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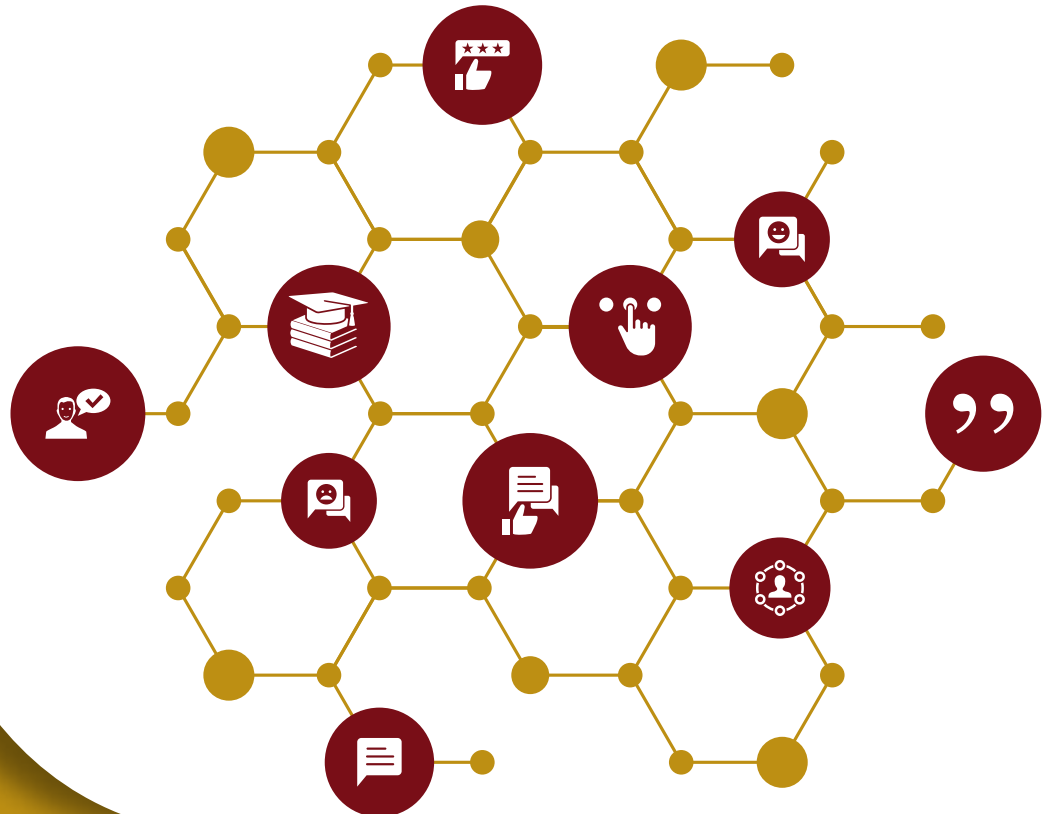
RESEARCH PAPER

Regional Center for Educational Planning

December 2020

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Policy Implementation in the Arab World: Lessons Learned and Recommendations

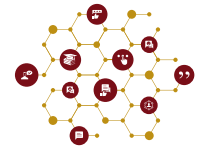




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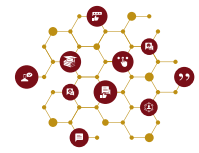


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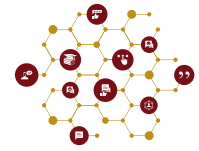


Introduction

Education can be viewed as a system or network of interacting factors that constitute the context in which the act of education takes place. Different stakeholders within this network have varying roles in the system, leading at times to outcomes that may not have been planned for. New trends in teaching and learning, as well as competitive economies and emerging migration, present the need to take a closer look at whether Arab countries craft plans and policies that ensure that they are capable of providing quality education to all while boosting their position in the global economy. Today, there are a number of complex new issues that have become pressing in these political and economic contexts, with direct implications for education.

In most Arab countries, the context and content of educational planning and policymaking have evolved over the decades. The methodologies of planning and policymaking have also changed in many countries in the region to match changing contexts and national priorities. A number of global initiatives have prompted such changes, such as Education For All (EFA) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), both of which pushed countries to develop holistic educational plans and integrate them into national priorities (Bray & Varghese, 2011). Other, more recent global initiatives include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2030).

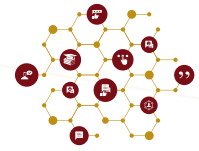
Understanding planning in countries in the Arab world requires a human capital lens, which nations employ to consider the returns on investment in education at the macrolevel in order to make decisions with financial and budgetary implications. Therefore, one of the guiding questions in educational planning is how much a nation should invest in education. Answering this requires an in-depth analysis of the allocation of public resources in light of competing national demands and of how to use these resources most efficiently is required when planning for education. Nations have used the framework of human capital theory to develop educational plans that reach out to their most vulnerable populations in order to provide them with a choice for their future. When plans are prepared at the national level, particular attention continues to be given to projections of enrollment, teachers' professional development, and financial requirements (Bray & Varghese, 2011). Such plans vary across different levels of education and across different types of education system.



Educational planning and policymaking in the Arab countries vary across different national contexts and priorities. Regardless, policy issues must be problematized in order to be given priority on the policy agenda of a government. Different factors intersect when identifying a policy issue within a country, depending on national priorities and political stakes. Once a policy issue is identified, it is important to understand power dynamics in the national context surrounding the issue in order to then understand how it advances or fails to advance to the policy agenda. Because power is a relationship, different social contexts play a significant role in defining the next steps in planning (Fowler, 2013). Therefore, power permeates education systems and educational policies and plans, particularly when power is integrated with political agendas. Consequently, power shapes such plans and policies.

As soon as an issue rises to the policy agenda, discussions on policy formulation and policy adoption emerge. At this stage, it is critical to consider relevant evidence to support the adoption of the most appropriate plan or policy. Such a policy or plan should benefit the majority, given that public resources are used. Tools supporting cost effectiveness are critical in such considerations. Finally, close attention should be paid to policy and plan implementation, taking into consideration who implements the plan or policy, as implementation makes or breaks policies and plans. Finally, evaluation of the plan or policy is important in order to determine how effective the initiative is and whether to carry on with it or alter or abolish it. Engaging implementers in the initial stages of policy planning (a bottom-up approach) is critical for the success of any plan, particularly in times of emergencies and crises.

Charged with responsibility for their own educational planning and development activities over the last 50 years, countries in the Arab world¹ have had some accomplishments but have also amassed a record of educational policy and reform undertakings that were less successful (Muasher & Brown, 2018; UNDP, 2016). This report draws on global and regional insights regarding educational policy to focus on critical planning, policymaking and implementation concerns, observations on the cycle of policy implementation activities, and factors that have contributed to the “implementability” (and lack thereof) of educational policies in Middle East and North African (MENA)



countries. Specifically, this study focuses on a broad and diverse array of country case studies in the MENA region, namely the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Oman, and Egypt, in order to provide a detailed analysis of the following themes:

- 1) Current policymaking and planning practices within Arab countries' educational systems and deficiencies in evidentiary bases of policy proposals and practice changes.
- 2) Linkages between educational reform/practice and educational policies and planning.
- 3) Factors that impact the implementation of educational plans.

Based on our analysis, we provide a set of practical recommendations to alleviate the disconnect between policymaking, planning, and implementation.

Theoretical framework

Over the past 20 years, scholars have shown a growing interest in global educational policy (e.g., Braun et al., 2011; Heimans, 2012; Mullen et al., 2013; Robertson et al., 2007; Saltman & Means, 2018; Spillane et al., 2009) and in the MENA region (e.g., Abdel-Moneim, 2020; Burden-Leahy, 2009; Chapman & Miric, 2009; Gaad et al., 2004; Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2019; Samier, 2018; Valverde, 2005). After conducting an extensive review of the literature, Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) suggested that there are three broad dimensions that dominate policy–practice discourse and analysis in most global educational contexts. First, there is the notion of policy as an “authority prescript”; second, policy is viewed as a prescriptive process; and third, policy is regarded as an interactive discursive practice (see Table 1). This report will utilize these three dimensions as an overarching framework with which to analyze the educational policy landscapes of the MENA region due to their widely accepted practicality, relevance, and overall applicability to educational policy contexts in the Arab world.

