Qatar’s educational reform past and future: challenges in teacher development

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ABSTRACT
Until the late 1990s, Qatar’s educational system used the intrinsically-nationalistic and cultural traditions of Arabic schools. The Qatari leadership and stakeholder was outdated; hence, they approached the RAND Corporation to examine and analyze the existing educational system and recommend options for building a new educational system. The RAND assessment study concluded that the country’s education system was rigid and lacked standards and international benchmarks. Consequently, this led to the reform in which a system of Independent Schools was established, new curriculum standards were set, and teacher and leadership professional development were enhanced to find the most effective systems for Qatari students to succeed along international and particularly Western benchmarks. The reform imputed by key principles of autonomy, accountability, variety and choice. Post-reform evaluation suggests that the system is still far from being what it should be. New teacher development initiatives have stressed on improving professional development for teachers through licensing and increased professional development programs. The present schooling is markedly different from what was presented in the reform. This article gives a brief historical preface of the educational system in Qatar and discusses the reform in terms of its future implications on teacher development in the K-12 educational system.

Background
Before the discovery of oil, there was no formal educational system in Qatar; teaching was mostly run by the Kuttab, known as ‘traveling educators’, who would travel from one village to another teaching language and the religious reading of the Quran. The move toward a more comprehensive form of education began with a school for boys in Doha, which opened in 1948. Government support of the school began in 1950 and expanded to other public schools. At the same time, schooling for girls was encouraged. The first public school for girls opened in 1956. The establishment of the Ministry of Education, called Wizarat Al-Maarif, occurred simultaneously, becoming one of the first ministries in Qatar (Al-Misnad, 2007).

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Since the 1950s, income from oil has enabled Qatar to provide its citizens with a number of social-welfare benefits. The early establishment of the state, the government has provided free education and health care to all Qatari citizens and allowances to widows, divorcees, orphans, and those with special needs (Al-Misnad, 2007). The wealth generated from oil led to the nation educational flagship, known as the Education City, and the establishment of the Qatar Foundation, which welcomed American and European higher education providers and created branch campuses of world renowned tier one universities.

In this article, we use a descriptive analogue-historical approach to describe Qatar’s educational reform; the approach is intended to reflect reality of the social-historical phenomena, the analogues means that it elicits from the phenomena the kinds of outcomes that the research is interested in. While this study was not a typical analogue study where we interviewed participants to make casual inferences about processes being studied (Sims, 1972), the study attempted to address the historical development in analogue approach in which we could reflect on the historical causal imperatives of the reform which started with a call for student improvement, the professional development of teachers of the Independent Schools through ingraining a standardized-based educational system and teacher professional development leading to the restructuring of the school system.

**Educational system and reforms**

Qatar experienced a number of reforms in the 1970s and 1980s. Early in its educational history, Qatar sought to eradicate illiteracy among a large nomadic community, but paid little attention to quality. There was little vision in what schools wanted to achieve, other than a basic education. After two decades of schooling expansion, the Gulf Union was to be created, which was one of the most well-known reforms. The Gulf Union initiatives planned to not only bring currencies closer together but also to unify schooling through one unified curriculum for all subjects. Later in the late 1990s with the idea of school independence brought about the establishment of scientific schools in the late had semi-independence from the Ministry of Education; specifically, they could determine their own curriculum in Mathematics and Science, use a Western curriculum, and teach in English, which became a model of change for other schools to follow (Brewer et al., 2007).

At the same time, the quality of the education system became subject to government concern and public discussion. A desire to improve the educational system was observed in light of Qatar’s leadership desire to advance its knowledge-creating capacity; by developing the educational sector (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010), young people could develop the skills needed to participate in a knowledge-based economy. This was motivated primarily by the fact that the nation’s school system was not producing high-quality outcomes in academic achievement, college attendance or success in the labor market. To identify areas of improvement, Qatar approached the RAND Corporation to analyze the existing educational system.

**The educational reform**

The new national educational system in Qatar was triggered by reports from the RAND Corporation (Brewer et al., 2007) that recommended improving the quality of teaching
to raise student achievement. RAND led the reform by conducting an initial assessment study. RAND’s analysis identified the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system and pointed to two main reform priorities: improving the education system’s basic elements through standards-based system and devising a system-changing plan to address the system’s overall inadequacies.

The major weaknesses identified by RAND were the school’s lack of vision and mission in the development of the educational system. Furthermore, the organizational structure of the school was mostly hierarchical; initiatives were generally piecemeal, with little overlap with the overall improvement. There were also no clear lines of authority and generally no clear leadership or decision-makers. Because there was missing leadership, schools reverted to higher authority and top-down decisions. The curriculum outlined by the Ministry of Education was incrementally adopted, grade by grade, all of which was done on the teacher’s own time, effort and expense. The Ministry of Education’s curriculum was not written in a way that enabled students and teachers to interact and have highly student-centered classrooms because of limited local capacity and resources. Schools were overwhelmed by the high overturn of expatriate teachers and the lack of professional development or practice (Zellman, Constant, & Goldman, 2011).

