students to be creative or practice critical thinking in the class.
- Publishing research or opinion that contradict the views of the government or question government policies is banned. Besides, the research projects are often assigned to those who take the 'official line'. Hence, there is very little scope for conducting research on creative topics that usually does not fit into government's guidelines.
- Ideological values play a very important role not only in selection and recruitment, but also in performance appraisal process. As a result, to be employed and promoted, educators are directed to reproduce the dominating ideologies even if they personally do not believe in them. On the other hand,

creativity is considered as a less important factor to be assessed in teachers' and faculties' performance appraisal.

- Religious and political affiliations influence who is able to teach and research. Many educators, especially faculties, are affiliated with the government. Their presence has created an environment of intimidation for both their colleagues and students. This is also a serious obstacle to creativity development and critical thinking.

The main educational macro-policies affecting creativity

The government's macro-policies have negatively affected creativity in different ways. One of the policies has been intensifying the result-orientation approach as discussed above. The scores obtained by students are usually considered as the most valuable achievement. This is a factor demotivating students to be creative because the exam questions are only based on the textbooks. They do not see any reason for engaging in creative activities other than what is taught to them, as creativity is not assessed in the education system.

Exam-centric means a system that controls what students do and do not know (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). In general, teachers and faculties are viewed as the main provider of knowledge and information who should often be obeyed by the students. Such education that holds examinations as its core component downplays the ultimate purpose of education i.e. critical thinking.

Another policy having adverse impact on creativity is centralization of faculty recruitment under the direct and strict control of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. As it was discussed earlier, in the recruitment process candidates' religious and political affiliations, as well as their political and ideological views are more determinative than the level of their knowledge. As a result of this policy, many candidates who are not qualified enough in terms of knowledge get the opportunity to be recruited. Lack of enough knowledge causes them to avoid providing students with the opportunity to discuss about different issues other than the syllabus. It ultimately leads to creativity being hampered.

Since it was founded, the Islamic regime of Iran has been trying to give legitimacy to its actions and policies. The government tries to build an image of a modern and updated system that gives freedom of speech to the intellectuals and the scholars. To build this image, the government has created platform for research and academic publications, and tries to facilitate increase of the number of such scholarly activities. However, the political and ideological control over educational institutions tightens the scope of such activities. As mentioned before, research projects are also often assigned to those who have political or religious affiliations. In addition, there are restrictions on certain research topics, research works that contradict views of the government are banned, and government policies cannot be questioned or criticized. That is how the scope for creativity among faculties is restricted. Obviously, this prevents scholars to use their creativity in developing new ideas and contributing to the knowledge in social sciences and humanities. Most of the publications lead to reproducing, rather than producing science.

The government appoints all who occupy managerial and decision-making positions at schools and universities. This is another policy that creates an environment of fear and ultimately suppresses creativity in educational system.

In Iran, creativity has been especially suppressed in the domain of social sciences and humanities. It has always been attempted to create scientific conflicts in these fields. The ideologue regimes in general, and Islamic regime of Iran in specific, have always endeavored to hinder different alternatives in social sciences and humanities by developing and providing ideological social sciences in parallel with Western social sciences. These efforts have been made in all of the four dimensions that were discussed earlier. Among all four dimensions, organizational structures, and training methods and pedagogical practices have been more affected by these efforts. By devaluing any alternative other than what is imposed, the educational system indirectly hinders the path to creative thinking. On the other hand, by publicizing the quantity of the research and publications that are mainly reproducing the existing knowledge, the government tries to show dynamicity on the local sciences.

Conclusion

In the past, the ideologue regimes' policy was mainly concentrated on limiting access to education. However, the growth of access to educational resources and the expansion of educational interactions have made these regimes update the forms of suppression in order to comply with the recent changes. Violation of academic freedom is one of the main methods implemented by such governments in order to narrow the space for creativity. The stifling educational environment suppresses creative and critical thinking.

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