Accepted for Publication in International Journal of Educational Reform, Spring 2014

School Reform in the Arab World: Characteristics & Prospects

Rima Karami Akkary and Nadia Rizk

Abstract: This paper discusses current educational reform attempts in the Arab world and their characteristics from the standpoint of international literature on effective large-scale school reform. The study followed a qualitative design using three main sources of data: 1) regional reform plans, 2) regional and international reports on education in the Arab world, and 3) journal notes and observations obtained from our work as consultants on educational reform in the region. The paper concludes by highlighting key lessons that Arab reformers can learn from international literature on effective school change in order to achieve effective school reform in the Arab world.

Key Words: Large scale reform; school improvement; Arab region; cross cultural analysis; educational policy;

Introduction

For the last six decades, Arab countries have been making Herculean efforts, spending millions of Dollars on school reform as a vehicle for social and economic development. Despite its intensity, this reform movement has been reported to be ineffective in helping Arab countries respond to the pressing demands of the 21st century. The last World Bank Middle East and North Africa (MENA) development report (2008), the Arab Knowledge Report (2009), and the United Nations Development Program [UNDP's] Arab Human Development Report (2002) point at disappointing results of reform efforts, especially in improving students' achievements and classroom practices, and inducing social, political and economic advancements. The MENA development report (The World Bank, 2008) attributes this failure to the shortcomings of the dominant approach of these reform attempts and posits that the region is in dire need for a new paradigm of educational reform.

Yet, correct as they may be, all these reports fall short of explaining the reasons of these shortcomings. An in depth examination of reform, not in terms of its content and impact but in terms of its design processes and assumptions, is critical for identifying root causes of this failure and setting new directions towards effective and sustainable educational development.

Purpose of the Study

This paper discusses the results of a study that examined current attempts at educational reform in a representative group of Arab Countries. It outlines the state of these educational reforms and identifies and discusses their characteristics from the standpoint of the international literature on effective large scale school reform. The paper concludes by highlighting key lessons that Arab reformers can learn from the international literature on effective school change in order to achieve effective school reform in their region.

The study fills a major gap in the available research on school reform in the region. By identifying the nature and characteristics of the current attempts at school reform, it draws a baseline that can help both policy makers and researchers in the area determine future directions for their work that are rooted in the current state of affairs in this domain.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative design (Merriam, 2009). Data was obtained from three main sources: 1) documents outlining 18 official reform plans and their intended interventions (goals and objectives, scope and sequence, key players and donors, and reported achievements) from five Arab countries, 2) documents outlining regional and national reports on the state of Arab education from international and regional organizations (UNDP, world bank, ALECSO, UNESCO) as well as from local educational professional organizations (LAES), and 3) journal notes, observations and personal correspondence of the researchers from their involvement in educational reform consultation in the region.

The five selected Arab countries [Morocco, Egypt, Qatar, Lebanon and Jordan] capture the diversity and variability in the Arab World across geographical location, size, population, expenditures on reform, and socio-political-economic conditions.

The procedures of the constant comparative method as outlined by Charmaz (2005, 2010) were used to collect and analyze data. Accordingly, the authors did a content analysis of all documents to determine what they addressed and what they did not address, compared and contrasted each document to the others, both within a given country and across time frames and countries. The authors finally codified all the collected data, developed categories and identified patterns, then compared these to available literature on effective reform (Charmaz, 2010).

Relevant literature was consulted at two main junctures. Prior to the field work, literature on educational reform in the Arab world was reviewed to understand the historical context, to select the countries and to identify the reform documents analyzed in the study. At the conclusion of the field work, the researchers examined Western and international literature on effective school reform and identified which patterns and practices in Arab countries were the same or different from practices reported in this literature, in order to discuss and propose alternative reform direction.

The organization of the results follows Leithwood and Jantzi's (2002) framework for analyzing large scale reform. The results on the context and characteristics of school reform attempts in Arab countries are discussed under three main headings: International and regional context of reform; Characteristics of national educational policies and their implementation strategies and; Conditions at the local school level. The discussion elaborates on these characteristics using relevant western literature on effective reform as a frame of reference. The paper concludes with a presentation of what the researchers believe to be relevant lessons that Arab reformers can learn from the international literature on effective school reform.

Context and Characteristics of School Reform Attempts in Arab Countries

International and Regional Contexts

International and regional contexts have significantly impacted the nature of the national reform plans and their implementation strategies in the Arab world. At the regional level, a new historical era in the Arab world, especially in terms of educational reform, dawned in the 1970s. In the wake of their bitter defeat in 1967 Arab-Israel War, Arab countries saw education as a catalyst for modernization, social advancement, economic development, and political solidarity (El Amine, 2005b; Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization [ALECSO],

2008). Consequently, multiple meetings convened among politicians and educational experts, under the auspices of the Arab league, resulted in a series of regional reform initiatives. These initiatives came in the form of regional strategic plans (ALECSO, 2008) or declarations issued by Arab education ministers (Sana'a Summit [1972]; the Algiers Summit [2005]; the Khartoum Summit [2006)]; the Riyadh Summit [2007]; & the Tunis Summit [2008]. These regional plans and declarations were intended to trigger country level national reform plans that were aligned with the goals of regional plans, thus setting a unified direction for reform among these countries.