The more surprising finding was that despite a national accumulation of wealth, Qatari schools lacked basic technology to support instruction. Buildings were deteriorating, and the classrooms were small and generally had a Spartan environment. This article’s author taught students at the National Public University who had come from public schools. The students informed him of the difficult school conditions, of cramped classrooms, with a ratio of at least 40 students to one teacher and often two persons to one chair with temperatures reaching 40 degrees Celsius with gyrating ceiling fans.

Knowledge of the conditions in international schools in Qatar and international educational experiences led to a more pressing need for change. Questions arose concerning the types of schools that needed to be developed, type of curricula and instructional approaches. Other questions were raised regarding evaluations and student achievement outcomes (Brewer et al., 2007). RAND came to the following recommendations:

- A standards-based system to guide schools, curriculum, assessment and professional development;
- Three options for the governance of schools – modifying the centralized Ministry structure to make it more responsive, adopting a decentralized charter school-like system or providing vouchers for families to enroll their children in private schools. The leadership opted for the second, but with a longer-term preference for the third (Zellman et al., 2009);
- A detailed plan for implementing the reforms, including the formation of three new institutions – The Supreme Education Council (SEC), the Education Institute and the Evaluation Institute – in place of the Ministry of Education.

**Changes within the educational system**

One of the most notable and drastic changes of the educational system in Qatar stemmed from RAND’s recommendations and options for the schooling system. There were a
number of possible school designs proposed. In 2002, RAND presented three main options for Qatar. The first option was for the government to independently fund the operated schools with limited government control. The second option was a voucher system in which parents could choose to use coupons to place students in private schools. The third option was a modified centralized system in which schools remained under the oversight of the government, but with modifications to governance. The leadership in Qatar selected the first option, the Independent School System, which many thought to be ambitious and particularly unusual for the Middle East where the educational system, traditionally run by the public sector, then completely turned over to the private sector (Brewer et al., 2007). Nevertheless, with the desire to improve foreign relationships, it was believed to be efficient and progressive. The implementation began in 2002, and the first schools were converted in 2004. The decision was to advance this model by encouraging private local and international organizations to operate and manage the newly formed Independent Schools. Four rationalized frames or dimensions were designed by RAND and national authorities (a national steering committee). These were recognized to be the ‘driving frames’ behind the Independent School system. The first of the four frames was autonomy, which allowed schools to make decisions about hiring teaching staff, curriculum, professional development, pedagogy and internal policies. Second was variety, which concerned what schools should offer in terms of their programs or curriculum. The intention was to have a great variety of programs that schools could offer. Third was choice, which was conceptualized as parents being able to choose the school in which their child could enroll based on the variety of programs a school could offer, and fourth was accountability, in which schools would be accountable for student outcomes. RAND recommended a standards-based system in which curriculum standards would be implemented at every level of the school with a corresponding set of national assessments at each grade level. The curriculum standards initially covered four subject areas (Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science) and then were followed by other subject areas. In addition to the curriculum standards, there were also performance standards in which the assessments were developed in parallel to the curriculum standards. The curricula were linked to both international standards and national assessments.

**New educational structure**

In addition to the proposed changes to the school system, RAND introduced a new organizational structure to oversee the school system, as determined when the new school structure was created. The proposed new system eventually led to the development of a parallel structure to the Ministry of Education, known as the SEC, which was operationally and structurally different than the Ministry of Education. Three main organizations were under the umbrella of the SEC; the Education Institute and the Evaluation Institute were the first to be established, followed by the Higher Education Institute. It was clear that the new structure would work in parallel with the Ministry of Education with direct administrative connections to the newly formed Independent Schools.

Following the establishment of the Independent Schools, the most significant change that occurred in the schools was the development of the curriculum standards in four subject areas: Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science. As part of promoting school
autonomy, schools were given the opportunity to develop their own curriculum that aligned to the standards. Many teachers were given the role to not only teach in the program but also to develop their own curriculum. Many teachers were overwhelmed by this process, and much of the curriculum, that is, the content, was not up to par with the quality needed to transform the educational spectrum. Teachers did not have the proficiency, nor the knowledge and skills to develop curriculum material. The principles of autonomy, translated into teachers making their own choices for the curriculum, which also served as a way to create an educational program accountable to the newly formed SEC.

The Education Institute of the SEC was responsible for selecting the management companies to run schools, developing the curriculum and performance standards and starting the process of providing professional development for school staff. The Evaluation Institute developed the assessments used to monitor students and school performance. While the Ministry of Education had no direct control over the new established school, it retained control over the Ministry Schools until they were transformed into Independent Schools. The two school systems existed in parallel until 2010, when all of the Ministry Schools were transformed into Independent Schools. However, to this day, the Ministry of Education and higher education has no executive powers over the Independent Schools.

In terms of governance, schools transformed into Independent Schools had a principal, that is, a director, known in legal terms as an ‘operator’. Along with the operator, there was usually an academic vice principal as well as an administrative and financial vice principal. Each school had subject coordinators, teachers and teaching assistants.

