



## Policy borrowing in the gulf cooperation council countries: Cultural scripts and epistemological conflicts



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Educational Borrowing  
Globalization  
Cultural Scripts  
GCC Countries  
Culture and learning

### ABSTRACT

Globalization through educational borrowing has transformed the K-12 educational landscape driving and shaping educational reforms worldwide by saturating nations' educational policies and practices reducing education to products and services globally sold to those with adequate resources. Governments worldwide seize the opportunity to import educational theories, policies and practices anticipating quick fixes and delivered results to their educational systems. However, a major concern about the borrowing process is that educational policies and practices that are effective in their original context may not prove effective elsewhere. In particular, the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have developed educational reforms by importing policies and practices tested in the West. Against the backdrop of the educational borrowing processes in the GCC, this paper identifies several cultural scripts in the region based on reviewing the existing literature and examines how the local educational epistemological beliefs undermine or support the implementation of a borrowed educational policy.

### 1. Introduction

“A penguin in the desert;” proclaimed Dr Khalifa AlSuwaidi, the opening keynote speaker, at the “Education in Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: Educational Creativity and Aspirations” Forum.<sup>1</sup> The title aroused the curiosity of the audience since it conflicts with the laws of nature. The speaker clarified that the “penguin” represents the educational systems, policies, curricula and textbooks imported from the West. He explained how these foreign elements are imposed on Arab communities without scrutiny, analysis or evaluation and argued they lack compatibility with Arabic culture. Speaking in the affirmative, Dr Khalifa concluded: “If penguins were able to live in the desert, then the borrowed Western educational systems would fit naturally in the Gulf landscape, our children would coexist with it and it would be compatible with the nature and patterns of our region’s social life.”

Governments worldwide seize the opportunity to import educational theories, policies and practices anticipating improvement to their educational systems. However, policy makers overlook the issue that the borrowing process implicitly promotes “de-territorialization and decontextualization of reform, and challenges the past conception of education as a culturally bounded system” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 5).

What we see is educational policymakers “adopting policy blueprints, management structures, leadership practices and professional development programs fashioned in different cultural setting while giving little consideration to their cultural fit” (Dimmock & Walker, 2000, p. 147). More importantly, ‘educational policy borrowing is endemic but without careful attention to the key ideas of contextualization and ownership its value is less likely to be achieved’ (McDonald, 2012, p. 1871) (McDonald, 2012) and could be described of attempting to fulfill the endeavors of turning a penguin to a desert species.

There is little doubt that the globalization of educational policy has become popular among educational policymakers worldwide (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Phillips (2004) defines the process of educational borrowing as “policy makers in one country seek to employ ideas taken from the experience of another country” (p. 54). The key element of borrowing is the conscious adoption of a policy from one context to another (Phillips and Ochs, 2003) led by the belief that foreign educational policies and models might solve existing or emerging problems. According to McDonald (2012) borrowing “occurs in a variety of ways including in-country training, student training/education in a foreign country, distance education programs, educational study tours, policy adoption, exchange programs and establishment of educational

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<sup>1</sup> Held at Qatar University on February 27, 2016.

institutions across borders” (p. 1817–1818) enabling the exportation of educational policies and products to develop into a lucrative and profitable business.<sup>2</sup>

The method used in this study employs a phenomenological paradigm where the study of events needs is carried to understand the character and meaning to experiences and events (Spiegelberg, 1982). “Phenomenology offers a sound philosophical framework for studying the multifaceted dimensions of experiences and associated meanings of events” (Ziakas & Boukas, 2012, p. 56). Phenomenology is used to enlarge and deepen the understanding of the range of immediate events without going into their depth and origins. As a phenomenon we look at common education scripts we contextualize then within the adaptive and adoptive model describing the immediate realities and experiences by drawing other scholarly arguments and variants of the experience and how the different scholars uncover those experience and make a meaningful sense out of them.

With that in mind, this paper argues that there is a need to consider the complexities of educational borrowing considering the concept of “cultural scripts” that refer to “background norms, templates, guidelines or models for ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and speaking, in a particular cultural context” (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 157). In what follows, the practice and orthodoxy of educational borrowing in the GCC is discussed before we develop a several cultural scripts based on reviewing the existing literature. Finally we propose several recommendations for policy borrowing in the region.

