Facing the challenges of educational reform in the Arab world

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Abstract   This paper pinpoints and discusses key aspects of the current approaches to school reform in the Arab world against the backdrop of what is accepted as the best practice in the international literature on effective school reform and educational change. The main goal of the paper is to highlight deeply ingrained assumptions and practices that are likely to create barriers for reformers who are interested in effectively implementing educational reform in the Arab region. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations informed by the current international literature on effective school reform, and deemed promising for overcoming the identified barriers and achieving effective and sustainable reform in the region. While the case of reform in the Arab region has its unique characteristics, it shares with other developing countries many of the challenges it faces. Lessons learned in this region offer promising insights to reformers in other developing regions of the world.

Keywords   Large scale reform · School improvement · Arab countries · Cross cultural analysis · Educational policy · School reform

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In the last decades, national governments around the world brought education reform to the forefront of their efforts to improve their countries' economic and social conditions (Abi-Mershed 2010; Carnoy and Rhoten 2002; Finnan 2000; Hargreaves 2007; Hallinger 2010; Hallinger and Bryant 2013). This paper addresses the case of educational reform as it is experienced in the Arab region. Similar to other developing regions of the world, educational reform in this region has been

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presented as the main vehicle for achieving social, political, and economic development (Abi-Mershed 2010; Bahgat 1999; Bashshur 1982; El Amine 2005). However, despite the multitude of regional and national initiatives, attempts at educational reform in this region are reported to have achieved limited quantitative gains in terms of increasing the number of educational opportunities and regarding the physical expansion of schools to additional geographic areas. The last World Bank Middle East and North Africa (MENA) development report (The World Bank 2008), the Arab Knowledge Report (2009), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Arab Human Development Report (2002), and the Arab World's Education Report Card (2012) point at disappointing results of reform efforts in inducing social, political, and economic advancements. Specifically, they point at the fact that although there is some noted quantitative progress with respect to (1) the increase in the number of universities and schools, and (2) the drop in the levels of illiteracy in some Arab countries, the quality of educational services, and their impact on the quality of learning of Arab students, fall short of preparing them for the demands of a postmodern technological world (see also 2011 TIMSS results, www.timss.bc.edu). This failure is mostly noted in the inability of these attempts to cause changes at the school and classroom level especially with regards to improving the quality of the classroom practices, the school climates, and consequently, the students' achievements (Bashshur 2005; Bahgat 1999; Chapman and Miric 2009; El Amine 2005; Faour 2012). The MENA development report (The World Bank 2008) links this current state to the shortcomings of the dominant approach of these reform attempts and posits that the region is in dire need of a new paradigm of educational reform.

Many regional conferences and meetings were held calling on educational experts and policymakers to: (1) discuss the reasons behind the shortcomings of the reform attempts, (2) identify the barriers to success encountered by educational reformers in the Arab region, and (3) issue recommendations on how to achieve effective and sustainable reform in the region (e.g. LAES conferences, regional UNESCO meetings, etc.). Reports from these meetings reached similar conclusions and revealed striking similarities regarding the identified challenges and suggestions offered to address these challenges [see for example the Lebanese Association for Educational Sciences (LAES) reports and conference proceedings www.laes.org]. According to these reports, the region's educators are stuck in their quest of thinking of approaches to reform that can prove successful at the level of school practices (Bashshur 1982, 2005; Abi-Mershed 2010; El Amine 2005). Moreover, most of these reports conclude with broad recommendations that fall short of proposing specific alternative directions and strategies. Mostly, they are presented as a set of reflections that are neither grounded in a conceptual and empirical knowledge base, nor based on the results of empirical studies conducted on the nature of implementation practices and on the impact of reform initiatives on educational practices in the Arab region (El Amine 2005, 2009).

This paper makes the case that educational reform, in this developing region, is doomed to repeat the past failures unless there are: (1) major changes in guiding principles and assumptions that underlie definitions of what kind of problems need to be addressed while focusing on changing teacher, principal, and school

organization practices; and (2) major changes in the design of reform and implementation strategies. The paper is based on the premise that following strategies and principles that are validated by empirical research does indeed result in changes in local school, teacher, and administrator practices that will consequently lead to improvements in students' achievement. It proposes that efforts to improve educational achievement in the Arab region will occur if: (1) there is an empirically grounded understanding of what school-level practices need to change to result in such an improvement, and (2) the assumptions and strategies necessary for the implementation of the reform are grounded in what empirical research validates as effective policy implementation and change strategies. The recommendations presented in this paper on how to face the challenges of educational reform in the Arab world emerged from reflections guided mainly by: (1) international literature on effective school reform; (2) reviews of regional and national reports and conference proceedings on the state of Arab education from international and regional organizations [United Nations Development Programs (UNDP), World Bank, Arab League Educational and Cultural Scientific Organization (ALECSO), United Nation Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as well as from local educational professional organizations, Lebanese Association for Educational Studies (LAES)]; and (3) the authors' experience in designing and implementing the TAMAM project, an ongoing initiative for school-based reform conducted in seven Arab countries (www.tamamproject.org). While the case of reform in the Arab region has its unique characteristics, it shares with other developing countries many of the challenges it faces. Lessons learned from analyzing failed reform attempts in this region offer promising insights that also inform reformers in other developing regions of the world.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The next section presents, as a background, an overview of the state of educational reform in the Arab countries highlighting common characteristics that are connected to its shortcomings. The paper then proposes a set of strategies and argues in favor of their promising impact on improving the effectiveness of reform initiatives in the Arab region and informing attempts at reform in other developing countries with similar conditions.