In the new system, teachers were able to use the standards, new curriculum and students were assessed through national exams developed by the new formed Evaluation Institute of the SEC. A decision was made by the government executive powers to also require the Evaluation Institute to assess private English schools, government schools and private Arabic schools. This was done to find the differences in performance between the different schools using unique assessments designed by the Evaluation Institute. The Evaluation Institute in 2004 developed the first set of assessments based on the four subject areas in which the curriculum standards existed: Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science. The assessments were performed prior to the establishment of the Independent Schools and the standards. Later, the assessments were aligned with the curriculum standards (Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science) for students in grades 1 through 12. In addition to the assessment system, the Evaluation Institute collected data on the school in general, the parents, students, teachers and principals.

With the implemented changes in the SEC in the creation of three institutes: Education Institute, Evaluation Institute and later Higher Education Institute, a more recent development has been the restructuring of the SEC and the establishment of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in 2016 which moved to establish a unified structure of the educational system and reorganized the Supreme Education into a ministry.

**Teacher professional development**

With greater need to improve the educational quality of schools, one challenge faced by SEC was to improve and identify the needs for teacher professional growth. RAND has earlier
identified teacher professional development as a major weakness schools needed to move forward with the curriculum and assessment practices. Using evidence-based data and research the SEC and RAND were aware that teacher quality had been shown to be the most important factor in student achievement in schools that had improved student achievement (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). The latter researchers suggested that greater work was needed to expand and improve the quality of education in schools; a sensible place to begin was to provide continuous teacher-improvement through professional development. There were a plethora of studies published with the intention of improving the quality of professional development within schools. Darling-Hammond (1997) perennially stressed on the role of the teacher and teacher knowledge on student learning, stating that if successful teaching was going to take place, teachers needed to be continuously supported by school leadership as professionals in instruction and ways of learning. One of Qatar’s National Development Strategy 2011–2016 provisions underlined different implementation challenges in coordinating the education and training of providers in a way that was comprehensive and multidimensional. One of these challenges was aligning the education and training of educational providers with the labor force needs; in response, the quality, efficiency, inclusiveness and portability across the entire education and training systems was addressed (SEC, 2008).

Early in the reform, one of the most significant challenges faced by teachers was the change in the instructional language from Arabic to English for Mathematics and Science. Many teachers in Qatar who had previously taught in Ministry of Education schools, used Arabic, were not qualified for employment in the new Independent Schools that were now using English. The Independent Schools started to push to create a multi-national teaching workforce. In the context of the national educational reform, this made the provision of quality professional development and fulfillment of teacher’s work demands more complex because the teaching workforce was so diverse.

In early 2000, the need for teacher training created opportunities for many educational companies, also known as the School Support Organization. They flocked to Qatar to provide support to the newly formed schools for in-service development, and the SEC contracted a large number of organizations, such as Moziaca from the U.S. and Cognition from New Zealand.

In the first year of operation, the SSOs supported schools using teaching methods and professional development to address the new standards. Mostly, these companies helped schools to implement the standards. The goal was to reach the point where teachers could read the standards, group them for the appropriate unit or lesson, identify the appropriateness of the standard for grade and age level, write objectives aligned with the standards according to content, identify the cognitive level related to the objectives (viz., Bloom’s objectives), develop the knowledge and skills targeted in the objectives and assess the content corresponding to the curriculum (Nasser et al., 2014). In addition, the SSOs prepared teachers to start new teaching methods that were student-centered. They worked with leaders and with many teacher support programs, such as strategic planning and curriculum development.

To initiate the reform process, two primary and significant initiatives had to be prepared: the standards and teacher training program. Initially, a teacher training program was developed by the Education Institute in collaboration with RAND to prepare teachers of the first-cohort schools. The Teacher Preparation and Certification Program was
implemented by CfBT (an education provider serving learners worldwide) jointly with the University of Southampton worked with teaches in Qatar to familiarize them with a variety of teaching strategies and methods in planning and assessment to teach them how to incorporate learning technologies in the classroom and to enhance their content knowledge. Policy-makers felt that the improvement in student outcomes was due to the teachers’ continuous improvement which led to a number of institutions whether public and private support to rush and establish various programs in teacher training.

After the SEC was fully developed, schools were oriented with the standards, the SEC developed a framework for all Independent Schools that was published in 2012–2013. The SEC framework described an operational plan for professional development in Independent Schools which consisted of four parts:

1. The professional development plans and activities conducted inside the school and approved by the School’s Professional Development Office.
2. The training programs provided by the SEC focused on curriculum standards training and the leadership programs.
3. Attest and promote offered by the Education Institute of SEC and the University of Qatar.
4. Online training courses and external conferences for employers who achieve high performance standards (SEC, 2012)

These plans allowed the Independent Schools to be more independent on outside institutions and started to allow the schools to seek external expertise and community professional support for teacher training whether in the use of the standards or new pedagogies.

