




Special issue: *International perspectives on signature pedagogies for school leaders*

Research article

Examining educational leadership preparation and development programmes in the Gulf region: a comparative study of Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar

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Abstract

This article is based on a comparative study that addresses signature pedagogies in leadership preparation and development policies and programmes in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. The three countries initiated an educational reform movement in the early 2000s, which unfolded in several phases, and which included a significant focus on school improvement and leadership development. The development of current and aspiring school leaders, and the recognition of their crucial role in leading change and improving student learning, were some of the main pillars of the reform agendas. Studies conducted

over the past 10 years provided multiple evidence that there still exist gaps in leadership preparation programmes, which impact their role in fulfilling the ambitious reforms. Using document analysis this study explores the potentials of significant signature pedagogies to enhance leadership professional learning programmes across the three countries. In 2013, Walker, Bryant and Lee studied the key features of educational leadership programmes in different countries by mainly addressing theoretical (research-based) foundation, coherence of content and programme profiles, including structure, methods and pedagogies. Their findings revealed major commonalities and differences between the three contexts and raised questions in relation to the limited prospects of signature pedagogies for the school leadership profession. Based on a critical examination of the findings and the limited prospects of signature pedagogies, the study offers insights and recommendations for an empirical study that sheds further light on the potential development of signature pedagogies for school leaders in the Gulf countries.

Keywords educational leadership; development; preparation; signature pedagogies; Gulf countries

Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, encompassing Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), represent a collection of small yet wealthy nation states situated along the western coast of the Gulf region, with a combined population of nearly 55.9 million (GCC-STAT, 2023). The emergence of oil and gas reserves within these nations has historically underpinned socio-economic development, substantially enhancing public service provisions, including education. Since the early 2000s, the Gulf states have undertaken a strategic reorientation focusing on the diversification of their economies and the investment in human resources due to the recognition of inherent risks associated with over-reliance on petrochemical industries (IMF, 2023). Central to this economic diversification agenda is a comprehensive overhaul of local education systems to better prepare citizens for competing in a knowledge-based global economy. The reform agenda aims to transform education systems from a traditional knowledge transmission approach to pedagogies that centralise critical thinking, problem solving and collaboration (Barber et al., 2007). To meet these goals, major educational reform initiatives were set, often in collaboration with transnational consulting organisations driven by the experiences of developed education systems worldwide (Hammad et al., 2024; Kirk, 2015).

The reform initiatives encompass a multifaceted approach that targets various aspects of the educational ecosystem. Key interventions included the enhancement of teachers' education, governance structures and accountability mechanisms, adopting twenty-first-century curricular frameworks, expanding higher, vocational education and early years education provisions (Alfadala, 2015; Alhouti, 2023). One major educational reform agenda has been the professional development of current and aspiring school leaders, recognising their crucial role in driving systemic change and fostering students' overall achievement (Alfadala, 2015). Hence, the major emphasis of this study is to examine leadership preparation and development programmes of educational leaders in public schools in three Gulf states – Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. The study explores the key features of these programmes and policy frameworks in line with Walker et al.'s (2013) findings, and it analyses the extent to which these programmes respond to Shulman's (2005) signature pedagogies framework, which recognises the balance between the intellectual, technical and moral dimensions. The study also aims to unpack commonalities and differences between the three countries, and to provide insights into this area, given the limited research examining leadership preparation and development in the region (Hammad et al., 2022) and the existing gaps in leadership skills and capacities (Alfadala, 2015; Romanowski et al., 2018).

The importance of leadership preparation and development

Leadership development is essential for improving the processes and outcomes of schooling (Leithwood and Seashore-Louis, 2012). Effective leadership contributes directly and indirectly to the improvement of teaching, student learning and the overall improvement of school operations (Robinson, 2011). According to Bush et al. (2007), to create long-standing impact in schools, leadership preparation and development should incorporate knowledge-based content, skills and contextual relevance. There is well-established evidence, globally, documenting the efforts of governments and educational bodies to develop strategies and programmes aiming to advance the role of leadership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Hallinger and Heck, 1997). Nonetheless, research on leadership development conducted in the Gulf region is still limited, especially if compared with the huge policy shift in education reform since the 2000s (Chaaban et al., 2023; Hammad et al., 2024).