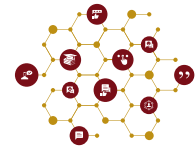
¹The Arab world is made up of a collection of 22 Arab countries that are part of the Arab League, which was created to unify the Arab nations politically and represent the interests of the people of the Arab nations. These countries include Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the Comoros Islands, Iraq, Djibouti, and the United Arab Emirates (World Population Review, 2020).



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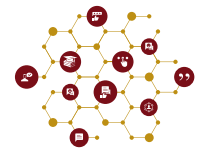


POLICY TYPE	KEY FEATURES
Policy as an authority prescript	Presents and describes policymaking and implementation as top-down, linear, and straightforward processes with clearly defined and definite outcomes.
Policy as a prescriptive process	Policymaking and implementation are perceived as adaptive, targeted, and prescriptive processes that are concerned with what needs to be accomplished in order to improve certain conditions within specific contexts, communities, etc.
Policy as an interactive discursive practice	Policymaking and implementation are seen as multidimensional, interactive, nonlinear, and discursive endeavors. They are the end result of an interactive process mediated by and negotiated among key elements. These include the context, policymakers, and policy implementers, all of whom do not see policy in the same light and hence influence one another.

Source: Bayeni and Bhengu, 2018

Policy as an authority prescript

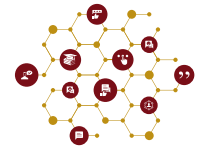
According to Bayeni and Bhengu (2018), examining policy as an authority prescript attempts to explain policies and their development by presenting policy planning and implementation as linear, straightforward processes with clear and definitive outcomes. Policy analysis focuses on existing policies, the policymaking process, and the ways in which policymakers operate. It is assumed that constructed policies will be instrumental in addressing problems at the implementation level by altering contextual conditions as well as changing or controlling the behavior of the citizens concerned. In this perspective, policymakers typically assume that they are best positioned to identify problems, using what some authors have referred to as a process of prognostic framing (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; Collinson, 2005; Levinson et al., 2009). Embedded in this process is the assumption that “policy will move in a smooth, orderly, and linear way from formulation to implementation areas” (Bayeni &



Bhengu, 2018 p. 4). Moreover, governments expect outcomes to be achieved irrespective of localized dimensions, contexts, and intricacies. As such, the authority prescriptive dimension of policymaking often ignores that the settings and conditions in which policies are implemented have their own complexities, dilemmas, actors, and stakeholders, which should be considered if successful implementation is to occur.

Some authors, such as Bayeni and Bhengu (2018), Hallinger (2018), McLaughlin (2006), and Spillane et al. (2009), have taken issue with this particular mode of educational policymaking and management. They have noted that schools and school systems differ in terms of location, history, stage of development, organizational cultures and structures, instructional programs, beliefs and practices, staff competencies and professional dispositions, personnel, available resources, demographics, political environments, etc. Consequently, these authors posit that there are multiple views of reality and many interacting human and nonhuman factors that shape policy–practice, so all available options should be weighed when making an educational improvement initiative in a specific context.

In addition, critical theorists such as Levinson et al. (2009) have suggested that top-down/hierarchical prescript approaches to policymaking exist to merely extend the interests of those in power. This is why those who are in power are inclined to influence policy direction. Levinson et al. (2009) focus on what they call the modalities of domination within the policy–practice terrain, in which only powerful groups (i.e., policymakers) decide on the content and purpose of policy. While there is certainly some merit to this argument, Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) have pointed out that this perspective has its own weaknesses, as it overlooks the fact that school settings in which policy is translated into practice have their own contextualized factors that shape policy–practice. Moreover, policymakers often cannot control these factors in any direct manner. Additionally, in any school, there will usually be some form of unequal division of power between principals, vice-principals, department heads, teachers, students, etc. Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) have implied that this scenario thus suggests that there are (perceived or real) complexities related to the power policymakers believe they have. At the same time, policymakers ignore the fact that school leaders (and

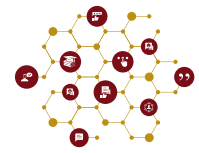


other local actors) are endowed with their own power that they can exercise to favor their interests and/or those of the local context, communities, stakeholders, etc.

Policy as a prescriptive process

Prescriptive policy frameworks are often juxtaposed with authority prescript models. Thus, while authority prescript models are concerned with the top-down process of formulating and implementing public policy as well as evaluating policymaking systems and structures at the macrolevel, prescriptive models are primarily concerned with the examination of issues and the resultant outcomes or impacts of policy. In this way, prescriptive models arise as a consequence of analytical and investigative processes; that is, they inform the audience as to whether a policy and/or program was needed and whether it improved the lives, conditions, contexts, etc. of those it targeted (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; MacBeath, 2008). Hanekom (1992), for example, has suggested that prescriptive models are concerned with normative paradigms, which state how policymakers must act, in addition to analyzing the outputs and impacts of a particular policy. In this way, prescriptive models are obtained after an assessment and evaluation process and will subsequently inform policymakers if policies are achieving their set goals.

Although there are many strong arguments that support educational policy as a prescriptive process, some authors—such as Braun et al. (2011) and MacBeath (2008)—have suggested that the implementation of policy through this framework is often unrealistic and can prove to be challenging and complex in some contexts. Moreover, Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) have argued that in the debates surrounding prescriptive processes of policymaking, “the policy as text is assumed to have the ability to constrain behavioral practices of policy implementers in ways that conform to the dictates of policy formulators...[and] such a view is flawed, particularly if we consider the dynamics of policy-practice complexities” (p. 3). In this way, prescriptive processes of policy formulation and implementation can actually resemble authority prescript approaches in that policymakers often presume that the policymaking process is unidirectional and straightforward, leading some critics to suggest that policy as a prescriptive

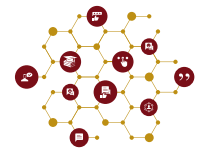


process is idealistic and nothing more than wishful thinking (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; MacBeath, 2008). Others have argued that prescriptive models are ineffectual policy processes as they are continually in a “state of becoming,” without ever accomplishing set goals, purposes, and functions (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; Webb & Gulson, 2012).

Policy as an interactive discursive practice

Policy as an interactive discursive practice stems from the notion that policy implementation is not a straightforward or linear process but is contested, challenged, and reinterpreted on the basis of circumstantial, contextual, and situational factors as well as the embedded experiences of policymakers, stakeholders, and various communities (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; Young & Lewis, 2015). Thus, in the context of education, policy passes through a number of levels at which people are present who hold views on policy that differ from those who make it. At each level, policy is mediated by a process of politicking and contextual dynamics, undergoing constant reconfiguring and recontextualizing. In this process, a policy’s message and purpose gradually come to resemble an interactive discursive practice (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; Young & Lewis, 2015).

Essentially, the interactive discursive model incorporates the view that people hold manifold interpretations of reality, and that all available possibilities should be weighed when implementing educational policies. Moreover, not all organizations, communities, cultures, and settings are the same, so a single universal solution to improving an educational system does not necessarily exist. Thus, when formulating policy, policymakers should consider the various options that best serve their stakeholders, such as acknowledging different viewpoints, promoting equity, endorsing customized and integrated educational models, and using lessons learned in one setting to innovate options in another (Bogotch et al., 2008; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). At the same time, educational policy will inevitably undergo a continuous, nonlinear process of adaptation and reconstruction as it moves from formulation to implementation, during which it is transformed and revised by various contextual factors and actors that do not necessarily perceive and/or experience policy in the same way (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018). Consequently, it is of crucial importance to understand not only the role

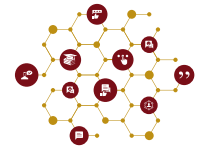


of government entities, interest groups, think tanks, stakeholders, etc. in the formulation of policy but also the ways in which school leaders, ground-level bureaucrats, teachers, and other community members mediate and interact with policies, which can lead to a change in policy intentions as contemplated by policymakers (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018).

The ensuing sections provide a brief description of the current state of education in the Arab world, major educational policymaking entities and implementation processes, significant reforms during the past 15 to 20 years, an overview of policy shortcomings in the report's case study countries, and recommendations for educational policy improvements. The authors of this report believe that this research will contribute to theoretical and practical design of policy planning and implementation within the ever-growing field of educational policy studies, regionally and internationally.