The new Independent Schools relied on classroom leaders who possessed a deep understanding of the subject matter; they employed proven techniques in contemporary teaching and thus motivated students to perform to their highest potential. Each Independent School had the freedom to hire its own staff, support independent school teachers, professional growth and development. In parallel, the Education Institute of the SEC offered a variety of teacher training programs. The program topics included the new curriculum standards, preparing students for annual assessments, and student-centered approaches. There were also programs designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of experienced teachers, who could then be invited to develop coursework, lead training, mentor new teachers and become master teachers.

There were also efforts undertaken by the SSOs to build capacity to train coordinators and teachers from the Independent Schools through support from international organizations based on the train-the-trainers model. By training teachers, they were thus able to train other teachers, reaching the largest number of staff. This context and situation allowed trainees to become experts, who then trained the new trainees. The trainers were prepared through an intensive and long-term program to train other coordinators and teachers in how to use the curriculum standards documents in planning and teaching. Later, many school leaders and subject coordinators were seconded to the newly transformed Independent Schools for the whole academic year to support the newly formed Independent Schools.
In December 2010, educationalists from the State of Texas Education Research Center at Texas A&M University, along with faculty members from the College of Education at Qatar University, carried out a national study to understand specifically needs of the profession. A group from both institutions visited 29 Qatar Independent Schools. Their findings suggested that Qatar Independent School teachers had attended many professional development workshops, yet significant professional development needs remained. Throughout the data collection process, researchers asked questions related to the professional development needs of school leaders; however, the report focused on the needs of teachers. The following summary and implications are presented as two domains: (a) professional development topics and (b) the professional development context and design (see Palmer et al., 2016). Researchers summarized the important findings collected from the teachers regarding the context and design of professional development. Specifically, that the professional development should: (a) be practical, (b) be limited in theory and take place during the normal school day at their own school, (c) include workshops and (d) include exchanging experiences with other schools.

The College of Education at Qatar University (the only national public university) played a key role in providing long-term professional development programs, especially in the establishment of the Center of Education Development and Research, which later metamorphosed into the Center of Educator Development. Both centers provided short-term sessions as well as long-term, extended programs, consultancy and school-based support programs (National Center of Educator Development [NCED], 2012). Alternative long-term programs were implemented focusing on mentorship, coaching and shadowing techniques.

In addition to the practice-based initiative created by the College of Education, the college had to undergo its own reform because it was part of the country’s National Public University. Before 2000, the College of Education offered a bachelor’s degree in general education, where most Qatari teachers were trained. In response to the reform, the College of Education programs were closed in 2004, compounded with that was a shortage of teachers. The number of teachers became increasingly sparse because of the educational reform movement that started in the same year. Since 2008, degrees became more specialized to the area of study. Students would take content courses in an area of specialty, such as Mathematics, English or the Sciences, and would simultaneously take pedagogical courses outside the college. Moreover, a postgraduate teacher training program was offered as part of the Qatar education reform (Brewer et al., 2007).

The reform drove a large number of Qatari teachers out of teaching because of the increased work demands, such as extensive after-school professional development requirements, but later re-opened restructuring the pedagogical courses by separating them from content subject courses. Currently, the college enjoys a large number of students specializing in the different strands of curriculum and instruction at primary and secondary schools. The College is the main feeder of teachers to the Independent Schools in Qatar as it is the only College of Education and/or department that train future teachers.

**Teacher quality and certification**

A major part of the reform was an effort to equip qualified professional staff, teachers and school leaders with the right skills to perform and compete in the twenty-first century
workplace. The quality of teachers was stressed to be the most important element to bring students to a level of educational attainment, and teacher need to go through continuous professional development activities to achieve high-quality teaching and learning environment. In addition, it was thought that a repertoire of activities in mentoring and coaching exist as part of the everyday life of the teacher so that teachers would be exposed to a variety of practices that they would consciously reflect upon to improve practice (Holton & Baldwin, 2000).

The Evaluation Institute of the SEC launched the National Professional Standards for School Teachers and Leaders in August 2006, which provided a benchmark for teaching excellence. It also developed the Qatar Office of Registration, Licensing and Accreditation (QORLA) for the Independent School staff. In 2008, the QORLA was established at the Evaluation Institute to issue provisional and full licenses for teachers and school leaders according to the National Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders. The New Zealand Cognition Education group helped the Evaluation Institute establish and implement the country's first-ever policy to improve teacher and school leader quality through a rigorous system of registration and licensing (http://www.cognition.co.nz/index.php/about-us/about-us-overview).

With the establishment of QORLA in 2007 came the development of Qatar Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders (QNPSTL). The QNPSTL outlined the skills and knowledge to be acquired at Independent Schools. The objective was to help Independent School leaders and teachers attain the professional skills that were necessary to manage and coordinate school affairs. It was expected that by the end of 2010, all Independent School teachers from the first four cohort schools (schools that were transformed to Independent Schools) would be licensed teachers. This did not materialize as there were many issues regarding the assessments of the portfolios as well as the standards.