Despite efforts to raise the standards and quality of school leadership across the Gulf states, evidence shows that there are significant gaps in leadership preparation programmes – and, consequently, in leadership knowledge and skills – that might prevent these programmes from effectively leading the ambitious education reform agenda (Alfadala, 2015; Alhouti and Male, 2017; Badri and Khaili, 2014). Hallinger and Chen (2015) have suggested that research on topics related to school leadership and management in Asian countries remains in a relatively early stage of development. In addition, there is growing evidence that more high-quality educational leadership and management studies need to be conducted in the Arab region to inform policy and practice in this area (Karami-Akkary and El Sahib, 2019). In the context of the Arabian Gulf countries, several scholars have emphasised the importance of widening the scope of educational leadership studies to tackle issues related to school leadership impact on students' academic outcomes and teachers' professional development (Al-Mahdy et al., 2021; Hammad et al., 2022). Accordingly, ineffective leadership development will continue to be a 'contributor' to 'inadequate' educational systems (Bush, 2009: 386). Reforming the system and improving learning outcomes requires deliberate planning and strategies that blend global evidence with local system needs and the individual professional learning needs of school leaders.

The knowledge and practice rift

According to Bush (2009), leadership development that focuses heavily on knowledge sources without enhancing performance skills might not be sufficient. Similarly, programmes that prioritise skills to research-informed knowledge might render leaders more focused on performance and habitual acts, rather than on intellectual and purposeful considerations. As school leadership requires a combination of knowledge, actions and a moral direction, programmes that focus on one of these directions might not be fit for purpose. hooks (1994) argued that teaching is not only about the intellect, but also requires the skill and know-how of teaching and interaction with students and adults in educational settings. hooks (1994) also called for teaching to be driven by love for students and engaging with their ideas and life experiences, which would allow educators to lead meaningful interactions that make a difference. Similarly, Shulman (2005) called for signature pedagogies in the workplace and argued against pedagogies that do not prepare professionals for real-life situations. 'Signature pedagogies are characteristic forms of teaching and learning that organise ways to prepare future practitioners for their professional work' (Black and Murtadha, 2007: 1). Shulman (2005) called for pedagogies that incorporate a balance of the three dimensions: knowledge, performance and acting with integrity. In line with Shulman's (2005) theory, this study examines educational leadership preparation and development frameworks represented by policy texts, training handbooks and relevant programme documents in the three countries.

Context

Bahrain

Since 2005, a series of reform initiatives have been introduced to develop the educational system in Bahrain. As such, improving teacher and leader education programmes has been a key pillar of these developmental projects. The Bahrain Teachers College was established to provide high-quality

programmes that would prepare pre-service and in-service teachers and leaders. Since 2008, the college has offered an Educational Leadership Programme (ELP) that prepares potential assistant principals and principals – nominated by the Ministry of Education – for leadership roles in Bahraini public schools. This programme was adopted and developed in collaboration with the National Institute of Education in Singapore. Singapore was chosen as it was one of the high-performing countries in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which was one of the main aims of education reform in Bahrain, and it was assumed to have a system that provides *best practices* which other nations should borrow; Nóvoa (2018) described this as ‘prescribing to the other’.

The ELP Programme comprises three tiers: Tier 1 – Certificate of Education Leadership; Tier 2 – Diploma of Education Leadership; and Tier 3 – Higher Diploma of Education Leadership. Assistant principals and senior teachers are selected by the Ministry of Education to participate in the various tiers of the programme. The programme aims to prepare government school leaders in several areas that underpin their job responsibilities, namely, curriculum innovations, professional development, educational research, strategic management, staff appraisal, communication with the community, home–school relations, using information and communication technology, improving students’ learning, and applying educational ethics. The programme requires completion of 420 hours of study divided into three tiers leading to the University of Bahrain Higher Diploma of Education Leadership. The programme can be completed within a minimum of two academic years to a maximum of six years (University of Bahrain, 2015).

In 2020, the leadership training for government school leaders in Bahrain was revisited to align its requirements with the Education and Training Quality Authority requirements (Education and Training Quality Authority, 2019). An improved School Leadership Programme and Teacher Leadership Programme were implemented. The School Leadership Programme aims at preparing government school leaders in the following six areas: human and financial resource management; educational law and ethics; student support and achievement; strategic planning for school improvement; school, family and community engagement; and practicum leading project in schools. The two-semester programme requires completion of 270 hours of study leading to the University of Bahrain Higher Diploma of School Leadership.