Educational planning and policymaking in the Arab world

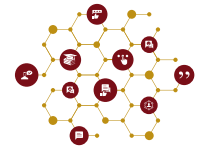
The process of designing policies and plans for the purpose of educational reform has been prevalent in the countries of the MENA region since the 1950s and early 1960s (Abdel-Moneim, 2020; Akkary, 2014; Samier, 2018). Educational policymaking became institutionalized as these countries gradually assumed responsibility for their own economic, social, and political well-being following the Great Wars and decolonization. It gained even greater significance as respective societies struggled with the reality of economic and social planning for development in the modern era (Abdel-Moneim, 2020; Akkary, 2014; London, 1993; Samier, 2018). When decolonization, independence, and modernization intensified during the 1960s, educational policies gradually became a formal imperative in strategic government planning for self-reliance and national development. One significant event across the Arab world (and in most developing societies) in the late 1960s and early 1970s therefore was the establishment of Educational Planning Divisions or Planning Units, very often within respective Ministries of Education (Abdel-Moneim, 2020; Akkary, 2014; London, 1993; Samier, 2018).



Over the next 50 years, governments across the Arab world plan to continue to expand and strengthen educational authorities and policymaking bodies (Abdel-Moneim, 2020; Akkary, 2014; Samier, 2018). In addition, the importance and value of education is routinely acknowledged, and a significant amount of progress has been made regarding educational development in the region (Abdel-Moneim, 2020; London, 1993; Samier, 2018). Moreover, many Arab countries appear determined to realize education as a fundamental human right, and the main vehicle for individual, societal, and national progress (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2019). This seems to be corroborated by recent reports on the status of education in the MENA region, particularly those prepared by United Nations (UN) agencies and other entities, such as the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Middle East Centre, and the World Bank (Nasser, 2018; UNDP, 2016; United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016).

Furthermore, many countries across the region have undertaken major educational reform initiatives that have been relatively successful. For example, over the past 10 years, the Jordanian government has expanded its role in directing the country's K-12 educational system. Many UN reports have lauded it for exceeding other Arab countries in its educational reform efforts (Nasser, 2018; UNDP, 2016, 2019; UNESCO, 2008, 2016). At the same time, many countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as Qatar, the KSA, and the UAE, are leading in educational change initiatives. This can be seen in their implementation of neoliberal globalized reforms that promote bilingual (English/Arabic) and/or imported curricula, the modernization of school systems, privatization, standardization, accountability, school choice, and testing (Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2019; Nasser, 2018; Samier, 2018). Nevertheless, despite considerable financial investment, it is still too early to determine whether any of these GCC countries have made significant educational improvements in a number of key areas (Abdel-Moneim, 2020; Lingard & Lewis, 2016; Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2019; Nasser, 2018; Samier, 2018).

Despite the educational policymaking strides that have been made in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and the UAE, a number of recent research studies and reports point out many Arab states' deficits in areas such as

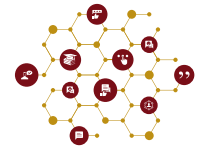


educational attainment, student retention and dropout rates, adult literacy, gender equity, and achievement on international tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Gaad et al., 2004; Ghanem et al., 2013; Nasser, 2018; Samier, 2018; UNDP, 2016, 2019; UNESCO, 2016). Another problematic area is teachers' and school leaders' qualifications and training, licensure, skills improvement, professional development, and retention (Ghanem et al., 2013; Nasser, 2018).

Complicating the task of evaluating the educational sector in the Arab world is the fact that many problems are often exacerbated by political volatility in the region. For example, while school enrollment rates in Lebanon are high, political and economic instability, along with the tremendous influx of Syrian refugees in recent years, has strained the public educational system, forcing many Lebanese parents to enroll their children in private schools.

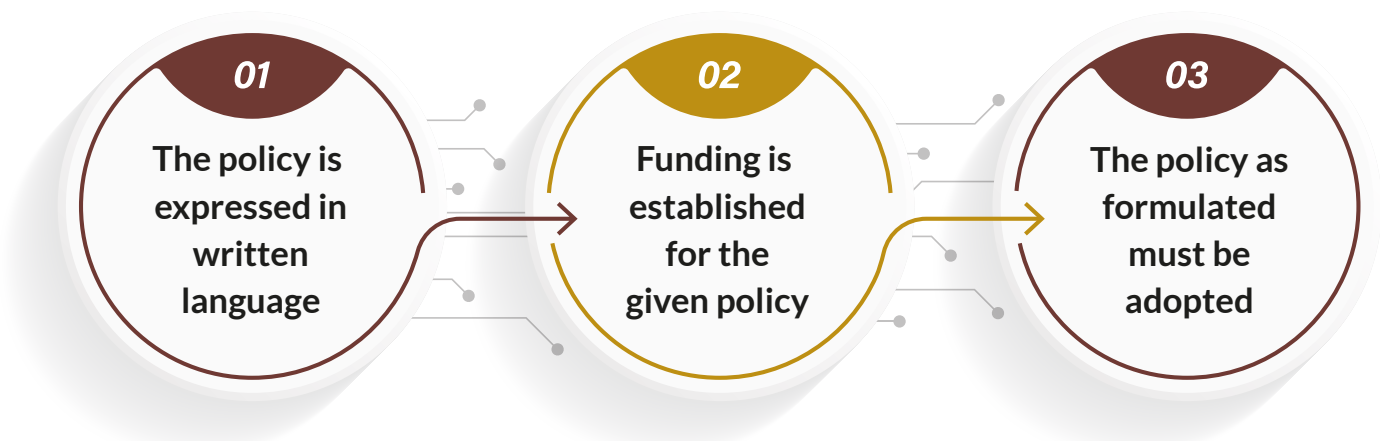
Next to issues such as educational attainment, student retention and dropout rates, literacy, achievement on international tests, funding, and political volatility, further problems relate to reports and analyses that group all Arab countries together and suggest that they are behind other regions with similar levels of development, such as Latin America and South Asia (Nasser, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). These types of generalizations are problematic, however, as the Arab world is very culturally, politically, and economically diverse and these types of broad comparisons rely primarily on economic indicators, which only serve to emphasize the many disparities and gaps among different countries as well as global regions (Nasser, 2018).

Thus, while many Arab governments have acknowledged the importance of education in addition to making some efforts at initiating change and school reforms, crucial deficiencies persist in educational policy, planning, and implementation across the entire MENA region. The purpose of this working paper, therefore, is to highlight and examine the gaps between educational plans and policies in the Arab world and the reality of their implementation, while also exploring ways in which they can be more transparent and effective in the future.



Linkages between educational reform/practice and educational policy and planning

An educational policy must be well defined; if it is not, it will not be prioritized by stakeholders and will not receive enough support to reach the policy agenda. If an educational policy does not reach agenda status, it stands little chance of becoming a formal policy with an influence on the education of students (Fowler, 2013). Such are the challenges of policy planning and implementation globally and in the Arab world. To narrow the gap between policy planning and full implementation, the developmental process should be reviewed by policymakers to ensure success. The development of policy for educational reform should follow defined stages of the process. These stages are identified by Fowler (2013, p. 210) as follows:



The policy's written language component should be researched, benchmarked, and moderated at the local level for success. Most policy implementations require a budget for the reform, program, or initiative planned. These costs must be funded for long-term implementation. The adoption of a policy is a formal process. As such, it provides accountability and governance criteria that are needed to ensure that implementation by middle management is done responsibly.



Four major factors contribute to policy failure. These point to the gap between policy development and implementation (Hudson et al., 2019). The four types of policy failure and modes of policy support are summarized in Table 2. Both global and regional senior leaders in education should carefully plan for success rather than failure. The success of school-based programs and reform efforts depends leadership in policy management and the engagement of key stakeholders in the policy development process. Only then can an educational policy be widely understood by all and implemented successfully.

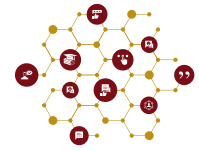
Table 2. Gap between Policy Development and Implementation.

Type of policy failure	Mode of policy support
Overly optimistic expectations.	Implementation preparation: better policy design.
Dispersed governance.	Prioritization and tracking: better policy monitoring.
Inadequate collaboration in policymaking.	Implementation support: better policy impact.
Vagaries of the political cycle.	Implementation review: better policy learning.

Source: Hudson et al., 2019.

Clearly communicated policy design can serve as a template for the specific details of a pending policy. In the implementation phase, monitoring of the policy can assist leadership with end-user effectiveness. Collaboration between key stakeholders in the policy development phase can improve communication and ownership of the new policy.