The QNPSTL described the abilities and knowledge necessary for teachers and leaders, the application and understanding of that knowledge as well as the quality of teaching and leadership practice in Independent Schools. The QNPSTL included 12 standards for teachers and 7 standards for school leaders that they had to demonstrate competence in. The QNPSTL explained what knowledge, skills and dispositions were required from teachers and school leaders. Education Queensland International of Australia, in collaboration with the SEC, drafted the standards that were applied in the 2007–2008 academic year. EQI met with stakeholders in the Independent Schools and discussed issues with different institutions, universities, SSOs and officials involved in the Diploma of Primary Education Program offered by Qatar University and Texas A&M (which at that time had developed the primary education diploma at Qatar University) (SEC, 2008). The Evaluation Institute of SEC started to require teachers and leaders in all of the Independent Schools in Qatar to obtain professional licenses that allowed them to teach and lead schools. The process of applying for and being awarded a professional license was known as registration.

The purpose of certification through registering school leaders and teachers was to create what is perceived as an objective system to monitor and assess the quality of school and classroom leaders. The program provides leaders and teachers with licenses and accreditation in accordance with the worldwide practices benchmarked against teacher and professional standards. It was another way to say that Qatar’s educational reform effort supported the country’s ambitious social development strategies. A
provisional license provided evidence that the teacher or school leader met the minimum personnel requirements for being employed in an Independent School. In 2009, nearly 2000 teachers and 800 leaders from the 85 Independent Schools had received provisional licenses. QORLA expected that all of the teachers in the Independent Schools would receive a provisional license by the end of 2020 and that those seeking provisional licenses would reach 3500 by the end of 2009. Beginning in September 2009, all teachers and leaders were required to apply online for all professional licenses.

Once teachers and leaders were provisionally licensed, they were required to commence or continue working towards a full license. The QORLA envisaged three levels of licensure for those with teaching and learning classroom responsibilities: entry level, proficient level and advanced skills level licenses. One level for education support professionals; two license levels were created for leaders, namely, a middle manager and senior manager level and three levels (entry, proficient and advanced skills) for teachers. To receive a full license, teachers and leaders had to complete an additional number of steps in the registration process. In May 2009, QORLA introduced portfolios as a tool for teachers and school leaders to demonstrate their competence in the QNPSTL and be granted a license. An in-school attestation committee and the QORLA Principal–Operator attestation panel were responsible for assessing the level of the full license to be awarded to a teacher or school leader.

With advice and support from Cognition Education of New Zealand, the SEC established an office within the Evaluation Institute to facilitate the introduction and on-going development of the Qatar registration and licensing policy framework. The Professional Licensing Office (PLO) replaced QORLA and expanded their scope to all school personnel responsible for awarding the certification.

In compiling a portfolio, intensive one-to-one direct contact mentoring and tutoring was meant to occur between teachers, teacher support professionals, schools leaders and coaches. In the context of the licensure process, a coach provides feedback and helps the applicant collect and annotate the appropriate evidence of best practices that matches the standards to complete the portfolio requirements.

Each piece of evidence in the portfolio must be linked to one or more of the standards defined in the Qatar National Professional Standards. The annotation associated with the evidence must express how and why the selected evidence meets the given standard. In addition, teacher or leader reflections to the attestation committee generally reviewed and evaluated their work and linked it directly to the QNPSTL. They drew on the connection between the national standards and classroom practices with the goal of demonstrating that their pedagogical practices met the national standards.

The College of Education, Qatar University in agreement with the PLO had trained 20 representatives in Qatar’s wider education sector, including principals, vice principals and University and College representatives, who have trained others to approve teacher principal and vice principal portfolios. The committee attests that each school leader portfolio must consist of a minimum of five members who represent the diversity of the curriculum and the school workforce. The committee authenticating each portfolio must have a minimum of 6 representatives from those trained. Training has also taken place for 10–12 individuals representing the diversity of the curriculum and the school workforce to approve portfolios and train other teachers on the QNPSTL.
More recently with the restructuring of the SEC into the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, The Licensing process has experienced some significant changes to the process and licensing. Now, teacher licensing is divided into three levels: Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. The entry level licensing in the previous professional licensing system is currently equivalent to level 1. While ‘Proficient’ known in the previous professional licensing is equivalent to level 2 and ‘Advanced’ is equivalent to Level 3. Having a bachelor degree, all teachers must go through the Ministries training or have received qualification from the College of Education at Qatar University to enter in the Level 1 licensing, others with experience must have three years in schools as teachers with an assessment of ‘very good’ rating in Qatari schools, while this evaluations differs between Qatari and non-Qatari teachers.

While previously, there was stress on the portfolio, there is now direction toward testing in terms of competencies which are assessed to the extent that they reflect the National professional standards. Significant tools which triangulate the data for each teacher which now include lesson plans, classroom/lesson observations, student performance data, professional development records, parents reports, community and outside the school learning record. Level 1 licensing the teacher must have very good assessments for at least two years, those who are seeking Level 2 must have ‘excellent’ rating for at least two years and for level 3 must have ‘excellent’ rating in the past-three consecutive years. The Principals and Vice Principals have one level licensing and must satisfy teacher Level 2 professional training.

