

Introductory Essay: Global Perspectives on Educational Leadership in the Middle East and North Africa, The View from Palestine

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This special issue on educational leadership in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region did not set out to focus exclusively on Palestine. That it did was by necessity, not by design. Despite our best efforts through several deadline extensions for submissions, we received no papers on educational leadership from researchers outside of Palestine. This fact speaks volumes to the problem that motivated us originally to produce this volume—the scarcity of scholarly discourse and research in the MENA region on leadership theory and leadership practice in education contexts. With some rare exceptions, there is little evidence of serious theoretical or empirical research on how administrators or teachers enact leadership in the contexts of basic, secondary, or higher education, or of what distinguishes leadership in educational change from, say, leadership in public policy and administration and governance more broadly [1,2].

We want to be clear, however. We are not dismissing the substantial body of literature on education and development in the MENA region since the 1950s and particularly since the 1970s from the interdisciplinary field of international and comparative education; nor from relevant sociological and anthropological literature on agency, power, and gender, or the work of political scientists on governance, policy, and political change in the region. What we are saying, however, is that just as some scholars have started examining leadership theories and leadership styles in public sector institutions in the MENA region, triggered mainly by the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring [3], education researchers likewise ought to be giving serious attention not only to the nature of leadership theory in the context of educational change, but also about the role of schooling in the development of social leadership in youth [4,5,6].

After all, during the half century preceding the dramatic regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt in January 2011, education policy in the MENA region witnessed successive waves of education reform heavily influenced by whatever development theory was dominant at the time—modernization, human capital, and neoliberalism to name the major ones. In the name of “international best practices,” these reforms were often foisted upon deficit-strapped ministries of education by international and multilateral development organizations like the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, and more recently by

organizations under the aegis of the EU [7]. Moreover, in the past decade the TIMSS and PISA international assessment programs have emerged as influential forces shaping policy discourses among education leaders in the MENA region [8,9]. The publication of country rankings and the regional comparisons they invite place enormous political pressure on governments and educational leaders to improve student achievement scores [10].

Taking our cue from Northouse [11], who emphasizes that leadership is a situated process “whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 16), each of the five papers in this special issue presents a view to a particular context in which the process of educational leadership plays out. The first three papers explore changes in teachers’ attitudes and perceptions about their professional identities and practices. The fourth paper looks at the sharply contrasting perceptions of student-teachers and teacher educators about the quality of pre-service teacher education. The fifth and final paper examines the sustainability of leadership attitudes and practices among a group of principals who participated in a leadership development program.

In the first paper, Hanan Ramahi examines the interim outcomes of a year-long intervention designed to develop teacher leadership as a means to professional development and school improvement at a private school in Ramallah. The intervention, “Teachers Leading the Way,” is part of Ramahi’s doctoral research. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and a reflective journal, Ramahi explores the teachers’ use of dialogue, reflection, problem solving and values-articulation as modalities to empower their capacity individually and collectively to lead change in their practices. She concludes that unlike conventional approaches to teacher professional development, a non-positional approach, where every teacher is inherently a change agent, [12,13], has potential for supporting the development of teachers’ leadership capacity in school-based reform focused on enhancing student learning outcomes.

In the next paper, Bihan Qaimari unpacks the impact of protracted and violent political conflict on teachers’ professional identity and the school social culture in which professional identity is embedded. Using a multiple case-study approach framed by sociocultural theories of

identity formation, Qaimari conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three West Bank schools during the 2000-2005 popular uprising against the Israeli occupation known as the Second Intifada [14]. Whereas Ramahi saw the potential of school social culture to support teachers in developing greater self-confidence, determination, and collegiality—important leadership traits in professional identity [15]—Qaimari instead finds many teachers questioning both their professional identity and personal efficacy in a school social culture ruptured by instability and daily threats of violence to both themselves and their students. Her study points to a crucial need for programs of pre-service and in-service teacher development to better prepare teachers to manage their own psychosocial needs as well as those of their students.