The basic assumption behind these regional initiatives was that strategic planning at the regional level would foster unity and solidarity among Arab societies. These regional plans reflected three main concerns: promoting the Arabic language, strengthening the core religious and humanitarian values these societies share, and collaborating on building human capacity for the much needed economic and social advancement in the region.

This trend continued well into the 21st century. In the early 2000s, a series of educational Arab League summits approved a comprehensive report on the development of education in the Arab countries and adopted a 10 years strategic plan in the Tunis Summit (ALECSO, 2008). The plan described the state of education and its challenges in the Arab countries and set goals for its improvement. It called for ensuring the right to education for all, enhancing the quality of education on all levels and subjects, and linking educational development with the needs of sustainable development and a rapidly changing world. It also offered two main recommendations pertaining to achieving these goals: 1) Future reform plans "must emanate from dialogue between the Arab countries themselves in the context of joint Arab action and not be imposed or proposed from the outside" (ALECSO, 2008, p.14); and 2) Arab educational

decision-makers need to make use of the existing "large reservoir of experiences and innovations… by adopting other countries' successful experiences, provided that these experiences are adapted to, and made to comply with the specificities of the Arab countries" (p.14).

The international context resonates with the regional attempts at reform in viewing education as a source of solutions for many socio-political and economic problems. Leithwood and Jantzi (2002) point out that eagerness to make quick impact pushes many reform minded governments around the world to adopt large scale educational reform. These large scale reforms are promoted and implemented in an atmosphere of skepticism and mistrust of their effectiveness, and the ability and commitment of those in charge of implementing them. As such, performance standards and accountability at all levels [student, teacher, and administrators] have become key elements of most reform initiatives around the world. The view that greater accountability would improve students' performance is currently widely shared among governments and educational reformers around the world.

In this context, Arab reformers are left to juggle three competing demands as they set their reform agendas, and design their reform approaches: 1) responding to international calls for setting standards, accountability and technological modernization; 2) responding to regional calls for collaboration and safeguarding Arab cultural heritage and identity; and 3) responding to the unique social, political and economic demands of their particular countries.

Characteristics of Educational Policies in the Arab World and their Implementation Strategies

Educational reform in the Arab region appears to be dominated by what Berman and McLaughlin (1974) and McLaughlin (1990) call the adoption perspective of planned change, whereas reformers hold a rationalistic view of organizational behavior grounded in the assumption that people in organizations are constantly eager "to seek better practices, have reliable means to identify superior behavior and are eager and able to adopt proven innovations" (Berman and McLaughlin, 1974, p. 7). This section discusses the key characteristics of recent reform plans and policies in the Arab region.

A top down approach strictly driven by government policies. Historically, educational reform in the Arab region has been mostly advanced in the form of top-down large scale strategic plans mandated by ministries of education through national level policies. These policies are typically followed by a flurry of disjointed activities to seek locally and internationally sponsored initiatives that can help achieve the set goals (Arab Knowledge Report, 2009, p. 128).

In Arab countries, reform is seen as the sole responsibility of governments and ministries of education and not that of educators at the school level. As such, planning for reform is left to politicians, government bureaucrats and few educational consultants occasionally appointed to assist in the process., For example, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, recent education reforms are driven by King Abdullah II's vision to transform Jordan from an agrarian economy to a predominantly industrialized nation and a regional hub for information technology (IT) with an active role in the global economy (Jordan Education Initiative, 2009). Indeed, 'Jordan Vision 2022' and '2002 Vision Forum for the Future of Education' are royal mandates that govern and shape all educational reform initiatives taking place in Jordan. Also, in Egypt, around 35 key

education policy statements enacted through Presidential and Ministerial decrees were issued between 1991 and 2006, mandating reforms related to 'quality improvement', 'improving access', and 'improving efficiency' (World Bank, 1999).

In both cases, there is no evidence that university-level and school-level educational practitioners have played an active role in planning and designing these reform initiatives. In fact, none of the reviewed reforms has been initiated, housed in, or supported by a university. The contribution of local universities' academics has been limited to offering training workshops and sporadic services in their individual capacities. International scholars have frequently highlighted the crucial role that universities can have in school reform as they are strategically situated to intervene and impact reform measures (Somekh and Zeichner, 2009; Murphy, 2008; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, Lapointe, and Orr, 2010; Chenoweth and Everhart, 2002). Through their research, educators at the university level can develop a unique understanding of the nature of problems school practitioners face in their practice, and hence can determine the competencies and conditions needed for school reforms to succeed. This potential is lost unless educational reform incorporates an active role for local universities in conceiving, designing, and implementing improvement initiatives.