The implementation of governmental educational policy in many parts of the world tends to facilitate a collective response from teachers. As autonomous and unorganized service providers, teachers in the MENA region have a varied history of implementing policy (Chapman & Miric, 2009). Meaningful efforts to improve the quality of education require a thoughtful application of inputs, an effective application of incentives, and clear and consistent accountability measures, all undertaken through partnerships between educational authorities, parents, and communities (Galal, 2002). This approach to policy development is



identified in this paper as “policy as an interactive discursive practice.” Communication, networking, and the negotiation of policy goals can be more successful with this shared decision-making process.

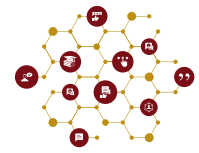
The successful implementation of educational policy can be a complex process. Policy development involves the participation of many stakeholders, each with a different view on the language and purpose of the draft policy. Viennet and Pont (2017) defined three reasons for the unsuccessful implementation of a policy:

- 1) Lack of focus on implementation processes when defining policies at the systems level.
- 2) Lack of recognition that the core of a change process requires engaging people.
- 3) Lack of revising implementation processes to adapt to new, complex governance systems.

Educational systems in the Arab world can be complex organizations, from the ministry level to school operations. The implementation of policy requires a systems approach with a hierarchical point of view. Communication with key stakeholders throughout the entire educational system helps provide clarity of purpose for policy implementation. The legal governance of policy adoption requires a comprehensive understanding for success.

The implementation of educational policy is multidirectional because it can be influenced by actors at various points in the educational system (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Policy can be contextualized, as different institutions may affect the educational system in policy development. As mentioned in this paper, policy as an interactive discursive practice considers the input of actors and different institutions that are viewed as stakeholders in the educational community.

Four dimensions should be taken into account for educational policy implementation to be effective (Viennet & Pont, 2017). These four dimensions can be considered a framework for educational policy implementation. Successful policy design should consider these dimensions for implementation:



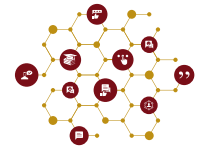
- 1) Smart policy design.
- 2) Inclusive stakeholder engagement.
- 3) A conducive institutional, policy, and societal context.
- 4) A coherent implementation strategy to reach schools.

The implementation of a policy should take into account the educational need, researched solutions, benchmarking of other systems, and clear language. Communication with and involvement of stakeholders can result in school-based success. The policy strategy for implementation must be understood at all levels of the organization in order to be effective.

The theoretical constructs of educational policy planning and implementation in this report include policy as a prescriptive process. This approach uses a targeted, prescriptive, and adaptive process, leading to a needs-based outcome. Linkage between educational reform and establishing policy can be improved with this process, from both a global and a regional perspective (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018).

One topic in educational policy development that has vast societal issues is the school curriculum. The question of what should be taught has long been debated in organizations. A review of the KSA's governmental curriculum, for example, has revealed gaps between current practice and international best practices. At the elementary level, the inclusion of multiculturalism would lead to a more comprehensive curriculum. At the intermediate level, the promotion of environmental sustainability could enhance the science curriculum. And finally, at the secondary level, providing solutions to global international problems can utilize higher-order thinking skills. According to Almogbel (2015), the curriculum gap is perpetuated by an overemphasis on Arabic language and Islamic culture. A more balanced approach could lead to improved international assessment scores. This situation could utilize policy as a prescriptive process with a targeted curriculum focus, leading to improved educational conditions.

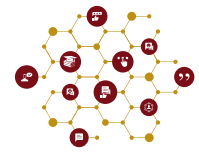
The linkage between effective educational reforms, practice, planning, and policy implementation can be established using a detailed systematic approach that involves key stakeholders in a professional, research-based process.



Factors impacting the implementation of educational reform plans in the Arab world

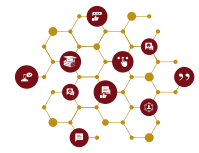
Many reports have addressed the quantitative and qualitative results of the implementation of educational reform in the MENA region, including the 2012 Arab World's Education Report Card and the 2008 World Bank MENA Development Report. These reports revealed inadequacies of current Arab educational systems and an unsatisfactory quality of learning. The main disappointing result is the failure of the implemented reform plans to enhance classroom practices and improve students' achievements (Faour, 2012). Various factors contribute to this lack of improvement. They are referred to as the challenges or the difficulties of translating the substantial educational reform plans into effective practices that impact the quality of classroom learning (Hargreaves, 2007). This section of the report highlights the shared factors associated with the deficiencies in the implementation of educational reform plans in the Arab world.

In most Arab countries, a funding dependency on international agencies with their specific political agendas makes the reform plans vague and doubtful in terms of their goals for many practitioners. This is because international agencies originated and implemented the reform plans without the involvement of local stakeholders and without paying attention to their needs. In addition, these plans are based mostly on imported knowledge from advanced countries, which are disconnected from the actual and real practices or local context of developing countries (Abi-Mershed, 2010). The reform ideas, strategies, programs, policies, etc. imported from advanced countries cannot be plugged and played in the Arab context without cross-cultural adaptation (Bashshur, 2010). This can be illustrated by the failure of the implemented funded reform project by the World Bank and the European Union in Egypt. The international agencies trained in-service teachers in teaching strategies developed for countries with small class sizes, unlike Egypt's large class sizes, with 60–80 students per classroom. Barakat (2019) has added that stakeholders in Egyptian schools perceived the reforms as being disconnected from the Egyptian context.



Another factor affecting the effective implementation of reform plans in the Arab world is their top-down, centralized, and government-led reform approach (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015), depriving teachers from active participation in the decision-making process (Akkary, 2014). This marginalization of practitioners' voices leads to a disconnection between the educational reform initiatives and the reality and actual practices in schools. In addition, it contributes to a lack of independence and poor reform outcomes. The top-down approach adopted in most of the Arab world sends a very strong message to practitioners that they have a passive role and are not change agents in the reform plans, and that any reform or changes are the responsibility of the government or policymakers (Dakkak, 2011; Karami-Akkary et al., 2012). Moreover, this approach makes stakeholders perceive the policies and educational plans set by the government as not to be questioned and unchangeable (Karami-Akkary & Rizk, 2012).

The implementation of educational reform plans in most Arab countries has not been effective in addition due to policymakers' and authorities' assumption that practitioners and stakeholders have the required knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively implement the reform plans. Also, stakeholders lack support related to implementation strategies at the school and classroom levels. Another problem that emerges from the lack of training or support is that changes imposed on stakeholders are seen as innovative practices that are not connected to actual practices or existing issues (Karami-Akkary & Rizk, 2012). For example, in the Lebanese national curriculum reform experience, it was found that there was a huge gap between the intended goals of the reform and the quality of its implementation (El-Amine, 2005). Results from a study by Tabari (2014), which examined UAE teachers' perceptions of reform plans, showed that teachers were positive about the reform plans but felt the need to have more responsibility in implementing the reforms. Teachers thought that the borrowed policies did not fully take the UAE's cultural context into consideration. It was argued that the ambitious plans of various Ministries of Education (MoE) in the Arab world do not match the capacity of school practitioners, which raises another issue related to the quality of teacher preparation programs in developing Arab countries or the process of recruiting foreign teachers in some Gulf countries (Akkary, 2014; Faour, 2012).



In conclusion, there are common factors that affect the effective implementation of reform plans in the Arab world. These factors include, but are not limited to, top-down and centralized reform plans, a lack in the preparation of the stakeholders, dependency on foreign agency policies/plans or policy borrowing, stakeholders' resistance to implementing reform plans set by foreign agencies, and unrelated and irrelevant reform plans that are disconnected from reality.

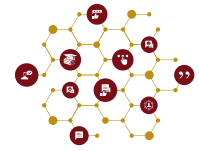
Case studies

The case of Saudi Arabia

The KSA was founded in 1932, when education was limited to a few Islamic schools. Today, public and private education at all levels is embedded in society. Government expenditure on education is 5.1% of gross domestic product (GDP) (Ministry of Education [MoE] in Saudi Arabia, 2020). Education in the KSA is divided into four developmental levels. Pre-primary education is for ages 3–5, with a population of 1,802,023. Primary education, ages 6–11, has a population of 3,366,594. Secondary education, for ages 12–17, has a current population of 2,826,033. Tertiary higher education, serving those 18–22 years old, has 2,381,678 students. Compulsory education lasts nine years, from age 6 to age 14 (UNESCO, 2020). The literacy rate for ages 15–24 is 99.3%, compared to 62.45% for ages 65 and above.

