



An Analysis of Iran's Experience in Privatization of Education: A Qualitative Assessment of Non-Governmental Schools' Status with Emphasis on Indicators of European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 16 July 2020 Revised: 05 September 2020 Accepted: 14 June 2021 Online: 15 June 2021</p>	<p>Privatization of education in Iran has experienced many ups and downs. This trend has been largely influenced by theoretical debates of proponents and opponents of establishment of non-governmental schools. For this reason, few studies have evaluated situation of non-governmental schools based on models of management science. The purpose of this study was to provide an analysis of Iran's experience in the process of education privatization through a qualitative review of non-governmental schools' status with emphasis on indicators of EFQM model. To this aim, Grounded theory approach, a semi-structured interview and content analysis were of great help. Findings showed that in all nine dimensions of the EFQM model, the performance of non-governmental schools was moderate. The research findings also confirmed the effect of contextual and intervening conditions on dimensions of model. According to findings, the experience of Islamic Republic of Iran in privatizing education compared to other developing countries shows how the performance of this economic sector can be affected by conditions inside and outside the organization.</p>
<p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Non-Governmental Schools Organizational Excellence, Privatization of Education, School Performance</p>	

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1. Introduction

In the present paper, the privatization of education means establishment of Non-Governmental schools (NGS) by the private sector in Iran. According to this definition, two points should be noted: First, establishment of NGS has a history equal to or even more than public schools (Ghasemi Pouya, 2004). Second, the expansion of modern educational system in Iran - as one of achievements of new civilization - has been done mainly by the government (Jafari, 2010). However, during the last four decades, the privatization of education has been a slow but progressive process in terms of number of schools, students and teachers (Omidi, 2019). For example, in the 1980s, most politicians, economists, and educational planners opposed establishment of NGS (Alavi Tabar, 1990; Razzaqi, 1997). After end of the Iran-Iraq war and start of new decade, the Iran's government, under influence of economic pressures and lack of budget, decided to allow the private sector to act in the field of education (Sarraf Ismaili, 2004). Of course, in practice, the government had to help founders and investors by providing low-interest loans, cheap land and educational facilities (Masri, 2008). Thus, over the last two decades, the process of establishing NGS has grown slowly but steadily. At present, these schools cover about 12% of all schools in Iran - with a student population of more than one million (Zaynevand, 2018).

What can be seen in this historical process is existence of permanent supporters and opponents for privatization of education in Iran. In fact, it seems that the majority of parents and teachers, a large number of specialists in educational sciences and humanities, many politicians in government organizations and majority of journalists do not agree with privatization of education. These people have several reasons for their opposition, the most important of which can be considered the reduction of "educational justice" (Hashemian, Zandian & Aghamohammadi, 2015). On the contrary, supporters of privatization of education believe that the root causes of injustice should be sought outside the educational system. They also mention the benefits of privatization (Ansari, 2005). However, this difference of opinion has led different provinces in Iran to adopt different policies regarding the privatization of education during the last four decades. These policies indicate a move towards "full governmentalization" on the one hand and "accelerated commercialization" on the other, which means that some provinces want to accelerate privatization process and some have tried to stop it (Zarghami, 2014).

But what has happened in practice? There are two answers to this question. The first answer emphasizes that Iranian political system has legally accepted privatization of education in order to reduce the role of government (Ministry of Education, 2020). In fact, Article 44 of the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran emphasizes reduction of government's role and transfer of many economical activities - including education - to the private sector. The second answer is that despite the adoption of laws supporting privatization, in practice, government has the main role and real privatization has not occurred in many economic areas (Dini Turkmani, 2019). One of the reasons of opponents for privatization of education is lack of clear mechanisms for determining performance of NGS. In fact, both proponents and opponents rely heavily on theoretical arguments, ideological beliefs and attitudes to substantiate their views. Therefore, there is less scientific research that has evaluated NGS' performance using scientific theories and findings. Based on this assumption, the present researchers tried to examine the situation of NGS using EFQM model and based on a qualitative evaluation.