In fact, the role of local Arab universities is often marginalized and overshadowed by the proliferation of international organizations sought by governments to provide "experts" perceived to be capable to "turn around" the ailing educational systems through short term limited interventions. In Qatar for example, the Ministry of Education coordinates with RAND Corporation (RAND-Qatar Policy Institute, 2009) to carry out educational research and needs assessment and to suggest reform plans and recommendations. In Lebanon, the Ministry of Education has resorted to experts from the World Bank for designing a key reform plan,

determining its allocated budget, and shaping its implementation strategies. Jordan brought in the American Institute for Research (AIR) to conduct research and monitor the planning and implementation of the country's two major reform initiatives: Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy I & II [ERfKE I and II] (2009). In all these cases, the short time appointment of consultants to oversee the planning and implementation of reform initiatives is insufficient for these consultants to understand the peculiarities of the social and cultural context, and to provide schools and practitioners with the long term assistance that "transformative change" necessitates.

In addition to marginalizing university-level educators, current educational reforms completely exclude school-level practitioners from the process of conceiving, planning and implementing school improvements. While university experts are sometimes called upon for consultation, there is no evidence in reviewed documents that school practitioners are expected to go beyond being "passive workers" who execute the top-down directives. This confirms Bashshur's (1982) observation that the politicization and bureaucratization of education, with the paternalistic Arab culture, lead practitioners to treat reform as the sole "property" and responsibility of politicians and government officials. With the way teachers are socialized into their profession, they act as blind executors of reforms top-down directives and rarely display a sense of urgency or ownership of the school reform process. (Bashshur, 1982; El Amine, 2005a). In contrast to this picture, Western scholars widely agree on the importance of the active role teachers should play in inducing change in the classroom and the school. International scholars agree that teachers participation in the decision making process is critical to the success of school reform and improvement. They also view that the accumulated experiences of teachers and their knowledge of conditions prevailing in their classrooms are assets in guiding

school-based, and country-level improvement efforts (e.g. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995; Harris and Young, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). In fact, incorporating the views and expertise of the various stakeholders to attend to the peculiarities of the contexts wherein reform initiatives are being introduced is central to effective school reform. As Berman and McLaughlin (1978) and McLaughlin (1990) explain, because "policy deals at a high degree of abstraction", it rarely addresses the "protracted process by which [the mandated] changes work their way into the daily lives of administrators and practitioners" (p.61). Therefore, depriving school practitioners from participating in the decision-making process and from discretion to develop custom-made practical solutions while implementing reforms not only shatters chances of sustainability and success, but also disables decision-makers' potential to generate policies that "accommodate diversity and variability" across the differing schools (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978, p. 62). From this standpoint, reform attempts in the Arab countries cannot succeed since school-level and university educators are not actively engaged in the decision making process to respond to the peculiarities and needs of their schools.

A vision for excellence that focuses on innovative approaches and ignores basic needs. The examination of the goals of the reform plans shows that they mostly focus on introducing innovative cutting edge practices as a way to achieve world class excellence. Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon plans aim at preparing their students for the information age by introducing technology into the classroom. While major funds are spent on computers for classrooms and teachers skilled in high-tech instructional methodologies, the realities on the ground make these initiatives luxuries that have little meaning to school practitioners. The need to provide adequate and safe buildings, to reduce drop-out rates, and to find enough teachers to cover all subject matters are more pressing problems that ministries of education still face. With

the exception of Qatar's Education for a New Era, all plans examined list goals that do not reflect a vision of the outcomes aspired for students and the teachers who educate them, nor the organizational arrangements necessary to achieve these outcomes. This is contrary to wide agreement among international scholars of the importance of establishing a vision for education that builds on successful practice and responds to current demands. This vision has to include not only the kind of students we want to graduate but also the processes that lead us there, namely how to teach, lead and organize our educational system (Mourshed et.al., 2010; Chenoweth and Everhart, 2002; Mclaughlin, 1990).

The Absence of research as a tool to generate knowledge and guide policy and practice. Arab reforms pay little attention to research as a tool for generating theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence that guide policy and practice. Research on education is scarce in the Arab world and a culturally grounded theoretical and empirical knowledge base which could inform educational reform policies is absent. As stated in the Arab knowledge report (2009), "the available data on knowledge in the Arab region is characterized by being widely scattered, difficult to obtain, and unavailable in aggregated form at the regional level or at that of groups of Arab countries" (p.253). Although many regional educational reports (e.g. ALECSO, UNESCO, UNDP) stress the importance of research in generating knowledge to guide educational reforms, the Arab world still suffers from a lack of well-grounded repertoire of documented best practices that captures previously generated learning and insights. The prevailing culture in the Arab countries still does not see the value of research and its potential positive contribution to the quality of policy and practice. Expenditure on scientific research is at the bottom of funding priorities and adequate funding for research is nearly non-existent (El-Baz, 2007; Arab Knowledge Report, 2009). This neglect of the research manifests itself at all

levels, with practitioners and academicians alike unequipped with the necessary skills to do it, and with the systemic support to fund and conduct research mostly absent. The scarcity of research and documentation of reform practices has been pointed out by several scholars. Bashshur (1982) raises the concern that there is a major lack of empirical studies that thoroughly examine where things are at in schools and even questions the accuracy of the available documented measures of educational performance in the Arab countries. El Amine (2005b) notes that "reform problems are strongly linked to the meager knowledge about them and to the [absence of] human resources that secure the transition from research to policies and practices, and back again to research, in a dynamic framework" (p.43).