The Teacher Leadership Programme, meanwhile, aims at preparing government school senior teachers in the instructional strategies for productive learning, curriculum design and assessment, teaching students with special educational needs, understanding teacher leadership, coaching and evaluating teachers, and action research. This programme also requires the completion of 270 hours of study leading to the University of Bahrain Diploma of Teacher Leadership.

Kuwait

Leadership development programmes in Kuwait are developed within the Ministry of Education’s centralised structure. Training is provided to all staff members, including principals, by the Ministry of Education’s training department. Leadership preparation is required, especially before assuming any formal leadership position (head teacher, assistant principal or principal). During their in-service training, school leaders, mainly principals, have the autonomy to choose which training courses they wish to attend.

A principal preparation programme was designed and organised by the Ministry of Education. Each year, the Ministry of Education presents a plan that contains independent workshops on leadership, conflict resolution, empowerment, managing meetings and other educational, practice-based or dialogic sessions. Although the Ministry of Education has a clear vision for the tasks and roles of senior leaders, their preparation programmes are not structured according to the specific skills they need (Hammad et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is no evidence that this content is based on research. Generally, all workshops presented to school principals contain a combination of theoretical and practical components. District supervision also organises workshops, lectures and training sessions that target principals’ professional needs.

Despite this, these programmes are still in the early stages of development, and they lack the organisation and academic underpinnings. There is a lack of internship opportunities at Kuwait University or other educational institutions. Some trainees are academics, others have postgraduate degrees (master’s degrees or PhDs), and some have extensive experience in educational leadership positions. Additionally, the training courses include a variety of workshops that principals may choose from depending on their practical and professional needs. Leaders are empowered to take responsibility for

their preparation and development; nevertheless, some still lack essential skills as a result of fragmented preparation programmes that do not provide the necessary support following the workshops (Alenezi and Alsaleh, 2021).

Despite the fact that most training sessions focus on leadership qualities, studies conducted in Kuwait, such as Alenezi and Alsaleh (2021), indicate that staff development programmes for leaders have only a minimal impact on professional development and are insufficient in terms of time, content and quality. The leaders indicated that they gained most of their leadership skills and experience through their daily work activities, rather than through formal training. According to Joyce and Showers (2002), training programmes should be linked to practice, consider educators' opinions regarding the necessary changes and provide support for all stakeholders. In Kuwait, a political decision needs to be made regarding redesigning leadership programmes. According to Alajmi's (2022) study, the Ministry of Education should provide school leaders with more autonomy and adequate training to facilitate their performance. Alhouti and Male (2017) studied the views of senior school leaders regarding leadership preparation courses. His study showed that although some participants appeared to be prepared for their positions based on the training they received, a greater emphasis was placed on the theoretical part of the training rather than the practical components. Moreover, the study indicates the need for more focused training and development opportunities to enhance the range of skills required for the role.

Since preparation programmes in Kuwait are still in the process of development and are short in their ability to gain accreditation or join an academically accredited programme, leaders rely on fostering social informal organisations and networks. Support groups formed by the Teacher Union, as well as informal mentoring groups, are growing in Kuwait. Through these voluntary informal networks, leaders find support, exchange experiences and support teachers.

Qatar

Qatar initiated its educational reform process in 2004 based on a large-scale evaluation of its educational system and outcomes, aided by foreign – transnational – consultants. The reform was aligned with governmental directions and massive economic and structural development plans in the country. The initial phase of educational reform centred school improvement, choice and accountability for government schools and, consequently, highlighted these areas as foundational in the role of school leaders. In 2015, choice and independence gradually lapsed, and centralisation reappeared. As a result, school leaders' preparation, development and key leadership activities became directly associated with ministerial directions and programmes.

The reform efforts, initially investing in the development of the National Professional Standards for School Leaders and Teachers, remained intact. The standards continued to be paramount in the process of licensure and professional learning for leaders and teachers. The standards – published in 2007 – included key benchmarks for the role of senior and middle leaders, in addition to detailed guidance on what each standard indicates.