Today's MoE first came into existence in 1925 as the Directorate of Knowledge. The Ministry of Knowledge was established in 1951 to monitor boys' government education. The General Presidency for Girls' Education was established in 1960 within the Ministry of Knowledge. The Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975 to implement the government's educational policy. In 2015, the Ministries of Education and Higher Education were merged into one entity (MoE in Saudi Arabia, 2020).

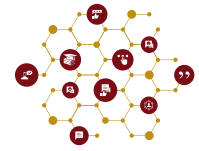
In almost all international comparison studies, students in the KSA score significantly lower than those in other countries. In the PISA in 2018, they scored



less than the international average in all three domains: Reading, Mathematics, and Science. The PISA average score in Reading was 487, with the KSA reporting 399. The PISA average in Math was 489, and the Saudi Arabian score was significantly lower, at 373. Also, in Science, the PISA average was 489, with the KSA at 386 (OECD, 2018). The TIMSS produced similar disparities. The 2015 Grade 4 Mathematics results on TIMSS state that the KSA scored lower than the international average across all categories. A study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) further analyzes the data to demonstrate that there was a noticeable difference in results between three socioeconomic categories. The more affluent Saudi Arabian students scored 400, compared with the international average of 527. In the average income bracket, the KSA scored 365, compared with the international average of 505. Finally, the more economically disadvantaged students in the KSA scored 369, while the international average of the same level of disadvantage was 485 (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IEA], 2020).

The MoE has planned and implemented several projects and government initiatives to address the disparities in Saudi Arabian students' outcomes in international testing and to improve public education in the KSA (MoE in Saudi Arabia, 2020). First, the National Education Platform seeks to provide services to all stakeholders. Second, the Teaching Staff Proficiency Development targets improve teaching and leadership competencies. Third, there is the Saudi Digital Library, the largest collection of academic resources in the Arab world. Fourth, the MoE seeks to improve educational buildings and facilities along with allocating land to private schools and infrastructure. Finally, private education has expanded, with a steady growth of schools and universities (MoE in Saudi Arabia, 2020).

In a review by the Saudi MoE, the concept of policy is confined to the national agenda. For educational planning, the MoE defines the planning format with the terms vision, mission, goals, and objectives. Its vision statement states, "The Ministry of Education seeks to put in place an exceptional educational system that builds a globally competitive knowledge-based community" (Saudi Cultural Bureau in Germany, 2019). The mission statement lists five objectives for



educational planning and implementation. First, to raise the quality of educational outcomes. Second, to increase the effectiveness of scientific research. Third, to encourage creativity and partnership. Forth, to develop community partnerships. Finally, to promote the skills and capabilities of students (MoE in Saudi Arabia, 2020). Clearly, the full implementation of the first and fifth points has not been accomplished, given comparative international test scores.

A major issue in the KSA are the perceived limits of the curriculum at all levels of education. Historically, the study of the Quran and Islamic culture has been the focus of the curriculum, while a host of issues considered important in international education are absent from it. In the Arabic language curriculum, global thinking, human rights, tolerance, multiculturalism, and international understanding are not present. Almogbel (2015) also notes that the National Social Studies curriculum is somewhat limited because its focus is almost entirely on the KSA. It is suggested that a wider perspective including international problems, sustainability, global thinking, and solutions to global problems should be considered for a more comprehensive approach and global perspective of the Social Studies curriculum (Almogbel, 2015).

Current studies and reports demonstrate the deficiencies of student achievement and significant gaps with international test scores. External reviews highlight the narrowness of the curriculum. These discrepancies demonstrate the need to improve the education curriculum in the KSA by bridging the gap between current planning and international best practice.

As we are looking at current educational planning and its linkage to reform and practice, a higher education example demonstrates effective implementation. The granting of overseas scholarships is one example of fulfilling the requirements for the qualification of national manpower (MoE in Saudi Arabia, 2020). It gives Saudi students the opportunity to join world-class higher education institutions and universities, enabling them to fulfill their developmental needs (MoE in Saudi Arabia, 2020). This can provide them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to carry out a nationwide agenda. The overseas scholarship plan identifies six initiatives for the project, as described in the table below.

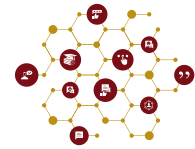


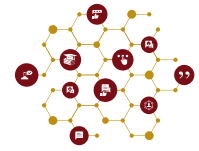
Table 3. Scholarship Initiatives.

Your job first and then your scholarship: Career planning.
Overseas scholarships strategy: Matching the university with student goals.
Study on labor market needs in disciplines not covered by Saudi universities: Program gaps.
Attracting and granting scholarships to outstanding students: Gifted and talented placement.
Scholarship recipient exchange programs: Global perspective.
Entrepreneurs who were scholarship recipients: Economic and business development.

Source: MoE in Saudi Arabia, 2020.

The MoE has developed partnerships with international universities to assist with the implementation of an overseas scholarship strategy for Saudi Arabian students. The Royal Commission Al Ula (RCU) has developed a program to provide scholarships to Saudi students at universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia, where students pursue a range of undergraduate and postgraduate studies (Royal Commission Al Ula [RCU], 2020). UNESCO has identified the Al Ula region as a historical heritage site in the KSA. The RCU's scholarship programs focus on areas that meet future employment opportunities in the areas of tourism, hospitality, archaeology, and museum studies in the region. Currently, 156 students are involved in the implementation of this planned scholarship program (RCU, 2020). The program provides all the support necessary for the students to be successful in their chosen field of study. Its successes can potentially provide a framework for other education sectors to emulate, enhancing the educational experiences provided to Saudi students. This will ensure that Saudi graduates receive a globally recognized education that will, in turn, provide them with the educational expertise to realize the national agenda.

Narrowing the gap between planning and implementation in the KSA will require a deep understanding of its culture and society in a changing world. "Implementing educational policy with a context unique to its own national education setting, values, history, environment and culture may indeed witness



the spawning of a Saudi educational system that can be, in many respects, comparable to many of the world’s education superpowers” (Tayan, 2017, p. 68).

Recommendations to bridge the gap between educational policy/planning and the full implementation of reform and practice are twofold. First, note the gap between policy development and implementation through understanding these four modes of policy support (Hudson et al., 2019):

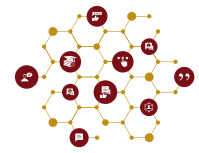
- 1) Implementation preparation with better policy design.
- 2) Prioritization and tracking for better policy monitoring.
- 3) Implementation support with better policy impact.
- 4) Implementation review for better policy learning.

These four modes of policy support ensure international best practice in policy development and implementation, resulting in narrowing the gap between planning and practice.

Second, the limited scope of the current curriculum does not offer a comprehensive or global perspective that encourages the development of critical thinking and the skills necessary to be competitive on an international stage. Almogbel (2015) has recommended the implementation of an international curriculum to improve student knowledge and skills, leading to a productive workforce to accomplish the KSA’s Vision 2030.

The case of Oman

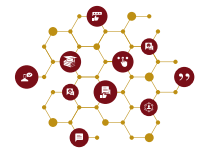
In order to remain competitive and innovative in the global economy, countries around the world are endeavoring to reform their educational systems. This section focuses on the educational system of Oman and provides a succinct summary of its major, system-wide reforms. More specifically, it explores the challenges of and gaps between educational plans and the reality of their implementation in the context of Oman. To begin, formal education in Oman goes back to the 1930s, when the Nader Ben Faisal School was opened as the first Omani school in 1932. Education at that time was mostly characterized by the spread of Quranic schools and the teaching of religion, the Arabic



language, and arithmetic. Changes in the educational sector were introduced in the 1970s, during which many schools were built. The student population increased significantly, from 900 in 1970 to over 560,000 in 2017 (Nasser, 2019). Equally, the number of schools has risen from 207 in 1975 to 1,091 in 2017. In the private sector, the number of schools has considerably increased, to over 480 schools serving a diverse student population of nearly 97,000 students in 2015 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016). This significant upsurge in the number of schools and students has posed many challenges and accelerated some reforms in the Sultanate.