Content analysis of the reform plans in the five selected countries provides additional evidence of these observations. These reform plans consist of a complex array of disconnected goals compiled as long to do lists. Most of these improvement goals are speculative, lacking both theoretical and empirical grounding. When available, data mentioned in the reform documents are restricted to statistics pointing at symptoms of the problems, such as low literacy levels, number of schools, number of teachers training institutes, without any data pertaining to the root causes behind the problems the reform attempts to address. This stands in stark contrast to what prevails in developed countries, where both private and public sectors allocate major funds to research and place it at the center of policy making and organizational development, advocating for its use as a means for knowledge production as well as for improving the quality of practice (Berman and Mclaughlin, 1974, 1978; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Wilson and Daviss, 1994, Fullan, 2007).

To summarize, the neglect of the research component in the Arab world has led to an absence of culturally-grounded theoretical and empirical knowledge base and a disconnection

between policy-making, culturally-based empirical and/or theoretical knowledge, and practice. Without research based home-grown interventions and reform designs that are grounded in the contextual realities of Arab schools, it is not surprising that Arab educational reform has failed to resolve the issues and problems that are faced by those closely engaged in the teaching and learning process.

Adaptation of Western originated best practices without critical examination of their cultural relevance. Western ideas on effective approaches to educational reform and best practices dominate reform agenda, design, and implementation strategies in the Arab World. The priorities, goals and strategies of the reform plans mirror the prevailing trends in the Western countries, without any attention given to their cultural relevance or applicability to the Arab schools and their realities. This influence is propagated through the agendas of donor agencies, and Western experts hired by governments.

In Lebanon and Jordan, the estimated national reform plan budget is 265 million and 318 million US dollars respectively, leaving these countries scrambling for donations from international donor organizations. As a result, reform goals and their strategies are influenced and often mandated by "international experts" assigned by these donor organizations and colored by their cultural biases and own agendas. In some cases, the selection of goals and strategies of reform appear to be driven by a "commercial consumer spirit" rather than an agenda for reform that responds to the priorities and needs of practitioners at the school level. For instance the selection of reform interventions, [i.e. technology in Jordan; independent schools in Qatar; professionalization of educators in Lebanon] seem to follow dominant trends in the Western world disregarding the priorities of the Arab schools, and neglecting to seek evidence to their applicability in the Arab cultural context.

A particularly interesting example is the independent schools model mandated on Qatari schools and educators. This is nothing but a clone of the charter school movement in the United States. The model presumes a society that holds to democratic principles, embraces diversity, and welcomes individual initiatives. These characteristics are lacking in the autocratic, paternalistic culture of the Qatari society. Successful adaptation of this model requires major work on building capacity among school practitioners to help them develop new conceptions and competencies to succeed in their new roles as active participants in the decision making process. This is something that existing structures and conditions within the imposed time frame do not allow and leaves the effectiveness of the Charter school model in improving Qatari schools under question.

According to Bashshur (1982, 2010), Arab reform initiatives are plagued by a desire to imitate international educational trends perceived as the panacea to catch up with modernization. Western models of reform are "parachuted" without attention to the emerging challenges. While Arab countries are invited to explore the empirical knowledge base from their more developed Western counterparts, they are still failing to do that with a critical eye to the applicability of the imported knowledge to their local circumstances. Because the cultural differences that exist between the West and the Arab region, it is doubtful that ideas 'imported' from the Western literature and models of change and reform can be anything but empty rhetoric with little impact on educational practice. As Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) point out, reformers should "question the salience of Western theories of […] schooling to the role of [practitioners] operating in very different cultural circumstances…, and explore the empirical basis for the application of theoretical knowledge, craft knowledge and school/system policies" (p. 111). Al Rubaie (2010) warns about educational policies that marginalize indigenous

knowledge and "mute the voices of local teachers and researchers" (p.117) calling to enhance knowledge production that responds to the needs of Arab society.