In the third paper, Ahmed Awad Amin, examines the attitudes of newly appointed teachers about classroom management. Although theoretical and practical distinctions are usually drawn between the concepts of leadership and management [16], contemporary school reform now sees the two as complementary sets of skills not limited to the principal only, but also integral to a teacher's professional identity and practice [17,18]. Based on observations over the years of his former student-teachers of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), Amin repeatedly found many to be struggling with classroom management during their early years of teaching. To explore why, Amin conducted survey research among a sample of TEFL teachers. His study finds that the teachers were both ill-prepared and poorly supported in how to translate their theoretical knowledge of classroom management from their pre-service coursework into effective classroom practices. Amin concludes his paper with recommendations for bridging the theory-practice gap that exists between pre-service and in-service teacher education.

The theory-practice gap in teacher preparation is further evidenced in the fourth paper by Bsharat and Rmahi, which compares the perceptions of teacher educators and student-teachers about the quality of pre-service teacher education at three universities in the West Bank. Using a qualitative research design involving in-depth interviews and focus groups, Bsharat and Rmahi framed their analysis by adapting standards established by the British Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [19]. Specifically, the study compares the views of the research subjects across three broad domains of quality: instructional practices of faculty; suitability of learning opportunities; and, academic support from the administration. The study reveals vastly conflicting views between course instructors and student-teachers across all three domains of quality. Whereas instructors described positively their management of course content and activities, the student-teachers, to the contrary, saw a lack of leadership by both faculty and the administration in providing relevant coursework and supportive resources toward developing both their theoretical and practical understanding of teaching and learning. In particular, student-teachers found instruction overly traditional, with teacher-centered lecturing as the norm. Even when technology was used, it merely substituted for lecturing and did little to engage students beyond memorization of theories and competencies. Most of all, the student-teachers found little harmonization between their

coursework and their experiences during practice teaching at schools. In short, the findings by Bsharat and Rmahi's study add support to conclusions drawn in Amin's paper and point to areas where administrative leadership need to shore up gaps in program management. Critically, the study suggests a conceptual framework and methodology—based on standards for quality assurance—that can inform university decision-making on improving pre-service teacher education in the Palestinian context.

The special issue concludes with a paper authored by the co-editors of the issue, Louis Cristillo, Nuha Ater, and Alia Assali. The paper presents findings from a mixed methods study that examines the sustainability of a three-year leadership development intervention involving 40 public school principals that ended in June 2013. The intervention was part of a USAID-funded school-based school reform project—the Model School Network (MSN) Program [20]—managed by AMIDEAST, a U.S. non-profit organization. The study finds evidence that nearly three years since its closeout, the MSN leadership training appears to be having a sustainable impact on the attitudes and practices of principals as leaders of their school communities in general and as instructional leaders in particular. The results point to a shift in attitudes dominated by management and control to attitudes and behaviors reflecting both transformational and distributed models of school leadership [21,22]. The study finds that principals continue to provide teachers with professional development opportunities; to support teacher collaboration; to encourage the use of technology in teaching and learning; to use student assessment data to inform professional development; and to mobilize a broad spectrum of stakeholders both inside and outside the school community to support school improvement.

To conclude, we want to emphasize again that although these five papers focus on the particular context of Palestine, we see their publication as a call to action for education researchers in the MENA region to begin laying the theoretical and empirical foundations for the study of educational leadership and leadership practice. The task needs to begin with some very basic questions: How is leadership, as a social and cultural construct, defined in educational contexts within and across countries of the MENA region? What traits or behaviors distinguish leadership personalities and styles? How does an individual acquire the status of education leader? What does education leadership look like in actual practice? What factors enable or constrain the agency of an individual to enact leadership for educational change? What factors facilitate or hinder leadership as a process? What is the status of research on leadership theory and practice currently: where are the gaps and what are the priorities? By asking essential questions like these, our hope is that education researchers in the MENA region can begin contributing meaningfully to leadership studies not only in the field of education, but also in the broader interdisciplinary discourses on leadership theory in the region and beyond.

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