The standards offer a framework for action and evaluation, as well as a parameter for understanding the scope of work and responsibilities. Nonetheless, they do not offer sufficient links with practical activities in schools despite elaborations, which has been addressed by the training programmes offered by the government over the years. The standards and the set of programmes aligned with them were initially developed through international consultants contracted by the Supreme Education Council – now the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. The standards are strongly aligned with mainstream benchmarking systems implemented in various countries, and driven by Australian, British and New Zealand educational systems, which widely guide school leaders' work. Therefore, the educational and pedagogical approaches underpinning the standards are, to a great extent, borrowed from these contexts and systems.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education initiated collaborations with Qatar University to develop a Master's of Education programme in educational leadership, coupled with a series of leadership development programmes offered by the university's Centre for Educational Training. The Centre for Educational Training's offerings are strongly aligned with the standards and largely funded by the government for Qatari school leaders; however, these offerings are still optional.

Developed in 2016, the Ministry's Centre for Educational Development offers a sequence of leadership training programmes that support emerging, aspiring and experienced leaders, notably principals, deputies, academic coordinators and other middle leaders. Those appointed for a

principalship position are expected to take a 60-hour leadership preparation programme by the Centre for Educational Development. In addition, leaders can only be appointed to a principalship position if they have a minimum 10 years of school experience in teaching and administration and a bachelor's degree (Hammad et al., 2024).

The findings from the literature highlight a critical gap in research on school leadership within the Middle East, particularly in the context of the Gulf countries (Bailey et al., 2021). While the UAE has made notable strides in exploring school leadership, other nations in the region continue to face challenges stemming from the adoption of leadership frameworks and practices developed in other contexts. The concept of *policy borrowing* has emerged as a central theme, underscoring the difficulties associated with transferring models of leadership without adequate consideration of cultural and contextual differences. Due to these challenges, several policy changes occurred. For example, the ELP in Bahrain encountered significant hurdles in its implementation, necessitating adaptation and delivery in Arabic following its initial collaboration with the National Institute of Education in Singapore. Similarly, Qatar's initial emphasis on school improvement, choice and accountability faltered due to insufficient training and contextualisation, ultimately prompting a return to centralised governance (Al-Mahdy et al., 2021).

Methodology

This article uses document analysis as a key method to collect data and analyse content, knowledge underpinnings, structure and values embedded in leadership development frameworks in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. Document analysis is a 'systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents' to generate empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009: 27). Document analysis can offer information about the nature of institutional life and practices (Fitzgerald, 2012), and it can enable learning about institutional frameworks and policies (Fisher, 2019). Although documents might not necessarily reflect the practical aspects related to leadership development or other operational and political aspects, they present the formal and institutional orientation towards certain areas versus others. For the goals of this study, the most relevant documents are mainly policy documents, training handbooks, professional development frameworks and local professional standards (see Table 1). Fitzgerald (2012) has suggested that documents chosen for this method should be authentic, credible, representative and meaningful. The documents chosen for this study are indeed authentic and credible, as they are developed and issued by governmental educational authorities in each country. They are representative, as they reflect the majority of official documents in this area, and they are directly relevant to the inquiries raised by this study. To improve the validity of document analysis in this study, a structured analytical method is used which includes a list of themes driven by two relevant frameworks (Davies et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2013) that offer a coherent approach to data analysis.

Table 1. Types and details of reviewed documents

Country	Document type	Document details
Bahrain	School Leadership Programmes Document	Issued by Bahrain Teachers College in 2020
	Educational Leadership Programmes Handbook	Issued by Bahrain Teachers College in 2015
	Bahrain Educational Leadership Strategy	Issued by the Ministry of Education in 2013
	Bahrain's school agenda: Expediting public school improvement	Issued by Bahrain Economic Development Board in 2011
Kuwait	Administrative Affairs and Administrative Development Sector yearly plan 2023–2024, 2022–2023	Issued by the Ministry of Education in Kuwait, issued 2022, 2023, 2024 National plan for Kuwait
Qatar	National Professional Standards for School Leaders	Issued by the Supreme Educational Council in May 2007
	The National Training Handbook for School Leaders 2020–2021; 2021–2022; 2022–2023; 2023–2024	Issued by Qatar Educational Training Centre, Ministry of Education and Higher Education in August 2020