Lack of a clear design plan that includes evaluation as an integral function of the reform process. Another major characteristic of the current approach to reform in the Arab world is the absence of adequate evaluation practices and a complete neglect of using the information that can be generated prior (needs assessment), during (monitoring) and after (evaluation for impact) in designing, planning and implementing the reform initiative. Indeed, evaluation as a formative approach is not a common practice in the region's cultural context and educators are often uncomfortable with what the approach involves in terms of analyzing practices, passing judgment and criticism, and modifying practices accordingly. In the rare instances when evaluation is practiced, it is not intended to critically and systematically evaluate impact based on pre-specified standards or criteria of goodness or the effectiveness of the reform strategies themselves in impacting practice at the school and classroom level. Rather, it is one directional, intended mostly for "inspection" purposes- e.g. demonstrating conformity with the mandates of the reform- or limited to "reporting" sporadic achievements. In fact, an examination of the available evaluative reports reveals that they are mostly focused on "reporting" reform activities completed in terms of the quantitative expansion in the number of schools, equipment introduced, amount and coverage of training carried out for practitioners, and in some cases, sporadic test scores measuring student learning outcomes. Nonetheless, even when reporting on these "achievements", there is neither clarity about their connection to the reform interventions, nor clarity about the quality criteria based on which these achievements can be "measured" to judge the impact of the reform. What is striking in all of the reforms reviewed is an absence of a

plan for evaluation that could generate information to guide the design of the reform process, to monitor its progress, and assess its effectiveness.

The meager work done around evaluating reform in the Arab world reflects a reform paradigm that does not value collecting evidence as a base for decision making during planning and implementing reform. As such, many of the insights and challenges that emerge through the implementation go unnoticed, and conclusions reached are mostly based on speculative knowledge and some conceptual convictions rather than on systematic analysis of practice. The approach to evaluation depicted in the Arab reform plans lacks the mechanisms needed for reformers to make use of evaluation for sustainable development, whereas, sustainability requires involvement of all key players in continuous reflection and inquiry to learn from past experiences and build on the accumulated wisdom of practice (Wilson and Daviss, 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Consequently, there is a major gap between what goes on in schools, and the vision, plans and practices that the national level reform policies are mandating on these schools' practitioners.

An approach to professional development that ignores building capacity for sustainable improvement. Building human capacity in Arab reform plans is often limited to technical skill building for implementing the interventions mandated by the reform plan. An examination of reform documents reveals that substantial professional development is not a goal by itself and building teachers' capacity is not teacher-centered; rather it is reform-centered. The training mandated by the reforms is congruent with the reforms' human capital requirements with no attention to the teachers' skills, needs, readiness, and priorities. For example, the professional development components of the reviewed plans are restricted to intensive "one stop" training sessions including: 1) teaching methodologies and strategies that enhance information literacy

and critical thinking using IT as a tool (Jordan Education Initiative, 2009; World Bank Education Enhancement Project in Egypt, 1996; USAID/LEAD Program in Lebanon, 2010), 2) interactive tools that promote student-centered learning (Jordan Education Initiative, 2009; LearnLink, modernizing Moroccan Education, 1999), and 3) deploying new curricula (The Secondary Education Enhancement Project in Egypt, 1999;The General Education Development Project in Lebanon, 2000). Otherwise, there is an eerie absence of training to equip teachers with competencies for reflection, inquiry and agencies of change. Moreover, there are no follow-up services to assist practitioners while incorporating their learning within the complexities of their work context and conditions. Such follow-up training is critical in providing teachers the skills necessary to tailor new approaches and innovative tools to their work context for ongoing improvement. In Lebanon for example, the National Educational Strategy (Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2010) suggests providing school administrative staff with both educational and administrative qualifications. In response to this aspect of the plan, the provided training entails six-month intensive training of 6,000 principals, designed with no prior evaluation of principals' needs or evidence based understanding of the problems they face in their practice. The result is that professional development becomes a myriad of training sessions disconnected from challenges faced during the implementation of the mandated changes in the schools.

Last but not least, the plans reveal that the concept of capacity building is limited to school practitioners. No training for university, ministry and/or other educational professional personnel is documented. Although several Arab scholars have pointed out weaknesses in the preparedness across several educational stakeholders (Al Sayyed, 2005; El Amine, 2005a), none

of the reform plans examined by the authors pays attention to providing training to ministry or university personnel.

The Local Context: Conditions at the Local School Level

Examination of the reform plans in the Arab countries leaves the impression that the local context is a "black hole" when it comes to planning for educational reform. Mandated initiatives in these plans often neglect specifying strategies to change instructional methods, management approaches, or other procedural issues at the micro-level of the school (Bashshur, 1982, 2005). There is no attention in these grand plans and among those implementing the reform to issues of motivation or building capacity. Reform attempts are planned as if they are to be implemented in a vacuum, ignoring the existing organizational conditions and their inherent potential to support or hinder the implementation of the attempted improvement. While the international literature points strongly at the salience of these issues and at their impact in influencing the effectiveness of translating reform policies into practice (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2002), Arab reformers stop short of focusing on this aspect. Arab reformers seem to assume that there is no need to set strategies for the implementation, and that implementation will be handled by the practitioners, or at best by consultants assigned for limited time to oversee the implementation process.

Moreover, there is no indication in the reviewed plans that the concerns, views or professional goals of school practitioners have played any role in initiating and planning reform initiatives. As such, practitioners at the school level are faced with unrealistic expectations that are often disconnected from addressing the challenges they perceive to be critical.

The absence of support during implementation, the inadequate capacity building, and the total neglect of understanding and addressing the current conditions at the school level risk eroding school level practitioners' sense of self efficacy and is reinforcing their acute mistrust and lack of commitment to the effort needed to make these top down mandated initiatives effective.