A World Bank report has described the pace of development and reform of the educational system in Oman in the previous two decades as both unprecedented and unparalleled by any other country (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2018). Oman has gone through two significant initiatives to reform its educational system since the onset of the 1970s. The first reform took place in 1976 and focused on building educational infrastructure all over the country in the form of schools. It also created professional development programs for teachers. During this reform, efforts were made to diversify the education sector by introducing technical education and establishing technical institutes and schools, such as the Commercial Secondary School and the Teachers' Institute (Nasser, 2019). The second major reform introduced basic and post-basic education. This is considered one of the major reform initiatives to restructure the modern Omani educational system. Instead of the old school structure, 6/3/3, a new, unified 10-year system of compulsory basic education was introduced, comprising two cycles: cycle 1 (Grades 1–4) and cycle 2 (Grades 5–10). These are followed by two years (Grades 11–12) of post-basic education (Al-Najar, 2016). In the context of Oman, educational reforms are usually referred to as those reforms planned and implemented after basic education was introduced in 1998. According to Rassekh (2004), these reforms included 11 major areas:

- 1) Improving the structure of the MoE.
- 2) Developing new objectives for the educational system.
- 3) Changing the structure of the current school system.
- 4) Changing curriculum content.
- 5) Introducing changes to assessment.



- 6) Developing teacher training and development.
- 7) Improving educational infrastructure.
- 8) Improving school organization.
- 9) Promoting and developing special education programs.
- 10) Encouraging private sector participation in education.
- 11) Implementing the continuous evaluation of educational programs.

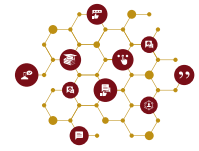
Other areas of this reform included emphasizing life skills (Al-Najar, 2016) and encouraging project-based learning, accountability, and quality assurance (Nasser, 2019).

According to the results of TIMSS in 2011, Omani students' performance in three cognitive skills (i.e., the application of knowledge in solving problems, knowledge recall, and the ability to reason in working through problems) was lower than that of students in other top-performing countries, such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Table 4 shows the percentage of Omani students at the four proficiency levels for Grade 4 Mathematics in TIMSS and Grade 4 Reading in PIRLS compared the percentage of students from Singapore and Hong Kong.

Table 4. Omani Students' Proficiency Levels in Grade 4 Mathematics and Reading in TIMSS and PIRLS Compared to Hong Kong and Singapore Levels in 2011

Country	Advanced (and above 625)	High (624-550)	Intermediate (554-475)	Low (474-400)
TIMSS				
Hong Kong	37	80	96	99
Singapore	43	78	94	99
International	4	28	69	90
Oman	1	5	20	46
PIRLS				
Hong Kong	18	67	93	99
Singapore	24	62	87	97
International	8	44	80	95
Oman	0	5	21	47

Source: Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2018



More importantly, one of the drivers of the new educational reform agenda is the Omani Vision 2020, which aims at diversifying economic revenues and overhauling different vital sectors, including the educational sector. According to this vision, developing education is a key process within a wider agenda of modernizing the Sultanate. Therefore, in order to transform the country into an innovative economy and bring the country closer to becoming one of the leading economies in the MENA region, investment in education is considered a priority (Issan & Gomaa, 2010).

At the macrolevel, one major issue is that the educational system needs to be modernized to meet international standards, while at the same time a stronger educational infrastructure responsive to the local human resources needs for skilled Omani workers should be built, gradually reducing the country's dependency on an expatriate workforce. At the microlevel, one of these challenges is to implement English as the language of instruction in both schools and tertiary educational institutions, as school graduates lack critical skills in English.

Omanization, which was one of the major objectives of Vision 2020, has been a great challenge to educational reform initiatives (Ennis, & Ra'id, 2014). The Omanization program is essentially economic and aims to reduce dependence on foreign workers. The education sector is expected to support this program by preparing educated and qualified Omanis for the workforce. However, although the Omanization program was successful in attracting a significant number of female teachers and has contributed to the feminization of schools in Oman, it has failed to attract male teachers to work in schools. Omanization was also an issue with respect to the private sector, which is still not attractive to Omani locals. Investment in education requires initiative and an entrepreneurial mindset, which is still lacking in young Omanis (Matriano & Suguku, 2015).

Educational reforms in Oman were relatively successful, particularly in terms of empowering women to play an important role in education and providing equal opportunities to both women and men to avail of educational opportunities. The quality of education has significantly improved since the introduction of reforms in the late 1990s. However, the implementation of these



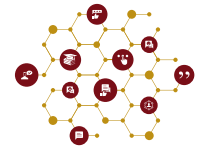
reforms was not an easy process, and many challenges were encountered (Rassekh, 2004). Despite the MoE and the government's support for these reforms, some changes failed to materialize. There is a disparity, for instance, between planned educational reform and the implementation of these reform initiatives and policies. According to Rassekh (2004), the implementation phase was very challenging for the following reasons:

- 1) Teachers are cautious about the introduced reforms.
- 2) There is a lack of educational research centers in the country.
- 3) There is a lack of expertise with respect to integrating new technologies at schools.
- 4) There is a lack of sufficient local expertise to support these reforms initiatives.

Al Shabibi and Silvennoinen (2018) have summarized areas of policy reform in Oman and highlighted the policy challenges in the following table.

Table 5. Policy Objectives, Rationale, and Policy Challenges in Oman (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2018).

Policy challenge	Rationale/evidence	Policy aim	Area
Student performance	To improve schools. To improve students' performance.	TIMSS and PIRLS showing low performance levels of Omani students.	Providing appropriate professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders.
Curriculum	Comprehensive curriculum able to address students' needs.	Curriculum differentiation.	Providing teachers with professional development regarding differentiation.
Assessment	Stronger focus on continuous assessment (MoE, 2009b, 2009c).	Teachers' assessments are unrealistic (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2018).	Train teachers in the use of a range of assessment methods.
Teachers	Encourage student-centered approaches to teaching as well as cooperative instructional strategies (MoE, 2009a).	Few teachers use student-centered learning methods (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2018).	Providing professional development opportunities that tackle student-centered approaches.

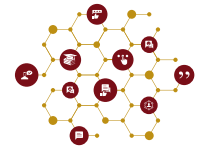


The case of Egypt

In Egypt's modern history, various educational reform movements emerged, which can be classified into two main categories: transformative reforms and non-transformative reforms. Transformative reforms started in the early 1800s and lasted until 1970, when non-transformative reforms began (Barakat, 2019). According to an OECD report, non-transformative reform movements, which are still active today, have resulted in slight changes to the educational system but no concrete improvement (OECD, 2015). This limited improvement in the Egyptian educational system since 1970 is due to the nature of the non-transformative reform movements, as they are top-down, centralized, and controlled by the MoE (Brewster, 2014; Mehta, 2015). The practice of educational policy reform is limited, which reflects the gap between policymakers, executors, and other stakeholders. Many principles and positionings created by educational policy are not implemented, in particular investment in education (OECD, 2019).

The Egyptian curriculum, lesson plans, and resources are all approved and controlled by the MoE. Principals and teachers have no control over what topics they can cover. Teachers are inspected by MoE inspectors, who attend classes. This puts teachers under huge pressure to follow the curriculum without any adjustments. The content of the curriculum is mostly politicized to inject the students with the required values. The gap between reform policy and practice with respect to curriculum is a main cause of the limited success of the reform movements, since they were initiated without teachers' involvement (Badrawy, 2011; OECD, 2010).

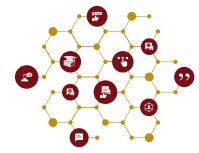
An OECD report (2010) has argued that the Egyptian government's central control over the educational system forms a main hindrance to educational reform. In addition, Egypt depends heavily on foreign aid and agencies to implement reforms, which means that their implementation lacks relevance, contextualization, and value (Ibrahim, 2010; Korany, 2011; OECD, 2015). The dependency limits reforms to what agencies provide, without any input from stakeholders, making them irrelevant to needs and scattering their outcomes (Ginsburg & Megahed, 2008).



In addition, the educational system in Egypt has suffered from many persistent challenges since the 1970s. One of these challenges is the rapidly growing population (Ambrosetti et al., 2019). Egypt is the most populous country in the MENA region (UNESCO, 2006). According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS, 2018), Egypt's current population is more than 100 million, and it experiences increasing socioeconomic issues. This growth, specifically the bulge in youth, and persistent economic issues place massive stress on Egypt's educational system. In 2016, the total enrollment of K-12 students in public and private schools reached 20.6 million students. This number of enrollments does not include religious education in the Al-Azharite system and technical secondary education. The higher education enrollment reached 2.4 million students. The educational system in Egypt relies heavily on the government as the main education provider. For example, in 2016, 90% of all K-12 students attended public schools, and 94% of total higher education students attended public universities (Oxford Analytica, 2019).