2. Research Background

The research background can be divided into two aspects: First, the review of previous research on evaluation of NGS' performance. Most of these studies have examined NGS' performance from the viewpoint of students, parents, or teachers and have not used any models of management science (Ghaffari & Shirvani, 2017; Habibi & Lotfi Damsaz, 2014; Heidari Charoudeh, 1996; Jahanian & Baladinejad, 2012; Javadi, 2006; Nazari, Vaziri & Adli, 2013; Pouyan, 1997; Rabiee & Salehi, 2007; Sabeti, 2007;). Second, the review of previous research on the use of European Foundation for Quality Management model (EFQM) in various organizations. This section refers to these researches in more detail:

Evaluating performance of any organization and identifying areas for improvement – and to survive in an increasingly competitive environment– requires a coherent and well-known model. In fact, organizations choose different methods and resources to evaluate performance according to their goals and missions. Among existing models, the EFQM model is theoretically well known to human resource professionals, management as well as those involved in organizations (Ahmada, Jankala & Jankalova, 2016; Rusk-Ziroka & Rozzak, 2019). This model provides, on the one hand, a framework for performance appraisal and, on the other hand, a practice guide for finding the strengths and areas for improvement. EFQM enables the identification of experiences and creates effective ways of transmitting them (Jagger & Matthias, 2016). A look at the core concepts of EFQM

shows that the most key business concepts have been considered. This model is based on nine key concepts of leadership, policy and strategy, human resources, partnership and resources, processes, employee outcomes, customer outcomes, community outcomes and key performance outcomes (Müller, 2001). Contrary to the popular belief, the elements of model can be used as qualitative indicators to exchange experiences inside and outside the organization (Iqbal, 2007). However, here are some findings of quantitative research related to the model:

So far, this model has been used to evaluate various organizations, which in the field of educational organizations can be found in the research of Osseo-Asare & Longbottom (2002), Hides, Davis & Jackson (2004), Kalou-Mora, Lille & Roldan (2006), Santos & Eyebrow (2019) and Vikdal, Flota & Nenadel (2020). Kahlo-Mora, Domínguez-CC & Criado (2018) showed that this model provides a valid framework for analyzing factors affecting human and social resources. Taghipour Zahir, Taheri & Jafari (2019) through examining the main components of school performance evaluation showed that all components are significant. Shams, Ghahramani, Maarefvand & Zangane (2014) in a study analyzing the performance of one of Iranian universities found that the criterion of "community outcomes" had the highest rank. Khajeei and Nazemi (2012) have studied the effectiveness of the EFQM model in evaluating the performance of Non-governmental middle and high schools from the perspective of principals and teachers. The findings indicate that EFQM can be used in evaluating school performance the same as in industrial organizations. NGS, due to the importance of customer satisfaction in all organizational processes, have to achieve a competitive advantage and maintain it in various fields.

3. Research Method

The method of the present research is qualitative - a Grounded theory. The reason behind the use of this method was to achieve a deep and rich description of the participants' experiences, attitudes and perceptions about the situation of NGS based on the nine indicators of the EFQM organizational excellence model. The statistical population of the study included all staff of NGS offices in 19 educational districts of Tehran who had more than 4 years of experience. The participants of the current study were selected through Purposive Sampling Method based on the principle of theoretical saturation. Semi-structured interview method was used to collect data. The interview consisted of five open-ended questions that were designed according to nine indicators of the EFQM organizational excellence model. The average duration of each interview was 67 minutes. The interviews also continued until the researchers achieved the repetition of the respondents'

opinions (theoretical saturation). The method of analysis used in the present study is systematic method of Strauss and Corbin (1990). In this method, after conducting and recording each interview, the researchers take notes and perform the analysis and coding process after each interview. In this way, accessibility to fresh, clear and comprehensive information is possible. The systematic analysis method emphasizes data analysis through open coding, axial coding and selective coding to make them easier to interpret. The following measures were also performed according to Creswell's (2005) criteria:

- Comparison by members: Five interviewers reviewed the first phase of analysis process and the categories obtained, and their views were applied to the central coding paradigm
- Peer review: Peer professors reviewed the coding paradigm and their views were used in model development. The research proposals were returned to 5 participants and their opinions were applied in presenting the research coding.

4. Findings

As stated in the previous section, main question of present study was how the current situation of NGS in the city of Tehran can be explained according to indicators of the EFQM organizational excellence model. The following five main questions were asked in all interviews: First, what are the causal conditions governing NGS (according to the EFQM model indicators); Second, what is the situation and context of schools? Third, what are the intervening conditions; Fourth, what phenomena, strategies and consequences are created, and Fifth, what is the core category or factor that reflects the current situation of NGS' performance? Findings from the interviews show that in the stage of open coding 25 basic concepts, in the axial coding, 6 major categories and in the selective coding stage, 1 core concept were extracted. In the following sections, first, a brief overview of number of schools in Tehran is provided, and then the nine main categories are explained with reference to 25 basic concepts and explanation of "core concept" formation:

Current Status

According to the official statistics of the Tehran Education Department, there are currently 3998 schools in this city, of which 1827 are non-governmental schools. Also, the total number of NGS teachers and staff is 29746 (Tehran City Education Organization, 2019).