A Fresh Start, a New Path

Looking at educational reform in the Arab countries through a comparative lens exposes many of its shortcomings and leaves educational reformers, policy makers, and scholars in the region with three extremely challenging tasks: 1) determine future directions that avoid repeating failed attempts, 2) benefit from the available wealth of international knowledge base, and 3) find ways to invest in their indigenous resources, respond to their most pressing local concerns, and honor their cultural identity. What Leithwood and Jantzi (2002) conclude in their review of large scale educational reform in the West applies to the Arab region as well:

> "It is not that large scale reform efforts have unequivocally demonstrated their superiority over other approaches to school improvement. Rather, it is that large scale approaches are the only ones likely to be tolerated by those who do and should "call the shots". So it is crucial to the future of today's schools to figure out how to do large-scale reform well." (p.28)

To "do their large school reform well" , Arab educational reformers need to admit the failure of their traditional approach to reform and move towards a re-conceptualization of how reform is done and a re-visioning of the kind of education they want to offer future generations of Arab

children. In 2005, and at the culmination of a long career as an Arab scholar studying reform in the area, Bashshur concluded:

> "What is required is a bold and complete change of focus and shift of attention from relying on big dreams, big goals and big words to stressing on where the actual educational act takes place: the classroom and the school, the learners and the teachers, and all what they need to succeed in their mission. Said differently, what we need in the Arab countries is a deep paradigm shift, and a change in the work processes which entails change from the traditional way of setting plans, designs, programs and reform policies which others have to follow and abide by to adopt a new approach focused on building the capacity of teachers and school workers and empowering them to actually do the reform by themselves" (p. 293).

The paradigm shift that Bashshur (2005) advocates means breaking free from established patterns that characterized past attempts at educational reform in the region. Much remains to be done, yet a lot can be learned.

What can be learned from Western Literature on Effective School Reform?

Decades of educational reform in the West have left a rich array of literature on policy making and best practices, resulting in a substantial knowledge base of what works and what does not in the area of school improvement (Seashore Louis et al., 1999). Compared to their Arab counterparts, Western researchers, reformers and practitioners have a wealth of documented experiences to tap into. Thus, reflecting on these experiences is critical for reformers interested in improving education in the Arab region. Lessons that can be learned from the Western experiences hold the promise to challenge the existing trends/paradigm in the Arab world creating a much needed dissonance in the midst of Arab reformers that can help them break old

patterns and transform their practices into more effective approaches.

Achieving this paradigm shift necessitates changes in both the organization of the educational system as well as in the assumptions underlying the vision, goals and strategies supporting the reform endeavors. Accordingly, Arab reformers need to become aware of the demands and beliefs of the global and national context they are operating in, set clear visions of where they want to go that honors where they are, and re-examine the current policy mandates and align them with the vision while paying special attention to the school level as the core of the whole reform operation.

While the literature on school reform in the US informs us that there are more than 1000 designs for school reform being informed by a rich knowledge base on school change (Murphy and Datnow, 2003), scholars in the Arab world cannot identify a single one. Thus, Arab reformers should direct their effort at designing evidence based prototypes of successful reform that can be later adapted on a broader scale.

The current Western paradigm of educational change is moving away from a rationalistic, linear conception of the change process, and is being shaped by constructivist traditions where multiple perspectives are embraced as a way to gain a comprehensive understanding of its complex and perplexing nature (Seashore Louis et al., 1999). Moreover, the current paradigm emphasizes implementation and advocates a view of change as evolutionary and not revolutionary (Mclaughlin, 1990; Wilson and Daviss, 1994; Chenoweth and Everhart, 2002). As such, reform has to attend to both the planned and unplanned aspects, channeling them toward achieving its improvement goals. The current paradigm espouses a systemic view that considers the interconnectedness of the conditions that influence organizational development and student learning, and calls for keeping the focus on improvements that impact the

classroom level (Mourshed et al., 2010; Chenoweth and Everhart, 2002). Moreover, this paradigm requires that educators at all levels [policy making, academics, school] should be actively involved in this process (Wilson and Daviss, 1994; Mclaughlin, 1998; Chenoweth and Everhart, 2002; Murphy and Datnow, 2003; Bascia and Hargreaves; 2000).

Within this approach to change, Arab reformers can benefit from the following learned lessons: 1) keeping the focus on triggering and supporting school based initiatives (Cuban, 1992); 2) setting visions and strategies that address root causes to problems at the school level and as a potential trigger for improvement and learning (Cuban, 1988, 1992; Sarason, 1996; Wilson and Daviss, 1994); 3) developing a "design intent" with explicit implementation strategies and a process to monitor and evaluate their effectiveness; According to Western scholars, the complexity of the process suggests the need for an "initial plan" that develops and changes in accordance with the organizational realities and in response to the emerging conditions during its implementation (Berman and Mclaughlin, 1974; Mclaughlin, 1990; Wilson and Daviss, 1994; Seashore Louis et al., 1999); and 4) thoroughly documenting emerging insights and lessons learned, as a way to build the foundation of a culturally grounded knowledge base.