While the registration and licensing of teachers and school leaders was introduced to professionalize and create a system accountable to SEC, it was a way to reflect on how to improve educational practices. More so, it was also a key approach for policy management, monitoring and assessing the qualifications, experience and professional learning of those deployed in the school sector. Central to the mission of the PLO is a research-based discussion of teacher effectiveness, which was meant to inform wider SEC dialogue and considerations as it further develops policies and strategies for improving teacher effectiveness.

The licensing process has brought about a strong level of evidence and professional-based practice in the schools, with the ultimate goal of scaling-up the license process to all. However, numerous barriers still abound; the large turnover of teachers, the school composition of the review committees and the type of evidence that teachers collect have all hampered the process. With current focus on lesson planning and classroom observations, teachers were aware of performance levels that reflect their quality teaching but also student achievement.

While licensing has been marred by administrative complexity, its intended purpose was to improve and provide continuous teacher professional development to improve teacher practice through on-going professional development. Research suggests that sustained professional development of 80 hours and above followed by follow-up and dynamic interactions (coaching) between the trainer and trainee improved practice (Hassel, Walter, & Hayden, 2002), this was rarely done even with the availability and development of teacher support centers within schools or through the SEC.

At the core of the attestation process was the development of a portfolio which now has been reduced to a number of performance-based, assessments, data about student performance, data from supervisor reports and parents which believed to deepen learning
and help teachers see their experiences as a reflection of their learning. An understanding of the subject and of their teaching helps teachers become effective and empowered. These portfolios can be used as a formative feedback loop to improve teaching and curricular strategies (Hebert, 2001).

**Postreform evaluation**

In 2005, RAND was contracted again to evaluate the implementation of the reform in the Independent Schools, known as the Qatar Comprehensive Education Assessment. The evaluation centered on the principles of teacher practices and the pedagogical changes within the classroom. As the crux of the reform was the development of standards, RAND focused on whether the standards-based reform was implemented in the Independent Schools in the four subject areas of Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science and also whether students engaged in inquiry-based and analytical approaches.

The postreform evaluation study primarily focused on teachers’ work, their ability to work with the standards and curriculum, and their engagement in professional development. The evaluation study found that the hiring quality teachers were limited because the difficulty in hiring and then retaining teachers. Many teachers would shun working in the Independent Schools because of a perceived workload a lack of pejoratives and promotion system in place. Many parents and principals were also concerned about teachers’ ability to use the standards and to teach Mathematics and Science in English because a majority of the time was taken to translate the curriculum to English. Teachers were encouraged to promote small group instruction, student-centered pedagogy and higher ordered thinking, and they were trained to assess students by using Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, including comprehension application analysis, synthesis and evaluation. However, teachers were more likely to use the lower end of the taxonomy of understanding and application (Zellman et al., 2009).

A review of classroom behaviors found that teachers still exhibited teacher-centered behaviors detached from student work in the classroom; rather than interact fully, they remained at their desks and classes were conducted in the form of whole-group activities. The RAND group also compared the Independent School teachers with the Ministry Schools teachers and found that Independent School teachers were more often engaged in professional development activities and curriculum design (Stasz, Eide, & Martorell, 2007).

**Challenges and review**

The greatest challenge in Qatar was to train teachers and keep them in the profession. This was addressed in the national strategy outlined in Qatar’s National Vision 2030, which stated that economic success was achieved through a world-class education system that provided students with a first-rate education compared to that offered anywhere in the world. The stress on Qatar’s ability to adapt to a new ‘knowledge-order’ could provide students with a first-rate education. Believing in evidence-based practices and classroom research, Qatar was intent on improving the quality of teachers as the single-most important factor in determining student achievement (Collias, Pajak, & Rigden, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996) and continuously improving teaching quality through training, professional and ongoing
With these goals in mind, the SEC proposed the idea of a qualification system, licensing connected to rewards and prerogatives. Nine years later, Qatar’s educational reform, Education for a New Era, has made great strides towards a world-class education system, but is seeking to build on the reforms to address critical challenges and opportunities. These challenges include the quality of the teaching profession, the teacher and school leader licensing policy and the broader range of policy initiatives designed to improve the quality of teachers and school leaders.

Since the commencement of the reform strategy, the SEC has introduced:

1. Curriculum Standards developed grade-by-grade
2. National Professional Standards for Teachers, School Leaders and Education Support Professionals
3. An enhanced program of professional learning for staff employed in schools for which the College of Education of Qatar University has designed a program. This program improves teaching practice through a coaching course designed to prepare educational leaders to become coaches for licensure candidates and attestation committee members. The goals of the course include applying coaching skills to support the development of portfolios for licensing, applying a PLO attestation policy and guidelines in a school context and facilitating school attestation committee decision-making processes.
4. Registration and licensing for teachers, school leaders and education support professionals. The State of Qatar PLO policy framework is the first in GCC countries.
5. More importantly, the NCED which came out of the Center of Education Development and Research at Qatar University, all continue to emphasize further training for teachers. The establishment of a NCED at Qatar University further enabled teachers and school-based innovation, supporting the notion that teacher quality is the key determinant in ensuring educational excellence.
6. As of 2015, the Education Institute of the SEC has established the Office of Teacher Training, emulating that of the Center of Educator Development, with the intent of unifying the professional development practices that can be aligned with the QNPSTL standards.

