DOES ONE SHOE FIT ALL? THE ‘PRESCRIPTION-PROFESSIONAL CONUNDRUM IN BAHRAIN

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INTRODUCTION

The Bahrain Education Reform Agenda is an ambitious plan which involves school improvement from bottom up to top down. From the classroom to the ministry and back! The national policy framework in Bahrain is centralized and manifests itself in an informed prescription of changes to the system. However, reports suggest that prescriptive approaches to school change have a limited lifecycle albeit a longer lifecycle in under resourced and under performing schools. A school centered, professionally driven can improve student achievement seems to have become a model of choice in some high performing school systems. It is evident that there is potential in developing educational systems to combine and blend both policy approaches using segmentation (Hopkins, 2006). The segmentation of Bahraini schools based on national quality markers and linked to the MOE’s Professional Development Continuum Cadre (PDCC) could provide the basis for an indigenous and sustainable curriculum reform. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to demonstrate that there is capacity in the system to undertake school based reforms and create a sustainable educational change.
The literature on large scale reform projects in education would be supportive of the idea that deep reforms to developing systems or under performing schools in good school systems will best be served by state regulated or prescriptive reforms (Fullan, 2000; Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Schleicher, 2011). Such is the reform policy framework in Bahrain. Perhaps the most recent example of the use of ‘informed prescription’ to successfully change an education system was in the UK in the 90’s (OECD 2011). International evidence confirms this outcome (TIMMS, 2007). Critics however argue that prescriptive reforms have a limited impact and that eventually improvement gains plateau although disadvantaged schools will probably continue to do well (Hopkins, 2006; Fullan, 2009; Fullan, 2011). Either way you look at it in England today there are thousands more children and young people reading and writing better today than they would have been without the reforms. Education reform scholars also argue that it takes more than prescriptive interventions to change a school system (OECD, 2005; Gopinathan et al., 2008). It takes human and social capital with social capital being the more important. In fact Michael Fullan, (2011) is keen to point out the need for ‘peer power’ in the classroom as an essential driver of education change.

Bahrain has adopted a centralized, prescriptive policy framework to its education reform agenda which is appropriate for a system under going deep changes (Haslam, 2011). However, in implementing its reform Bahrain also has the problem of sustainability through capacity development of local school teachers and leaders. The question is can the reform policy framework as it stands ensure student achievement in the classroom and also ensure system wide sustainability through the development of education social capital?
Bahrain is a relatively small national education system (UNESCO, 2012). It is served by 202 schools and just over 11,864 teachers. There are 125,603 Bahraini students in the public system with a further 24,508 in the local private schools. What is interesting is that over 378 teachers hold advanced post graduate degrees (Masters or doctorates) and 7326 have undergraduate degrees in education. What is a cause for concern is that as many as 2269 teachers do not hold a university degree and 56 have secondary education (Bahrain Ministry of Education, 2012). Combined with international test scores (TIMMS, 2007) in math and science in 2003 and 2007 these data indicated a need for large scale changes to the education system and the Bahrain Education Reform Project was established.

**THE BAHRAIN EDUCATION REFORM PROJECT**

There has been significant investment in three key reform agencies including an independent Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training (QAAET). The Bahrain Polytechnic to help with the reforms to vocational and technical education and the Bahrain Teachers College at the University of Bahrain. In like manner there have been six strategic themes identified as key drivers of educational change for student achievement. Education policy choices to this point have been centralized and prescriptive but the real work has yet to be undertaken and that is the roll out of national curriculum reforms and the need to professionally develop the teaching force in this regard. It’s the operational mix of these agencies and reform agenda elements that is complex. How do they relate to each other and how might the reform elements interact and roll out simultaneously while at the same time catering to the critical dimension of sustainability and capacity development? David Hopkin’s (2006) article which served as a primer for an OECD leadership conference argues that for the UK system to continue to improve centralized,
prescriptive reforms should give way to school centered, ‘professional’ reforms. But is this realistic in the context of Bahrain? Outstanding and good schools may be able to respond to this challenge but less effective schools may still need resources, help and guidance. His solution was to segment the school system based on the stage of development of the school toward reform. The most obvious segmentation has been undertaken by the QAAET and is available on the website as a report on schools (Figure 1). The second classification that could prove useful to segmenting the system is the MOE’s professional development cadre with grades from four to eight.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

Recent data from the QAAET suggests there could be as many as 33% of schools in Bahrain with good to outstanding teachers (QAAET 2012). 33% of the teaching workforce amounts to as many as 3800 or so teachers\(^1\). In like manner there are as many as 7600 teachers working in satisfactory or inadequate schools so there is work to be done. A contributory data set is that of earned qualifications of Bahraini teachers and school leaders (Table 1). On the positive side there appears to be 7704 teachers with a B.Ed. or higher degree with pedagogy training. On the other hand there are 4054 with no teacher’s certificate and either a first degree or less (Bahrain MOE, 2012).