Key findings

Design and delivery

The design and delivery of leadership development programmes are overseen by the Ministry of Education and Ministry-affiliated centres and trainers in Kuwait and Qatar; however, in Bahrain, leadership preparation is fully provided by Bahrain Teachers College. Bahrain has a well-established programme of leadership qualifications for teacher leaders, assistant principals and principals. In Qatar, the Ministry of Education established a centre for educational training that exclusively offers training for government school leaders, both senior and middle leaders. In Kuwait, leadership development is fully designed and provided by the Ministry of Education, with limited provision for the private sector. In both Kuwait and Qatar, collaboration between the national university and the Ministry of Education is an important source of professional development for educational practitioners, including school leaders, but this is neither exclusive nor consistent. Bahrain's programmes require completion of a full course equivalent to a higher diploma and conditioned by a passing grade for a leader to qualify for the role, while Qatar and Kuwait offer developmental programmes rather than formal qualifications.

Key focus areas

All three contexts had a significant focus on the leadership and management of teaching and learning in schools, including instructional supervision. Leading change, innovation, accountability, monitoring and evaluation, conflict management and skills development are also among the key areas addressed by these programmes. In addition, whole-school administrative and managerial processes are also prioritised across the three contexts. The Bahraini framework had an additional focus on ethics and understanding legal aspects in educational practice, while Kuwaiti and Qatari frameworks highlighted cultural and religious values and norms without explicitly addressing the notions of education laws and ethics.

Knowledge frameworks (research-based content)

Programme content in the three countries reflected the incorporation of major educational leadership theories developed in Western contexts, mainly North America, Australia and the UK. The most common theories informing these frameworks are instructional leadership, leading teaching and learning, learning-centred leadership, school effectiveness and improvement and innovative leadership, as well as knowledge frameworks focusing on efficiency, performance improvement, skills-based and data-informed approaches.

Selection

Access to most of these programmes requires prior appointment into a principalship role or deputy principalship. The programmes focus on preparation for the leadership role and development while in the role; however, the vast majority involve development for those already in leadership roles. Bahrain had an additional focus on preparation for those aspiring for leadership due to the well-established structure of leadership development programmes.

Key commonalities

- (1) Leadership preparation and development (LPD) programmes and strategies are governed by governmental entities, and they are largely aligned with governmental visions and strategies and public policies.
- (2) Planning and delivery of LPD programmes takes place via the Ministry of Education or government-affiliated educational providers.
- (3) Local cultural and religious values are widely prevalent within LPD frameworks.
- (4) Programme content predominantly focuses on professional aspects (administration, performance, skills and overall organisational development), in addition to academic content related to instructional leadership and the supervision of teaching and learning.

- (5) Student needs are highlighted in some of these programmes in relation to gifted and talented students, student behaviour management and students with special educational needs. However, other sociological aspects such as generational concerns, student and teacher engagement and belonging, socio-economic inequalities, inclusion, equity, diverse family backgrounds and multilingual needs of students are widely absent.

Key differences

Structure

The structure and operational features of LPD programmes in Bahrain are significantly different from Kuwait and Qatar. In Bahrain, public school leaders are required to complete a leadership qualification equivalent to a higher diploma, offered by the Bahrain Teachers College, University of Bahrain. Alternatively, Kuwait and Qatar Ministries of Education oversee and govern leadership development programmes through Ministry-affiliated centres, which could be open to collaboration with national and international universities, with minimal exception for private providers.

Focus areas

Leadership development in Kuwait heavily focuses on training teacher and improving teaching and learning, whereas Qatar programmes focus more on school improvement, evaluation and organisational aspects related to the leadership role. Bahrain programmes, in general, focus mostly on instructional leadership and supervision, in addition to a well-rounded set of leadership dimensions (Robinson, 2011).

The analytical framework

This study examined existing frameworks and programmes of leadership preparation and development in the three Gulf countries based on the descriptors offered by Walker et al. (2013), who explored the key features of professional development programmes internationally. Walker et al. (2013) suggested that leadership development programmes can be understood by exploring their key content areas, focuses, knowledge frameworks, sources of content, curriculum consistency and coherence, and structural and operational aspects. These descriptors can be deeply informative of the relevance and value of leadership professional learning for practising and aspiring leaders (Davies et al., 2005). After generating key features, commonalities and differences, the following section discusses whether these programmes reflect the dimensions of professional signature pedagogies for leaders that enable them to develop their thinking, performance and action with a sense of moral purpose (Shulman, 2005).