Reform outcomes

Currently, all public schools have been transformed into Independent Schools. Questions remain as to the implementation of the four principles outlined by RAND. Accountability, in large part, remains due to the greater control that the SEC which now is the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. The schools have made substantial progress toward adopting a standard-based system that now guides schools, curriculum assessment and professional development of teachers and school leaders. The idea of the school as an autonomous entity has now been relegated to a school with government-led authority and some flexibility in hiring, professional development and budgeting. Certainly the centralized control of schools is felt at all levels, specifically by the school operator and funding. However, schools do make decisions regarding teaching methods, teacher
incentives, professional development plans and hiring of staff. Schools are now monitored to address changes in student outcomes with frequent, extensive testing and systematic school evaluation.

The most important aspect of the reform has been a standards-based system implemented to guide schools, assess the curriculum and professional development (Zellman et al., 2009). Both the standards and assessment are internationally benchmarked into school-selected curricula. There is consensus now that students are doing work, they are learner-centered in student-centered classrooms within improved facilities and teachers are better prepared and better trained to guide them in accordance with internationally benchmarked standards.

The K-12 educational reform has impacted other stakeholders in Qatar, predominantly Qatar University, which underwent its own reform, particularly in the College of Education, mentioned above the College of Education is part of the national public university closed all of its programs and restructured along the reform lines. Qatar has also recently developed an Education City, with universities from all over the world opening branch campuses, among them Weil Cornell and Texas A&M, to promote higher levels of achievement for Qatari students (Stasz et al., 2007). As the reform progresses, these benefits should extend to more students. Despite many positive aspects of the reform, there have been serious parental and stakeholder concerns about the Independent Schools and resourcing in Independent Schools. The Government response has been to resort to increasingly regulatory approaches, thus possibly jeopardizing performance improvement (Zellman et al., 2009). One conclusive remark stated that the K-12 education system still did not adequately prepare Qataris for work or postsecondary study and that the reforms would take time to bear fruit (Stasz et al., 2007).

Geopolitically, over the past century and a half there has been a long history of hegemony in the Gulf by Britain’s imperial power which extended from Kuwait down to Yemen through its proxy East Indian Company and its strong brassy navy. The shores of the Gulf have been under the protection of the British insuring that the East Indian Company had its ships safely docked and products delivered timely. With absolvent of its prowess over the area, the imperial overture still extends till today; the Anglo-US union during the Gulf War has juxtaposed its hegemony to a culturally and educationally imperative in the region. Much of the North American and Western hemisphere want to see Qatar and the region as a socially and culturally a Western friendly region. It is believed that the way to this goal has been clearly expressed in U.S. military policy. Rauch (2009) policy paper on postGulf War-Iraq that Iraq ‘should be provided with culturally acceptable education guidance focused on providing its citizenry the skill sets necessary to succeed in the global economy’ (p. 2). Policy adoption and RAND cooperation have recommended to Qatar’s leadership to compete into a world of information technology in the name of global markets which have created the contexts for a cultural economy hinged on Western and Anglo-American initiatives of open markets and greater dependency on Western cultural products.

While policy decision was made to make these substantive changes in schooling and systems, many would describe this as a quantum leap and a courageous step forward; but, with a lack of concern of Qatar’s history, culture and identity. A large part of what was implemented was generally borrowed and adopted rather adapted policy and systems (Ellili-Cherif, Romanowski, & Nasser, 2012). Many would have recognized that
the curriculum, the charter-like model of independent schools, and teaching in a foreign language – English; was so abrasively none contextualized and out of touch with the cultural and contextual realities. In fact, the educational borrowing and adoption has been so austere that it has been described by the educational authorities as a penguin implanted in the desert (Al-Salih, 2008), a new form of imperialism in which knowledge become the instruments of foreign domination and manipulation and are imposed on Arab communities through policy transfer without much internal analysis, self-reflection, tests of applicability, adequateness and scrutiny, in such a discourse and approach the local systems would generally be open to market influences and a barrage of flashy products which opulently attract consumers because of their showy presentation.

The more recent flare of global spread has been the push toward greater role of social media, language policy and other cultural artifacts that impose linguistic and cultural hegemonic interpretation of culture, human interactions and social organization much of it in my opinion has been to place Qatar open to the global market at a cost of weathering directly or indirectly, the socio-economic and cultural fabric that bounds the Qatari community. While Qatar is far from being able to compete in a knowledge economy and being a strong player of a vicious world order; however, Qatar has certainly carved its own path of development invigorated by a strong engagement with Western globalism and hegemonic interpretations.