**Insert Table 1 here**

Every teacher in the system can be placed on the Ministry of Education professional development career cadre which includes three tracks (namely teaching, specialist and leadership) and as many as eight levels (Figure 2). The newly trained teacher enters the cadre as a certified teacher a grade 4 and while the majority of teachers are at levels four, five and six

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\(^1\) Actual data on teachers in outstanding schools is difficult to come by and so the number of teachers was calculated as a % number of schools at each stage of their performance cycle multiplied by the number of teachers in the system.
there are some who have aspired to higher levels and would be the system leaders and potential architects of education change in Bahrain. The value of the cadre is that it allows Bahrain to customize its professional development and curriculum reform policies by segmentation based on QAAET rankings and stage of career development.

Insert Figure 2 here

SEGMENTATION OF THE BAHRAIN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

In simple terms the assumption is that outstanding schools have outstanding teachers and school leaders and in like manner schools would not be classified as ‘good’ without good teachers and school leaders. Just as schools are at a stage of organizational excellence so too are teachers and school leaders at different stages of their professional growth and at different stages of career development on the cadre. The matrix illustrated in Figure 3 provides for a policy framework that distinguishes between the need for ‘prescriptive’ interventions on the one hand and school based ‘professional’ reforms on the other. There is a twist to this in that those outstanding and good teachers with years of teaching and school leadership experience can also implement the reforms and thus build social capital across the system.

There could be as many as 2300 teachers working in underperforming schools in Bahrain. Their professional development would involve for the most part prescriptive interventions having to do with re-skilling programs. Coincidentally, there are 2269 teachers without a first degree and teaching in Bahraini schools. Obviously they will not all be working in inadequate schools but perhaps there are a number that are and that would benefit from a job rotation. There could be up to 5320 teachers working in satisfactory schools and need intensive classroom coaching and oversight possibly by colleagues in outstanding and good schools as a form of collaborative and
vertically integrated PD (Cordingley, et al 2003). No new teachers should be placed in satisfactory or inadequate schools and the new teachers in of course good to outstanding schools would need to be mentored by experienced teachers. The policy conundrum is situated at the junction of the satisfactory to good/outstanding schools and involves their ability to take on school based reforms?

**Insert Figure 3 here**

In like manner from a capacity building point of view it is the good to outstanding school teachers at the senior levels of the school cadre that could be the champions of collaborative professional development system wide (Huber et al. 2007). Especially when the reforms are in English and the language of instruction is Arabic! Teachers therefore, at grades 7 and 8 in good schools as well as teachers at grades 6, 7 and 8 in outstanding schools are likely to be the professional development leaders of choice who could local agents of change (OECD, 2010). They are likely to be designated master curriculum trainers, graduate student candidates, BTC Teaching Fellow candidates, clinical professors designated for masters or doctoral work overseas, teaching practice mentors and leaders in professional development/lab school partnerships with the BTC. Where possible they would also be master trainers for the national numeracy and literacy curriculum roll out for example.

**CONCLUSION**

Even the most challenged educational systems have some capacity to help it reform in a sustainable manner. However, people need to be motivated, incentivized, engaged and empowered in incremental stages (OECD 2011). In the mean time with at least two structural reforms in place (namely an independent quality assurance system for schools and a career cadre model) it is possible to implement a reform policy agenda based on a blend of government
centered and school centered initiatives. In short ‘one shoe may not fit all’ and for long term sustainability and the development of social capital let’s make sure it doesn’t.

**REFERENCES**

OECD (2010), *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. Accessed at: http://www.oecd.org/document/13/0,3343,en_2649_35845621_46538637_1_1_1_1,00.html


Figure 1

BAHRAIN Quality Assurance Agency for Education and Training (QAAET) 2011 Report on Bahrain Public Schools

Outstanding: (7) 3.5%
Good: (60) 29.7%
Satisfactory: (93) 46.5%
Inadequate: (41) 20.3%

400 teachers
3432 teachers
5320 teachers
2300 teachers

### Table 1

**Educational qualifications of Bahrain Public School Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Public School Teachers</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD / MSc/ M.Ed</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Ed</td>
<td>7326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc or BA</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma, Higher Diploma, Sec. or Elementary</td>
<td>2269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1860</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2

*Bahrain MOE Career Cadre for Teachers and School Leaders*
Figure 3

Segmentation based on the stage of development of the school and the teaching force

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QAAET School Ratings</th>
<th>MOE (CPD) Cadre</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 Outstanding Schools</td>
<td>Mentoring &amp; Mainstream PD Program</td>
<td>School based reforms &amp; collaborative PD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 Good schools</td>
<td>Mentoring Mainstream PD Program</td>
<td>School based reforms &amp; Collaborative PD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93 Satisfactory schools</td>
<td>Intensive In-classroom Coaching and Oversight by system PD leaders and outside experts</td>
<td>Collaborative PD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 Inadequate schools</td>
<td>Off-classroom - Re-skilling Programs by BTC, system PD leaders and outside experts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Prescription | Social Capital | School based