## 2. Educational borrowing in the GCC

In this section, we discuss reasons behind educational borrowing in the GCC; highlight regional examples of educational borrowing; and examine the results of importing educational systems as discussed in the existing literature. The six Gulf Cooperation Council countries share a variety of social norms and practices based on “common religious, economic, cultural, political and historical characteristics” (Issan, 2013, p. 145). GCC leaders view education as an essential element needed to develop their nations economy and guide social change in the knowledge age (Mansour and Al-Shamrani, 2015). There is a common element that led the GCC governments to invest in quite similar educational reforms. There is a general belief that the development of a nation is strongly associated with education measures, a significant indicator of modernization. This belief has led to all levels of education in the GCC quickly developing and all have involved extensive policy borrowing, from Western countries (Mansour and Al-Shamrani, 2015). This has led to constant changes in educational policy in the Middle Eastern region because “the reforms are often borrowed (or lent) with the ideas behind them tending to have been tested elsewhere, usually in a developed country. . all this done to quick fix education systems to deliver results” (Donn & Manthri, 2013, p. 9).

Dahl (2010) argues that members of the GCC “struggle with a disconnect between accelerating modernization and economic growth, and unchanged cultural values and attitudes” (p. 2). Leaders in the UAE “recognize that traditional Arabic-style learning has not developed the critical, analytical and creative skills needed to provide strong contributors to their workforce, or reduced dependence on foreign expertise” (p. 3). The UAE has sought out Western educational policies, practices and models that could address this need believing “Western, English-medium educations can enable this” (Dahl, 2010, p. 3).

<sup>2</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports income from Australia’s international education services sector exports was a record high \$17.6 billion in 2014 (Minister for Education and Training, 2015). Education services are still Australia’s largest services export, with \$15bn revenue in 2012 (International Trade in Goods and Services, Australia, 2013). New Zealand’s educational industry generated larger economic gains than the export of New Zealand wines (Robertson et al., 2002). The UK’s education exports industry is worth £17.5 billion (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013).

However as GCC countries attempt to raise the level of education, they must deal with various negative social consequences “such as the weakening of the Arabic language, the possible loss of Cultural identity, and the undermining of cultural and religious values. Bahgat (1999) argues that these countries struggle with the preservation of their culture as they attempt to reconcile traditional values and modernization, especially in the educational systems.

Diallo (2014) points out that Western educational systems are “influenced by secular and liberal epistemologies...relatively distant from religious influence” (p. 5). Secular ideologies outside of a religious framework play a significant role in the construction of knowledge and shape thinking and inquiry in Western education and in turn, pedagogical practices. Diallo states, “basic education and the transmission of Islamic knowledge rely on repetition, drills and memorization as their key learning methods. Memorization and recitation are important” (p. 4). More importantly, rote learning has spread “to the ‘philosophy of teaching, which inculcates passivity, dependence, prior respect for authority and an unquestioning attitude” (Prokop, 2003, p. 80).

On the contrary, the prime purpose of education in Qatar “must be” teaching Qataris their culture, language and religion. Similarly, Islamic epistemologies and education practices play a considerable role over the education systems in the UAE (Diallo, 2014; Findlow, 2008). Dahl (2010) stresses that, “for Arabs, learning has been very much rooted in tradition and religion. Non-empirical sources of knowledge are accepted as valid, whereas in the West fact must be established by the scientific method” (p. 20). It has been said: there are two things we should give our children: one is “roots” and the other is “wings.” In what follows we develop three cultural scripts<sup>3</sup> in the GCC, based on the reviewing the existed literature, before examining whether the countries of the region have succeed in giving their children both roots and wings.

## 3. Cultural scripts in the GCC

Several scholars have utilized the concept of cultural scripts to understand the dominant cultural factors that influence and guide individual behaviors and ways of understanding the world (see Tan, 2015; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2004; Goddard, 1997; Reynolds, 1996). According to Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004) the term cultural script refers to a “powerful new technique for articulating cultural norms, values, and practices in terms which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike” (p. 153). These scripts can be viewed as a reflection of an individuals’ understanding and their actions, and meaning in a particular context. “Cultural scripts are intended to capture background norms, templates, guidelines or models for ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and speaking, in a particular cultural context (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 157). Cultural scripts are learned implicitly by participation rather than by study (Stigler and Hiebert, 1999) and these scripts reflect the knowledge shared among the members of a given community.

In education, a cultural script describes “taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about how to teach or learn successfully and about how to use talk in interaction, among other aspects of learning” (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006, p. 9). Cultural scripts in education emerge as various activities or ways for learning, reading and writing, talking and thinking and also play a role in shaping the student-teacher roles (Welikala, 2011),<sup>4</sup> thus privileging particular narratives of learning while excluding others. In what follows, the concept of cultural script is discussed and the influential and prevailing

<sup>3</sup> We argue that these cultural scripts among many others form the basis of the educational epistemological belief in the region.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Tan (2015) provides three cultural scripts for teaching in China. The three scripts are as follows: 1) “the students’ respect for the teacher” (p. 200); 2) “student attention and discipline in class” (p. 201); and 3) “the importance of practice for the students” (p. 201).

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