Discussion

Shulman's (2005) signature pedagogies framework strongly aligns with the overarching goals and values of educational reform across the three countries, especially as they target educational enhancement through knowledge, skills and moral aspects. This discussion analyses the findings while responding to the key questions raised by Shulman (2005) with regard to key pedagogies and ways of preparing professional practitioners (school leaders), given the tensions of the field and the changing dimensions and expectations of leaders' work. According to Shulman's (2005: 2) signature pedagogies, there are 'three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to think, to perform, and to act with integrity'. Signature pedagogies have: (1) a surface structure of processes for teaching and learning about the profession; (2) a deep structure that involves assumptions about the best ways to impart knowledge and the most appropriate forms of knowledge; and (3) an implicit structure, particularly the beliefs, values and moral underpinnings of practice (Shulman, 2005).

Although each of the three countries explored in the study has its unique approach to leadership development driven by its own educational reform agenda, the findings reflect an overall phenomenon of homogenisation and centralisation of leadership preparation and development in public schools. While the guiding frameworks and programmes recognise different levels of leadership experience and job roles, the needs of schools driven by their diverse communities or locations are rarely addressed. On

the contrary, there is a generic training approach that everyone is expected to undertake, especially when instructed by the Ministry of Education. Due to the limitation of the methodology adopted by the study, little is known about individual and group initiatives, and leaders' contribution to the development and design of these programmes. The findings do not reveal whether leaders have the choice to enrol in programmes that meet their professional needs, rather than based on career stage or official appointment.

The outcomes of the study showed that there is a significant focus on school improvement, instructional leadership and relevant theories addressing the supervision of teaching and learning, but less attention to learning theories underpinning leading, teaching and student learning. Additionally, a common component is the focus on the *what* and *how* of school leaders' work; that is, how they lead and manage their schools and teams, and what they do as principals or deputies, but not much on the *why*. The findings, including commonalities and differences, revealed an overview of what knowledge frameworks are reinforced and what activities are highlighted as a part of LPD programmes, in addition to the centrality of local cultural values.

Signature pedagogies in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar's leadership preparation and development

The main purpose of this study, besides examining the key features of LPD programmes in the three contexts, was to explore whether these programmes explicitly offer or indicate potential directions for specific signature pedagogies for the profession of school leaders. By analysing the surface structures, deep structures and implicit structures (Shulman, 2005) driven by the findings of this document review, the following sections discuss the extent to which the findings indicate specific signature pedagogies and what these mean in the three contexts. According to Shulman (2005), signature pedagogies consist of: (1) surface structures that are 'operational acts of teaching and learning' or observable strategies and mechanisms; (2) deep structures that can be described as assumptions about the transfer and exchange of knowledge; and (3) implicit structures or the underlying beliefs, values and dispositions embedded within teaching and learning. According to Shulman (2005), it is not the presence of some of these structures that is key in his theory, but the integration and balance of these different aspects in a specific professional learning approach that can be described as a signature pedagogy.

Bahrain

Bahrain has distinct and well-structured educational leadership preparation programmes for middle and senior school leaders. The programmes are designed in collaboration with the Bahrain Teachers College, Bahrain Ministry of Education and the University of Bahrain. They offer the leadership competencies set by the Ministry of Education, especially those related to improving school performance according to the Bahrain Quality Assurance requirements. The programmes intend to prepare and improve school leaders' knowledge and skills in various areas, particularly leadership styles, strategic planning, human and financial resource management, action research, best practices in school leadership, home-school communication, improving student achievement, dealing with ethical and legal issues, and other areas. The programmes also focus on improving the leaders' skills in dealing with various real-life situations encountered by students, parents and other stakeholders (Abdel-Hameed et al., 2018). The High Diploma of School Leadership offered to leaders after completing the programme requirements is recognised by the Bahrain Civil Services Bureau for leaders' promotion purposes. Public school leaders in Bahrain are encouraged to engage with professional training workshops offered by the Ministry of Education and other entities, and to connect with their peers.