Causal Conditions

Causal conditions in the present study are nine components of EFQM that are used to determine level of organizations performance. In order to determine the causal conditions prevailing in NGS, the status of nine indicators can be determined in order. Data analysis shows that the interviewees first indicate what should be in NGS - given the components of the EFQM model - and then identify the shortcomings of schools in each component:

1. Leadership: According to the analysis of interviews, the first task of NGS leaders (founder or principal) can be considered to determine the mission and professional vision of the school in a clear and unambiguous manner. In order to achieve this indicator, leaders must clearly address issues such as direct participation in the development and improvement of management methods, communication with students' parents, continuous monitoring and evaluation of teaching staff activities, and defining responsibilities and duties of each employee. The analysis of interviews with experts from NGS office shows that the majority of the founders and principals of schools pay a lot of attention to the above-mentioned issues. Of course, it should be noted that the leadership style of many founders and managers is mostly authoritarian and controlling.
2. Policy and strategy: Identify the needs of staff, students and teachers in a systematic manner, develop an appropriate and effective strategy to support school's vision and mission, analyze school performance to identify potential and actual capabilities, updating strategies according to environmental changes, familiarizing stakeholders (parents, staff, teachers, etc.) with strategies and more attention to the priorities and needs of all people to determine strategy are most important issues that are considered by NGS experts. Analysis of interviews also revealed that for many founders, economic goals are the most important factor in determining school strategy. In addition, the lack or little opportunity for staff participation to determine strategies can be considered as one weakness of these schools.
3. Human Resources: A review of data and open coding shows that experts in analyzing the situation of NGS - according to the human resources index - refer to issues such as creating opportunities and developing professional skills of educational staff in cooperation with district administration, understanding needs and job expectations of staff and teachers, design and

implementation of training courses, creating a system for collecting and maintaining information of school manpower, creating opportunities to exchange experience with colleagues inside and outside the school, creating a system of continuous performance appraisal and efforts to maintain talented staffs. Also, the majority of experts believe that founders try to hire teachers who have a good reputation for teaching. At the same time, many schools do not have a coherent and specific program for manpower training.

4. Participation and resources: According to experts of NGS, identification, evaluation and selection of school equipment according to the ergonomic issue, development and improvement of processes for attracting financial resources, saving assets and energy consumption, identifying and managing risks to gain trust of main stakeholders, and provision of space and educational facilities (such as laboratories and educational equipment, etc.) in accordance with the needs of students are the most important issues that should be considered by the founders. Also, interviews' analysis reveals that there is a major difference between NGS in different educational districts of Tehran in terms of participation and resources index, so that the situation is very good in rich districts, while many NGS in poor areas do not have adequate resources.
5. Processes: According to the interviewees, in the process index, the school should benefit from issues such as using modern teaching methods, flexible organizational space, and variety in the ways of doing work. While in many NGS, teaching methods are traditional, school climate is based on bureaucracy and less creativity, and job tasks are performed repetitively and uniformly.
6. Staff results: Creating opportunities to exchange experiences with teachers inside and outside the school, establishing a motivational system for teachers, and increasing teachers' satisfaction with the provision of services and welfare facilities are some of the issues related to staff results. While many experts from NGS believe that the staff complains about issues such as low salaries, high workload, lack of job promotion and uncertainty in the employment situation.
7. Customer results: The main customers of NGS are students and parents. Customer results index includes the students' sports, cultural and social achievements, reduction of academic failure, promoting students' mental health and life skills. Also, creating a positive attitude in parents

about school activities, parents' satisfaction with the quality of educational services, and creating a system of reporting student performance to parents are related to customer results index. The analysis of the interviews highlighted that the level of parents and students' satisfaction about NGS' performance is in a good level in most cases, although they complain about enrollment fees.

8. Society outcomes: The majority of interviewees acknowledged that there is no specific criterion for evaluating society outcomes. However, many experts agree that the privatization of education has become a commonplace in society. At the same time, there are many positive and negative comments about the performance of NGS that make judging difficult.

9. Performance Results: In analyzing the performance results of NGS, experts consider the sub-factors such as number of certificates received by school from Department of Education at different regional, provincial and national levels; achieving significant results compared to peer schools; excellent ranks by students in various competitions; assessing social effects and consequences of school (such as educating active citizens and reputation) and organizational health of school (in terms of finances, honesty in organizational communication and with customers). Also, their evaluation shows the differences among schools in different districts of Tehran.