Voices in the local community has been heard reflecting concerns about policy adoption, Al-Kobesi, for instance highlighted that with the absence of well-defined Islamic studies and history represented in the curriculum standards and overemphasis on Mathematics and Sciences and language of instruction are diverging from their own sense of their Arabic and Islamic tradition. The local community had on many occasions its own and ineffective chorus of disapproval, the international led reform withered in its purpose of education in Qatar to teach Qataris their culture, language and religion or in its ability. The reform in fact has withered an important component in the identity of the Qatari student marginalizing Arabic and also lacking the proper English language teaching in schools.

The author believes that there is a greater purpose of reform as to face local crisis rather than international agendas. In my opinion this form of reform has done little to support the well-being of the Qatari student whether intellectually or culturally, discounting what usually moves national agendas specifically as an internal logos, self-reflection and self-correction. It is obvious that little has been done to improve professional practices based on grounded approaches, needs from within the schools and problems of daily life. Overall however, at an absolute national level there has been improvement in achievement scores.

**The path forward: challenges**

The most striking result of the educational reform was the standardized-based system. In most subjects, students did not reach 10% of the required standards, which resulted in a serious reflection about where Qatar might be heading in the next two decades (Nasser et al., 2014). This has led to further strategies for the reform of the education system outlined in the *Qatar National Vision* (QNV) (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008), with a clear message to create an advanced, self-sustaining country by 2030.
The National Qatar Vision 2030 originated from the Qatar National Development Strategy (QNDS) 2011–2016 (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2010). The subsequent vision rests on four pillars – human development, social development, economic development and environmental development. The QNV recognizes that the postoil era centers on a knowledge-based economy tackling education and health and extending the rights and safety of expatriate labor. It calls for:

- A curriculum responding to labor market needs and individual aspirations as well as access to lifelong learning;
- a network of programs that foster Qatari ethical and moral values and heritage, a sense of citizenship, innovation, culture and sport;
- self-managing, accountable institutions; and
- research, including an international role in science and cultural activity.

There is also realization in the QNV that the participation of Qataris in the workforce will involve investment in training for all citizens, incentives for Qataris to enter professional and management roles in both the public and private sectors, increased opportunities and vocational support for Qatari women, and recruitment of the right mix of expatriate labor.

While the QNV identified future actions and roles, the QNDS (2011–2016) identified five important challenges for education and training:

- underachievement in Math, Science and English language;
- poor administration and poor preparation of teachers;
- insufficient alignment with the labor market;
- low standards in some private schools; and
- inadequate pathways beyond the secondary school level.

These five key areas led to five programs: core and cross-cutting education and training, improving K-12 general education, improving higher education, strengthening technical and vocational education and training and enhancing scientific research. Initiatives drew on several outcomes to outline strategic plans that reflect the future of the educational sector to develop:

- A national structure of evaluation, testing and certification
- The arrangements and structure for the governance of education and schools
- Provisions for enabling students with additional educational support needs to participate fully in education
- The extension of mandatory education
- New streams of secondary education that are able to meet business and industry sector needs while being responsive to individual student needs
- Monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of the overall integrated education service.
Conclusion

Qatar has made major and fundamental changes in the past 10 years and improved standards considerably, but it now needs to consider a second change that may involve extended patterns of education; new streams and options at the secondary stage; a cohesive K-12 sector linked to higher education; a single effective management structure; the introduction of innovative options for students; and the development of a high-quality staffing body both centrally and in schools, all combined with a single effective monitoring and evaluation process.

Any future steps in education reform need to be aligned with the established directions of policy development and must be philosophically and operationally consistent with policies, conceptual frames and a consistent accountability system. There are now knowledge, mistakes and successes, which provide a wider perspective in terms of finding practical opportunities and constraints and will lead to possible options for the next reform phase.

At the same time, the review of the international literature suggests a clear focus on teaching and learning, a similar focus on teacher professional development, the use of collaborative professional systems of peer review and mentoring, very clear support and direction provided by government agencies, institutional autonomy balanced by professional sharing and a focus on distributed but inspirational leadership. These features of successful systems and the need to engage in policy learning rather than policy borrowing suggest that the national culture of reform should be supplemented by a more participative and collegial professional approach so that teachers are able to exercise creativity and fully understand the reforms and their role within them.

In 2000, at the outset of the reform, Qatar made important choices about a standards-based system. Now there is a need to see these standards aligned to lifelong learning outcomes and work-based competency and find an effective way to fulfill these outcomes. A new reform is on the horizon in which Qatar recognizes the importance of developing teacher and staff quality and new qualification systems to help Qatar be closer to international lifelong competencies, outcomes and standards.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Ramzi Nasser is Professor and Dean of the College of Arts and Applied Sciences at Dhofar University in Oman. Ramzi Nasser has taught math and education courses in a career spanning 23 years in Academia. He has contributed to international journals and publications in the area of institutional research, psycho-social behavior, educational research, mathematics education, teacher professional development and continues to research and work with school teachers, practitioners and school leaders in Qatar and more recently in Oman. He has contributed to the development of educational research agenda in Qatar, enjoys writing, researching in multidiscipline in the social sciences. Ramzi Nasser is also an Editor-in-Chief of the Near and Middle Eastern Journal of Research in Education, the only English language Journal addressing research in Education in the Arab World and the Middle East.
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