The surface structure for Bahrain's education leadership programme entails a set of course materials prepared and shared by course instructors, as well as a list of suggested course references. The sessions are usually interactive, where both instructors and leaders present and exchange ideas and opinions about the taught theories and topics. The deep structure of the pedagogy rests on the assertion that what is being taught emphasises how to think as a school leader in various contexts and situations, and where they apply appropriate leadership theories and styles; in other words, case studies are always an essential part of the course materials, and they are discussed and analysed by all participants, taking into account the various school contexts. The implicit structure of the pedagogy (the moral dimension) focuses on values and beliefs, which are extracted from the Bahraini Islamic culture. The

ethical dimension is carefully taken into account in most cases. One of the courses taught in the leadership preparation programme deals with ethics and law in education. This course provides leaders with the laws and regulations applied in various situations; however, Islamic values are always a base for leaders' decisions in each case.

Similar to Kuwaiti programmes, there is more focus on instructional leadership and supervision of teaching and learning besides school improvement and effectiveness theories, but nothing in particular on learning theory related to adults and students. The findings also revealed the need for more attention to the practical aspects of the role. While leaders enrolled in these programmes engage with theory related to different aspects of the role, there is a gap in connecting knowledge aspects to practical ones. Although the programme includes group discussions as a teaching strategy, it does not explicitly connect intellectual exchange with practical problem-solving skills that are directly relevant to workplace challenges.

Kuwait

Kuwait has a unique educational leadership preparation programme. Despite the ambiguity in standards regarding the expected outcomes related to leadership skills, leadership evaluations for principals express commitment, working with the group, management skills and self-development ambitions. Regarding self-development, the Ministry of Education encourages school leaders' autonomy to gain knowledge, connect with peer groups and be active in informal communities of teachers. As a result of ambiguous preparation standards, some school leaders go the extra mile to improve themselves, while others may stick to the minimum requirement.

The surface structure of Kuwait's education is the focus on textbooks. Therefore, good teaching practices are also a part of leaders' development programmes. Leadership training focuses on how to lead schools with high expectations for student learning through effective teaching and competent use of curriculum textbooks. The deep structure relates to what knowledge frameworks are taught in school leadership training. A Kuwaiti school leader preparation programme discusses leadership theories, administration and management skills, planning and evaluation. There is significant input from Western leadership theories, rather than a contextually and culturally relevant construction of knowledge. Educational leadership theories and constructs driven by local social realities and scholarship are rare. There is a need to interrogate borrowed Western theories concerning school realities and the so-called mainstream knowledge embedded within the LPD programmes.

The implicit structure represents the moral dimension, beliefs, attitudes and values, which are highly celebrated in Kuwaiti and other Muslim contexts as social values and beliefs are interconnected with faith. For example, a school leader in such a context is a role model who has parental-like authority and autonomy. Until recently, teachers and school leaders were trusted as parents, and they had the authority to treat their students as if they were their children in informal education. With the transformation of education to being formally and directly supervised by the Ministry, less autonomy and more standards were required of schools, minimising teachers' and leaders' professional judgement. For leaders' preparation programmes to be effective, specific values must be incorporated that give appreciation and more value to educators and leaders.

Based on a review of the yearly plans of the Administrative Affairs and Administrative Development Sector (see Table 1), the objectives and desired outcomes of training workshops were not clearly stated. There may be a need for more clarification on what outcomes the leadership preparation programme in Kuwait should achieve. It appeared that there was a shortage of clear standards and skills for school leaders. Both the Ministry of Education and educators need to define and agree on more fundamental standards, values, attitudes and practices.

Leader preparation programmes are also part of a whole education system that emphasises students as the centre of the educational process. The lack of national assessments negatively impacts school performance evaluations. It certainly affects the validity of school progress measurements that are based on student academic achievement. As a result, school leadership preparation programmes in Kuwait are not linked to student academic measures, making it difficult to assess their real impact.

Qatar

Leadership preparation and development in Qatar are strongly aligned with the National Professional Standards (Romanowski et al., 2018), which are reflected in the dimensions and components of its LPD programme policies and frameworks. The standards document includes evidence and recommendations from Hattie (2003) and OECD (2009) research that suggest specific guidelines and interventions for improving teaching and learning based on multiple data collection sites. Nonetheless, the relationship and relevance of these studies to the Qatari context is not addressed. The standards for school leaders in Qatar and the handbook for leadership professional learning include a significant focus on school effectiveness and improvement, the supervision of teaching and learning, and the multiple administrative faces of school leaders' role. Nonetheless, there is limited focus on understanding teaching approaches and the processes of learning for both adults and young people, which represent the deep structures – a key component of signature pedagogies for professional development.