Over the last decade, enrollment in Egypt's K-12 educational system (excluding religious education in the Al-Azharite system and technical secondary education) increased by 32%, with a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 2.8%. Such rapid growth in K-12 enrollment has affected the quality of education (PwC Education and Skills Practice, 2018). The low quality of education in Egypt and the failure of the educational reform movements is indicated by the rank of Egypt in TIMSS: Egyptian schools ranked below average in TIMSS compared to other OECD countries (Martin et al., 2008). The poor quality of education in public schools is considered the main barrier to economic and radical development (Khouzam & Aziz, 2005).

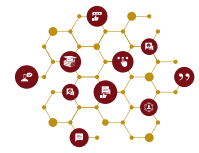
In addition, the increasing number of students in K-12 classes has affected the pressure on teachers and the hiring of qualified teachers. According to Khouzam and Aziz (2005), teachers in Egypt have low incomes, which affects their teaching. Some of them provide private tutoring to increase their income, which "sacrifices their mission as educators" (Naguib, 2006, p. 71). In addition, the increase in K-12 students has allowed schools to rely on hiring teachers on a contract basis who may not have the same qualifications or experience as existing teachers. These teachers do not receive the same pay as formal teachers and may work in poor conditions (USAID, 2017).



Another major challenge to (or cause of the failure of) educational reform in Egypt is that schools and educators were insufficiently prepared to implement top-down reform plans. A study by El-Bilawi and Nasser (2017) has pointed out factors that affect the effective implementation of reform plans in schools. One of these factors is the lack of targeted and customized professional development (PD) to support the planned reform. Teachers had to pay for compulsory PD (Caena, 2011), with no follow-up after the training (Truesdale, 2003). The provided PDs were not linked to classroom practices, which made their implementation difficult. It was clear from the results of El-Bilawi and Nasser's (2017) study that teachers were not prepared for or supported by reform planners in the implementation of reform plans, which resulted in a hampered reform agenda. Teachers were not involved in decision-making, and there were many conflicting decisions as the MoE's policies and regulations changed frequently and some of them contradicted each other. In addition, results have indicated that school leaders were not flexible in implementing the reform plans, which resulted in resistance to change and innovation from the teachers' side.

Since 2011, there have been many attempts at tackling the significant challenges faced by the educational system in Egypt. The Egyptian government adopted a comprehensive economic reform program. The Vision 2030's educational strategy recognizes that the educational system in Egypt thus far did not deliver the required quality of education vital to meeting the needs of Egypt's labor market and responding to developing political and social systems. As a result, the MoE has developed an educational reform program (2018–2030) with a total budget of USD 2 billion (Moghaieb, 2019).

Vision 2030 entails a reform program that began to be implemented in 2019. This year was declared "the year of education," and it witnessed a number of reform initiatives that mostly concentrated on the integration of technology into K-12 classrooms. This reform was to continue in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic started. The pandemic negatively affected Egypt's and the entire world's economy, but it accelerated the integration of technology and a shift in the perception of education (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). Some of the associated strategies included in Vision 2030's technology integration vision are listed below (Eldakar & Kenawy, 2020; El-Megharbel, 2015; Moghaieb, 2019):

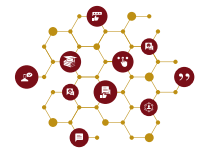


- 1) The Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB): an online library providing access to different resources using the national ID.
- 2) Integrating technology into teaching and learning: the delivery of one million tablets to Grade 10 students, teachers, and schools' management. These tablets are loaded with appropriate content to enhance learning engagement.
- 3) Students' assessments: Grade 10–12 exams will be e-tests.

In addition, to overcome a shortage of 320,000 teachers, Minister of Education Tarek Shawki created a plan to hire 120,000 teachers from outside the MoE's budget in October 2019.

The success of the educational system in Egypt is contingent on improving the quality of education. Education should prepare Egyptians for fast economic and social changes. While there are major achievements to be celebrated by the educational system in Egypt—such as increasing enrollment at elementary and secondary levels and attracting female students to the system—it is still not delivering the required quality to support social and economic needs. In spite of educational initiatives and reforms, the outcomes of the Egyptian educational system are insufficient. The factors that have contributed to this insufficient reform are summarized from the literature as follows (Ahmed, 2020; Badran & Toprak, 2020; Singer & El-Sayed Mahmoud, 2020; Sobhy, 2019; Waterbury, 2019):

- 1) Education in Egypt still follows the traditional way and employs a teacher-centered approach.
- 2) The curriculum lacks the development of students' 21st-century skills.
- 3) Policies, curricula, and examinations are centralized.
- 4) There is a huge enrollment of technical and vocational students, which has resulted in a very high number of graduates that cannot be integrated into the labor market.
- 5) The rationing of free education privatizes education and increases the load on families.
- 6) Public schools are very crowded and do not provide quality education.
- 7) The gap between established policies and directions and their



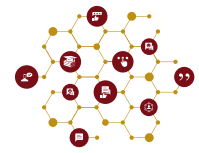
implementation, especially investment in education, is a critical issue.

8) The unequal quality of teaching and learning between public and private schools and between urban and rural students.

9) The lack of liability and transparency on the administration level in educational institutions, with huge confusion present in decision-making processes.

According to the OECD (2010), Egypt should adopt a balanced, gradual, and transparent approach to controlling public education, an approach tailored to the needs of each Egyptian city and context. Using this approach will prioritize goals that are adapted to specific needs. This adoption of local policies should not replace national planning or policies but align them to different needs. The national and city-level governments need to collaborate to give more autonomy and flexibility to each city government: “support is needed to strengthen cities’ capacities to align investments across sectors and identify innovative funding mechanisms, from land-based financing and property taxes to public-private partnerships” (Katramiz et al., 2020, p. 5). The success of decentralization has been addressed by the World Bank (2008) in a study of 14 MENA region countries, which revealed that countries with a decentralized educational system achieved better educational outcomes than countries with centralized ones.

The MoE needs to implement an in-house approach or model by carrying out decentralization reform (Dakkak, 2011) and depending on a national reform agenda, not an “externally mandated reform” (Benavot et al., 2007, p. 220). The MoE needs to reach an equilibrium between implementing the existing centralized system and building teachers’ capacities to accomplish profound and sustainable reforms (Hopkins, 2007). It could benefit from balanced models of educational reform, similar to the model proposed by Hopkins (2007), which balances top-down and bottom-up reform. In his model, Hopkins (2007) suggests that a prescribed reform change should be implemented by the government until stable progress is achieved. After empowering stakeholders and building their capacity, this prescribed change can be transformed into deep and sustainable change (Barber, 2009).

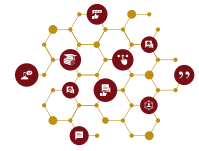


Teachers in Egyptian schools should be provided with gradual and supportive PD, as they need to understand and model best teaching practices. The PD should focus on modeling classroom practices connected to the implemented reform (Black et al., 2003). Moreover, the MoE should provide teachers in schools with the facilities and resources to support them in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and enable them to implement the reform plans (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999), including continuous and sustainable PD (Penuel et al., 2007). A study by Barakat (2019) has found that the PD offered to teachers by foreign agencies was planned for small class sizes; however, no training was provided in how to implement reform-related teaching strategies in a context of 60–80 students in a classroom. In addition, the same study found that school leaders oppose any reform agenda created by foreign agencies, as they do not see any value for classroom practices.

Finally, more research needs to be conducted to identify current reform challenges and compare Egypt to other countries. It is argued that the results of these research studies are only vital if they open a dialogue between the authorities and stakeholders (Barakat, 2019). Based on a review of the literature, the Egyptian MoE has tried to implement many reform initiatives; however, few were evaluated in terms of their effectiveness (Korany, 2011). More research studies are needed to gauge the effectiveness of different reform initiatives and stimulate economic development.

Recommendations for policy and practice

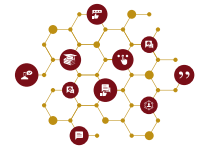
Educational reform is a difficult undertaking that is highly challenging and demanding at the intellectual, economic, and political level (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). As Nicolescu and Petrescu (2017) have suggested that in order to develop holistic education or a system of education that aligns with the real world, all facets of the system have to be considered, and they must be considered from the perspective of integrating all parts into an existing system. In light of what has been discussed, we make the following suggestions in order to improve education and alleviate the disconnect between policymaking, planning, and implementation in the Arab world.