Moreover, reformers need to bring inquiry to the center of the reform process thus enabling all those involved to question the effectiveness of current practices, build on the lessons learned from their shortcomings and successes, and most importantly keep the focus on resolving the challenges faced at the school level by embracing "conflict filled" situations as potential triggers for improvement and learning (Cuban, 1992). Mehta (2010) proposes a new direction to the link between policy, research and practice suggesting that "practice needs to drive the process, the research will take place in schools, the role of policy would be to provide

the needed support." (p. 8).

In addition, building individual and collective capacity at all levels [ministries, universities, schools] should be an integral part of the design of every reform plan. Scholars agree that implementing and sustaining school improvement need professional teachers who are highly skilled in their craft (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Lambert, 2003) and capable of working together (Smylie and Hart, 1999). Building human and social capacity among teachers includes training teachers on inquiry (Greenwood and Levin, 2007), problem solving and reflective practice (Argyris & Schon 1996, innovativeness and creativity (Wilson & Daviss, 1994), decision making and leadership (Lambert, 2003), and interpersonal and collaborative skills (Lambert, 2003; Mourshed et al., 2010; Seashore Louis et al., 1999; Smylie and Hart, 1999). With these skills, teachers are expected to acquire new roles and professional identities, both as change agents and as "generators of professional knowledge" (Seashore Louis et al., 1999, p. 264), and should play an integral role in instituting mechanisms for networking and collaboration between scholars, policy makers, and school practitioners. Last and not least, and despite the sense of urgency to turn around the failing educational system and improve educational outcomes, Arab reformers need to be patient as they go through this transformational shift. They need to allow time for the process and accept failures as opportunities to learn, remembering that it is a process that does not develop without normal growing pain [failures, wasted resources], and takes time to show results (Wilson and Daviss, 1994, p. 128; Fullan et al., 2006; Murphy and Datnow; 2003).

References

Al Rubaie, A. (2010). Building indigenous knowledge capacity for development. *World Journal of Science, 7* (2), 113-128.

Al Sayyed, F.H. (2005). Educational reform within the contexts of conspiracy fear and the absence of participation: Study on the impact of developmental foreign aid on reform of educational policy in Egypt in the nineties. In A. El Amine (Ed.), *Reform of General Education in the Arab World* (1st ed., pp. 39 – 53). UNESCO Regional Bureau, Beirut: UNESCO Publications.

Arab Knowledge Report. (2009). *Towards productive intercommunication for knowledge*. Produced by Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation (MBRF) and the United Nation Development Programme/ Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RDAS). Dubai, UAE: Al Ghurair Printing and Publishing House L.L.C.

Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization [ALESCO] (2008). *A Plan for the development of education in the Arab countries.* Egypt.

Argyris, C., & Schon, D.A. (1996). *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice*. MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Bashshur, M. (1982). *Trends in Arab education: In light of the report "the strategy for developing Arab education" [Eteghahat fi altarbiya al arabiya: ala thaw' takreer "estrategiyat tatweer altarbiya alarabiya"*. Tunis: Wehdat Al Bohouth Altarbawiya.

Bashshur, M. (2005). Dualities and entries in educational reform issues. In A. El Amine (Ed.), *Reform of general Education in the Arab world* (pp. 277 – 298). UNESCO Regional Bureau, Beirut: UNESCO Publications.

Bashshur, M. (2010, April). *Adoption/adaptation and the question of educational reform in the gulf (with specific reference to Qatar).* Symposium on Education Reform in the GCC counties, convened by the Gulf Comparative Education Society, Qatar.

Bascia, N. & Hargreaves, A. (2000). Teaching and leading on the sharp edges of change. In N., Bascia & A., Hargreaves (Eds), *The sharp edge of educational change: Teaching leading and the reality of reform (pp.3-26)*. London: Routledge.

Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. (1974). *Federal programs supporting educational change,* Vol. I: *A model of educational change.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. (1978). *Federal programs supporting educational change, Vol. VIII: Implementing and sustaining innovations.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Charmaz, K. (2010). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Chenoweth, T. G., & Everhart, R.B. (2002). *Navigating comprehensive school change: A guide for the perplexed*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Cuban, L. (1988). *The managerial imperative and the practice of leadership in schools*. New York: Suny.

Cuban, L. (1992). Managing dilemmas while building professional communities. *Educational Researcher, 21*(1), 4-11.

Darling-Hammond, L. (Ed.) (1994). *Professional development schools: Schools for developing the profession*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M.W. (1995). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*(8) 597-604.

Darling-Hammond, L., Chung Wei, R., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and Abroad*. Stanford University: The National Staff Development Council and the School redesign network.