It is natural that the qualitative evaluation of NGS' performance indicates that there is a gap between current and desired situations in terms of different EFQM indicators. The analysis of interviews reveals that this gap is not only affected by causal conditions. Therefore, we must pay attention to the role and effect of contextual conditions, interventional conditions, and a phenomenon that arises from the existence of contextual and interventional conditions, as well as strategies and consequences (Table 1). In the following sections, these cases are explained respectively.

Table 1: Results of the three steps of open, axial and selective coding

Concepts	Categories	Core Concept	
Leadership Policy and strategy human resources Participation and resources processes Staff results Customer result The result of society Key performance results	causal conditions	Medium performance	
Internal factors such as reduction of fertility rate External factors such as economic conditions	contextual conditions		
Cabinet Parliament Supreme Council of Education Ministry of Education Province & Distracts Departments of Education	interventional conditions		
Board of Trustees schools Governmental & Public Schools	Phenomenon: emergence of competitors		
Resistance Submission	Reactive strategies		
Reduce the number of students Increased frustration for investment Pressure on parents to pay tuition Decreased educational quality Reduce teachers' working hours	consequences		
Number of concepts and categories: 25	6		1

Contextual Conditions

Contextual conditions refer to the impact of factors that sometimes occur due to various demographic variables whose effects cannot be eliminated in the short time; i.e. impact of population growth rates, student's gender, level of education and long-standing features of economic system – such as cyclical inflation and recession. Analysis of research data highlighted that NGS experts have mainly pointed to impact of two factors: declining birth rates and unfavorable economic conditions. On the one hand, during the last decade, the growth rate of Iran's population has been steadily declining, so that the student population has decreased from 17 million in the 1990s to about 15 million at present (Mohammadzadeh, 2019). On the other hand, Iran's economic situation - especially under influence of economic sanction of the United States - has led to inflation/stagnation cycle and a decline in economic capacity of families to enroll their children in non-governmental schools.

Interventional Conditions

In the present study, interventional conditions indicate the impact of a set of institutions and organizations that in a natural process should accelerate economic activity of NGS, but sometimes disrupts their performance. The interviewees mentioned the role of Cabinet, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Supreme Council of Education, the Deputy of Public Participation and Non-Governmental Schools of the Ministry of Education, and the province and regional education departments. Interviewees believe that each of these five institutions has reduced the successful performance of NGS by passing various laws, monitoring ongoing activities and complex bureaucracies.

Phenomenon of Competitors' Emergence

The negative impact of causal, contextual, and interventional conditions is the emergence of competitors. These competitors are schools that, by attracting students, have reduced rate of enrollment in NGS. According to experts, the main competitors are Board of Trustees Schools and public schools. In Iran, Board of Trustees Schools are schools that enroll students at a low cost. Most public schools also do not charge parents a registration fee.

Responsive Strategies

Strategy means developing a plan to interact or respond to the effects of environmental factors in order to achieve goals of organization (Bryson, 1998). According to this definition, it can be seen from the analysis of research data that NGS use two strategies of resistance and submission to improve their performance. Resistance means resisting the negative effects of contextual and interventional conditions on NGS' performance, while surrender means accepting these effects.

Consequence

The result of resistance or surrender is called the consequence. Analysis of interviews' content shows that nowadays contextual and interventional conditions have reduced the number of students, increased frustration of private sector to invest in education, pressured parents to pay more tuition, reduced the quality of education and reduced teachers' working hours. Perceptions and interpretation of interviews which show effects of the interrelationship between components of the EFQM organizational excellence model created the core concept of "average performance" of NGS. This concept indicates that these experts do not believe that NGS were successful according to nine aspects of EFQM and their performance is at the average level (Figure 1).