1) To develop a participative approach to policymaking that is built on including different stakeholders (policymakers, researchers, schools, practitioners, community) in designing and formulating policies. This can be more effective than impositional, top-down approaches. Forging strong relationships and communication between policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, for instance, is critical to bridging the gap between policy and implementation.

2) To build channels of communication between policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to work together to address educational deficiencies and challenges. More opportunities are needed for these stakeholders to collaborate and develop joint research agendas. Cooperation between policymakers, researchers, and practitioners could be achieved through system-wide professional networks or professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs in this context would serve as professional spaces where teachers and school leaders work with policymakers to address educational issues and make decisions related to their own practice and student learning. Clausen et al. (2009) have identified shared power, shared goals, long-term commitment, group memory, and continuous work and development as some characteristics of a community of practice. Teachers involved in these PLCs become strong advocates of the expected reforms and changes. As they assume active roles in these reform initiatives, teachers and school leaders buy into the change and reform initiative and feel more empowered to implement the new policies.

3) To adopt local policies informed by the local context that would make implementation easier. This is more advantageous than replicating international educational models and systems. In the context of the Gulf, Fakhro (2009) suggests building modern educational systems derived from the local history, culture, and heritage of GCC countries. Mullen et al. (2013) consider the process of importing an external educational system a cultural security issue, which does not only undermine local culture but also, in some cases, destroys it. Said (2006) cautions against transplanting educational systems in the form of imported packages of textbooks, syllabi, curricula, teaching staff, and sometimes entire education models, as in the case of Bahrain.



4) To not understand policy implementation as a linear process in which policymakers set the change agenda and mandate other procedures for schools to follow. This is a simplistic conceptualization of how change takes place, while schools are complex organizations with different belief systems and organizational cultures, as argued earlier. One-size-fits-all packaged policies might not work for all schools.

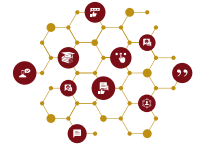
5) To give more attention to the implementation process, relationships, and communication dynamics and processes involved in the implementation of new policies and reforms. Change is fraught with challenges and risks. It is a complex process that requires building capacity across the entire educational system. Change involves engaging people to advocate a vision and communicate it to other professionals. Fullan (2001) argues that policymakers have the power to set change agendas and dictate their implementation. However, they have very little influence on their actual implementation. Therefore, involving schools in the process of policymaking could help develop contextual and more relevant policies. School leaders, for instance, could be potential change agents, and their role in introducing change is critical. According to Reeves (2006), school principals could not only communicate the benefits of change across schools but also make the change experience more motivating and invigorating.

6) To exercise caution about introducing too many reforms in the Arab world. Fullan (1998) cautions against change overload in the form of fragmented requirements and demands, which are often externally imposed. Abrahamson (2004, p. 3) also cautions against initiative overload, which he defines as “the tendency of organizations to launch more change initiatives than anyone could ever reasonably handle.”

7) To conduct more research on the gap between planning and implementation in educational systems of the Arab world. Research should play a critical role in shaping policy and practice in the region. Without research-informed choices and decisions, policies will remain myopic and short-lived endeavors destined to fail. To this end, we suggest that educational reforms should be driven by robust local research agendas that are more responsive to the context-specific issues and concerns of the countries in the region.

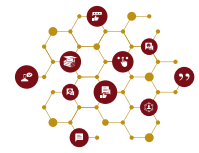
The following table lists in detail all recommendations for the three countries (i.e., KSA, Oman, and Egypt) we included in this paper.

Country	Recommendations
KSA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To invest in teacher training and professional development to improve teachers' performance and quality. • To empower the private sector as a potential contributor to education reforms. Cooperation between the Saudi government and the private sector in funding education institutions should be encouraged. • To continuously evaluate and monitor these reform efforts and determine their effectiveness. • To focus on providing students opportunities and choices for both academic learning and vocational training in the curriculum design.
Oman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To focus on more accountability and understanding quality assurance measures and indicators during the process of reform implementation. Establishing clear measures and criteria could speed up and facilitate the implementation process. • To establish strong partnerships with different economic sectors. This will not only support the implementation process but also play a critical role in the post-reform era. • To consider global trends and methods in curriculum development. • To continuously evaluate educational reforms. Given their significance and impact on the Omani economy, these reforms need to be continuously evaluated and reviewed. • To develop policies to enhance and improve special needs programs. • To adopt policies and initiatives to increase literacy levels in Oman. • To develop teacher development and education programs to improve teaching and student learning and develop teachers' competencies and skills. • To encourage private investment and contribution to education in order to alleviate the financial burden on the government and the MoE.
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To establish trust in the Egyptian public educational system by enhancing the quality of education provided in government-owned institutions. This is done by setting standards for educational inputs, processes, and outputs and institutionalizing the process of monitoring and evaluation from the lowest to the highest levels. • To establish a stable and comprehensive vision for each educational sector within the framework of a complete and effective educational policy for the future. • To provide equal access to education for all groups: special needs, boys, and girls. • To organize a national process for educational development that will reduce disparities across provinces and support coordination and the sharing of experiences. • To increase private sector involvement in funding and structuring the educational system in Egypt.



Conclusion

This report aims to increase understanding of the gap between policy planning and implementation and augment the knowledge base related to its impact on educational systems of the Arab world. It is hoped that the paper fills a gap in the literature by focusing on a topic that is under researched in the region. Besides providing these contributions, the report raises a set of relevant issues that deserve further research and investigation. Having outlined the major issues and factors that impact the implementation of educational policies, it would be valuable, for instance, if future research could expand on the findings of this report through a more focused analysis and account of these gaps and of how to address the problem of implementation in the Arab world.



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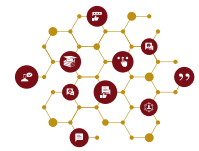
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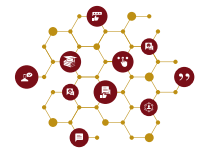
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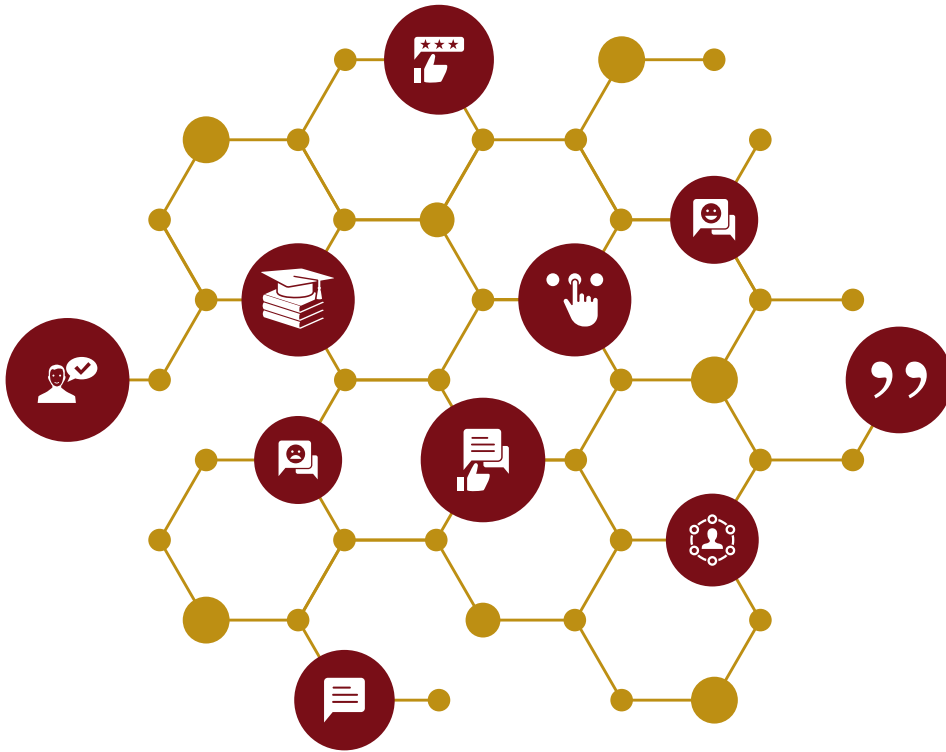


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