Darling-Hammond, L., Meyerson, D., Lapointe, M., & Orr, M.T. (2010). *Preparing principals for a changing world: Lessons for effective school leadership programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy I & II in the World Bank Project Information Document (PID). (2009). *Appraisal Stage*. Retrieved from http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2009/01/30/000104615_20090203101235/Rendered/PDF/JO010ERfKE0II01aisal0Stage010Jan.28.pdf

El Amine, A. (2005a). The dynamism of educational reform in Arab countries – a synthesis paper. In A. El Amine (Eds.), *Reform of general education in the Arab world* (1st ed., pp. 321 – 368). UNESCO Regional Bureau, Beirut: UNESCO Publications.

El Amine, A. (2005b). Executive summary. In A. El Amine (Ed.), *Reform of general education in the Arab world* (1st ed., pp. 23 – 47). UNESCO Regional Bureau, Beirut: UNESCO Publications.

El-Baz, F. (2007). Reform in Arab countries: The role of education. Retrieved from http://www.strategicforesight.com/iwforum/farouk.htm

Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (2007). *Introduction to action research: Social research for social change* (2nd ed.). CA: Sage Publications.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Hallinger, P., & Leithwood, K. (1996). Culture and educational administration: A case of finding out what you don't know you don't know. *Journal of Educational Administration, l34* (5), 98-116.

Harris, A., & Young, J. (2000). Comparing school improvement programs in England and Canada. *School Leadership and Management, 20* (1), 31-42.

Jordan Education Initiative. (2009). Annual Report. Retrieved from http://www.jei.org.jo/cms/sites/default/files/reports/2009%20Annual%20Report.pdf.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). The eighth and Ninth Moments: Participatory action research: communicative action and the public sphere. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1115-1126). Thousands Oaks CA: Sage Publications.

Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership capacity: for lasting school improvement*. VA: ASCD.

LearnLink, (1999). *Modernizing Moroccan education.* Retrieved from http://learnlink.aed.org/Publications/Country_Papers/cp_pdf/CP_Morocco.pdf.

Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2010). Quality education for growth, national education strategy framework. Retrieved from http://www.mehe.gov.lb/uploads/file/ESDP%20modified%20march%202010/ESDP%20English%20FINAL%20-p%201.pdf

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2002). A framework of research on large scale reform. *Journal of Educational Change, 3, 7-33.*

McLaughlin, M. W. (1987). Learning from experience: Lessons from policy implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis,* 9(2), 171-178.

McLaughlin, M.W. (1990). The RAND change agent study revisited: Macro perspectives and

micro realities. *Educational Researcher, 1*9(9), 11-16.

McLaughlin, M.W. (1998). Listening and learning from the Field: Tales of policy implementation and situated practice. In A. Lieberman (Ed.).T*he roots of Educational Change: International handbook of educational change* (pp.58-72). Netherlands: Springer.

McLaughlin, M. W., & Yee, S. (1988). School as a place to have a career. In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *Building a professional culture in schools (pp.23-44).* New York: Teachers College Press.

Mehta, J. (2010). Inverting the pyramid of school reform: Practice should drive research and policy not the reverse. *Harvard Education Letter, 26*(6), 6-8.

Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. SF: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., & Barber, M. (2010). *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better.* London*:* Mckinsey and company.

Murphy, J. (2008). A framework for rebuilding initial certification preparation programs in educational leadership. Lessons from whole-state reform initiatives. *Teachers College Record, 110*(10), 2172-2203.

Murphy, J., & Datnow, A. (2003). *Leadership lessons from comprehensive school reform*.CA: Corwin Press.

RAND-Qatar Policy Institute (2009). Implementation of the K-12 Education Reform in Qatar's Schools. Retrieved from http://www.qascores.com/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG880.pdf.

Sarason, S. (1996). *Revisiting the culture of school and the problem of change*. NY: Teachers

College Press.

Seashore Louis, K., Toole, J., & Hargreaves, A. (1999). Rethinking school improvement. In J. Murphy & K. Seashore Louis (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational administration (pp. 251-276-*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Somekh, B. & Zeichner, K. (2009). Action research for educational reform: Remodeling action research theories and practices in local contexts. *Educational Action Research, 17*(1), 5-21.

Smylie, M. A., & Hart A. W. (1999). School leadership for teacher learning and change: A human and social capital development perspective. In J. Murphy & K. Seashore Louis (Eds.), Handbook *of research on educational administration: A project of the American Educational Research Association* (2nd ed. pp. 421-441). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

The World Bank, Human Development Group, Middle East and North Africa Region (1996). *Project information document, Egypt education enhancement program.*

The World Bank, Human Development Group, Middle East and North Africa Region (1999). *Project appraisal document, Egypt secondary education enhancement* project.

The World Bank (2008). *MENA development report: The road not traveled: Education reform in the Middle East and North Africa*. Washington, D. C.: World Bank.

United Nations Development Program, Regional Bureau for Arab States (2002). *Arab human development report* New York, NY, Author.

USAID (2010). Lebanon programs: Investing in people. Lebanon educational assistance for development. Retrieved from http://www.usaid.gov/lb/programs/people.html.

Wilson, K., & Daviss, B. (1994). *Redesigning education*. New York: Teachers College Press.