The document review showed that programmes in Qatar include knowledge and skills components related to senior leadership roles (principals and deputy principals). The Ministry of Education and its affiliated Centre for Educational Development offer a coherent programme for those appointed into a leadership position to equip them with the needed knowledge and skills for a whole course of preparation. The training is conducted as a series of lectures, interactive workshops or discussion groups. However, it all stems from leadership and organisational theory and the prescribed role of school leaders, rather than engaging closely with the practicalities of the field, particularly classroom issues and experiences. Therefore, the surface structures or the observable methods and strategies of LPD in Qatar is a consistent standards-based approach of direct trainer–trainee relationship in a group setting, mainly a workshop or a conversational setting. The deep structures stem from paradigmatic hierarchical framework governing these policies and programmes where leaders are largely viewed as receivers of instruction and participants in the school improvement strategy, but they do not address leadership learning per se or how leadership can advance the learning of teachers and students. The moral structure, however, is explicitly addressed in the recurrent reminders of the importance of Qatari–Arabic and Islamic values and traditions, and the social norms embedded within the family and collective culture of Qatar.

Conclusion

While the three structures of professional signature pedagogies can be relatively highlighted in the outcomes of this review among the three LPD programmes in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, their integration and balance is not necessarily consistent with the core goal of this theory. According to Shulman (2005: 53), 'professionals must learn abundant amounts of theory and vast bodies of knowledge. They must come to understand in order to act, and they must act in order to serve.' Shulman (2005) calls for a balanced approach that prioritises the connection of theory, practice and moral foundation in professional learning, where all of these dimensions will lead to a useful and effective pedagogical learning experience. His theory calls for developing the 'habits of mind, habits of heart and the habits of hand' (Shulman, 2005: 56), where leaders need to develop these habits combined to ease the complexity and uncertainties of the role and sharpen their sense of professional judgement.

The review and analysis of LPD frameworks in the three Gulf countries showed significant improvement and efforts related to developing leadership as a key catalyst of education reform. Despite some variations, the findings reflect a wide range of similarities where significant attention is dedicated to leadership and organisational theory, the multiple facets of the job, in addition to leadership learning, styles and approaches that are predominantly influenced by internationally renowned literature. Surface structures, referring to school leadership dimensions and strategies, are evident across the three contexts, with a more consistent approach in Bahrain than in Kuwait and Qatar. Deep structures, referring to how learning happens and how it can be improved, are least addressed. Finally, moral structures, related to local cultural and religious values, are evident, but the focus on the moral purpose of education, schools and leadership is least addressed. Driven by Shulman's (2005) signature pedagogies, the study highlights the importance of addressing and integrating knowledge, performance and moral structures in LPD programmes for more effective outcomes. In addition, contextualising professional development programmes and engaging school leaders in decisions and choices related to their learning is essential.

The literature review and the outcomes of this study emphasise the need for a more localised and culturally responsive approach to leadership development within the GCC region. A recurring concern

is the paucity of research conducted in settings that share similar cultural and social norms, which limits the applicability of imported leadership models (Hammad et al., 2022). Scholars argue that this lack of contextual alignment often leads to ineffective implementation or outright rejection by school leaders who perceive Western practices as impractical. To address this issue, leadership preparation programmes must strive to balance international best practices with local knowledge and cultural sensitivities. This balance is particularly vital for professional development strategies, including coaching and mentoring, which should be tailored to reflect the values and traditions of the region. Ultimately, advancing school leadership within the GCC requires a collaborative effort from both researchers and educators to develop frameworks that resonate with the unique social, cultural and educational dynamics of the Middle East. Such efforts will help build sustainable leadership practices that support educational reform and foster high-quality learning outcomes for all students (Bailey et al., 2021).

Based on its outcomes and the limitations of its methodology, this study recommends an empirical investigation that examines the perspectives of school leaders in the public sector in relation to the LPD programmes with which they are engaged, and the extent to which these programmes can potentially contribute to specific signature pedagogies of the profession. Further examination of peer dialogic exchanges and consistent forms of collaboration, as well as connecting learning with student needs, is crucial to form a more comprehensive view of the effectiveness of these programmes in each of the three contexts.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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