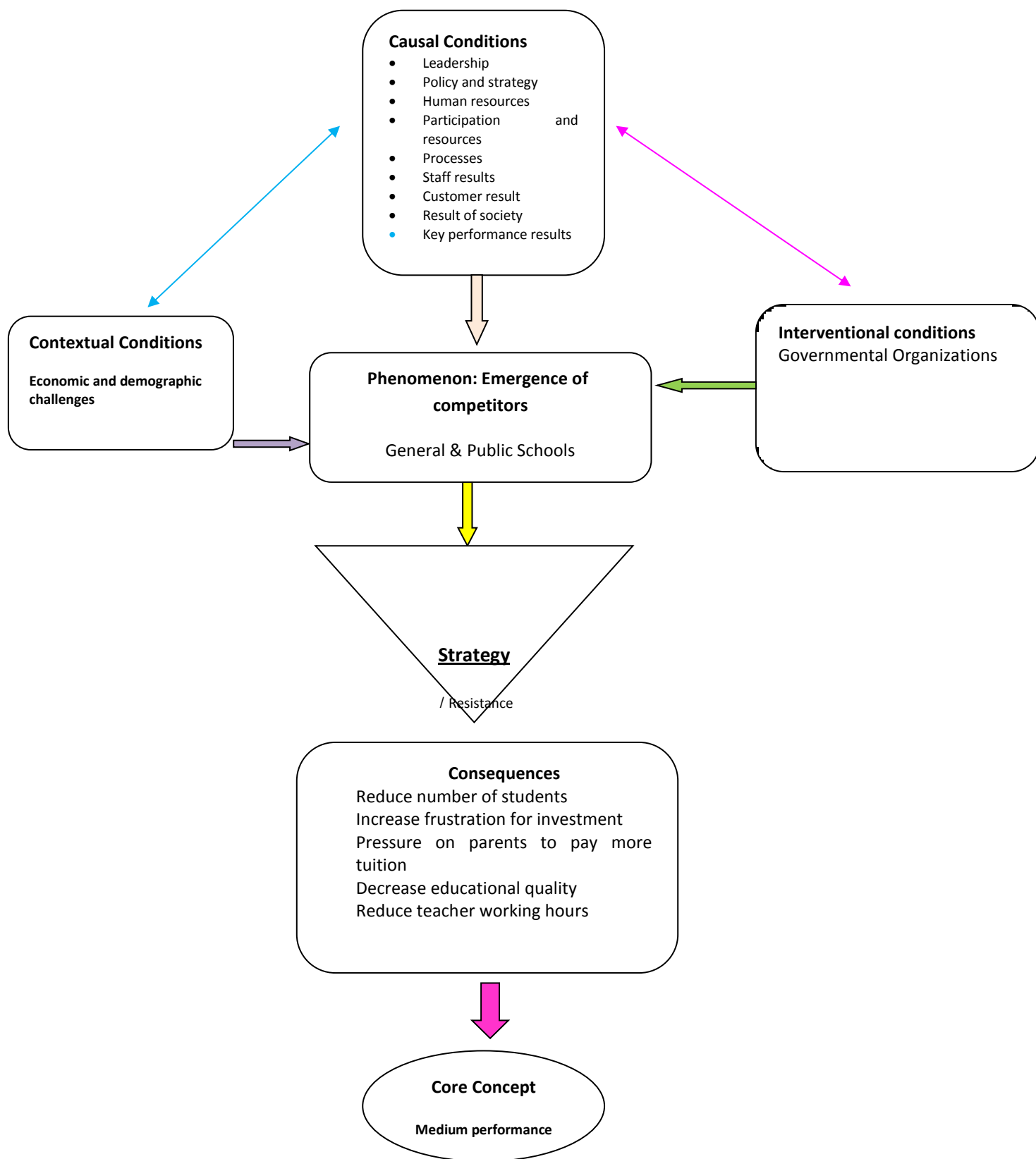


Figure 1- Analysis of Non-Governmental Schools' Performance based on EFQM model

5. Conclusion

Privatization of education in Iran, despite a history of more than a century, is still not widely accepted. One of the reasons for this failure is complexity of evaluation of NGS' performance. Analysis of data related to research background showed that most researchers have tried to assess current situation and performance of these schools by surveying students, parents or teachers - using a questionnaire. In the present study and for the first time in Iran, an attempt was made to use EFQM organizational excellence model to evaluate non-governmental schools' performance. Also, the main approach of researchers was to use EFQM model through a qualitative way - using interviews. The interviews helped the present researchers to take a fresh and different look at the performance of NGS. In addition, the selection of interviewees did not follow the usual routine of previous research. In the present study, the researchers found that the experts of Non-Governmental School Offices in educational districts of Tehran have more knowledge and experience to analyze and assess schools' performance due to their direct and continuous contact with the founders and teachers.

The research findings are more diverse than previous studies. They showed that in all nine components of the EFQM model, Non-Governmental Schools face weaknesses and shortcomings in terms of performance. Also, the research findings revealed that to assess performance of non-governmental schools, the role and impact of contextual and interventional factors, strategies and consequences on components of EFQM should be considered. The latest findings of the study highlighted that the situation of NGS is at an average level in terms of performance. Research findings can be useful for educational planners in developing countries to be more familiar with challenges of privatization of education.

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