The state of educational reform in the Arab countries

Reform in the Arab region gained center stage in the 1970s, signaling the start, and development, of a new educational paradigm in the Arab world. In the wake of their defeat in the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, Arab countries saw education as a catalyst for modernization, social advancement, economic development, and political solidarity (El Amine 2005; ALECSO 2008). In addition, educational leaders from these countries participated in worldwide initiatives that encourage their countries to improve educational services, like the United Nations' Education for All Act launched in Thailand in 1990 and reaffirmed in Dakkar in 2000. For the last two decades, this has manifested in the form of regional and national initiatives that have resulted in top-down and long-term strategic plans for educational reform (Bashshur 1982, 2005; El Amine 2005). At the regional level, the meetings among politicians

and educational experts, under the auspices of the Arab League, led to the launching of these initiatives (Sana'a Summit 1972; The Algiers Summit 2005; The Khartoum Summit 2006; The Riyadh Summit 2007; The Tunis Summit 2008, 2011). As a result, a series of regional strategic plans and declarations were signed by the ministers of education of Arab countries. These regional plans were intended to trigger reform initiatives at the country level that aligned with the regional goals, thus setting a unified direction for reform among all the Arab countries. The basic assumption behind these regional plans was that strategic planning at the regional level would foster unity and solidarity among Arab societies, promote the Arabic language, strengthen the core religious and humanitarian values that these societies share, and build human capacity for the much-needed economic and social advancement in the region (Bashshur 1982). The latest two of these regional initiatives are the strategic plan adopted in the Tunis Summit (ALECSO 2008), and the Arab regional agenda for improving educational quality (The World Bank Group 2012). The former calls for ensuring the right to education for all, enhancing the quality of education for all levels and subjects, and linking educational development with the needs of sustainable development and a rapidly changing world. It also offers two main recommendations pertaining to achieving these goals: (1) Future reform plans "must emanate from dialogue between the Arab countries themselves in the context of joint Arab action and not be imposed or proposed from the outside" (ALECSO 2008, p. 14); and (2) Arab educational decision-makers need to make use of the existing "large reservoir of experiences and innovations…by adopting other countries' successful experiences, provided that these experiences are adapted to—and made to comply with—the specificities of the Arab countries" (ALECSO 2008, p. 14). The second, consists of five programs coordinated by ALECSO:

(1) Research and Evaluation of Education Quality (Morocco/UNESCO Beirut); (2) Teacher Policies and Teacher Professional Development (Queen Rania Teacher Academy); (3) Early Childhood Development (Arab Resource Collective); (4) Curriculum Innovation, Qualifications and ICTS in Education (Tunisian National Center for Technologies in Education); and (5) Entrepreneurship (Injaz Al Arab/World Economic Forum) (The World Bank Group 2012).

Despite the geopolitical and societal differences among the Arab countries, educational reformers are all subject to the challenge of facing up to three competing demands as they design and implement their national reform initiatives: (1) aligning with the international calls for setting standards, accountability, and technological modernization; (2) responding to the regional calls for collaboration among Arab States and focusing on safeguarding the Arab cultural heritage and identity; and (3) responding to the unique social, political, and economic demands of their particular countries. Whether their goals are to move towards the decentralization of the educational system as in the Qatar model (Bahjat 1999; Brewer and & Goldman 2010), or to educate for a knowledge economy as in the case of Jordan (ERFKE I & II—see "Appendix 1, 2"), or to professionalize the educational sector as in the case of Lebanon (see "Appendix 1, 2"), either way, the

national level's initiatives to reform are found to share a number of common characteristics (Karami-Akkary and Rizk 2011), as highlighted in the next section.

Common characteristics of educational reform in the Arab region

In what follows, the characteristics of educational reform in the Arab region will be presented and discussed in relation to how they relate to their commonly noted challenges.

Initiatives for reform are driven by political agendas

Many Arab scholars contend that the majority of the current reform initiatives are driven by political agendas that are isolated from the priorities and needs of educational practitioners and the schools' social and cultural contexts (Abi-Mershed 2010; Bashshur 2005, 2010; El Amine 2005; Mazawi 2010). Moreover, educational reform in the Arab states is often triggered and supported by initiatives from international, development, and humanitarian agencies as well as western governments (Mazawi 2010). There is a widespread agreement that regardless of the discourse employed by these agencies, most of their initiatives are driven by the donor country's economic and political agendas rather than by the concerns revolving around the development in the Arab countries (Bashshur 2010; Mazawi 2010; Sayed 2005). Mazawi (2010) explains that when it comes to the impact of these influences on the approaches to reform, Arab countries appear as "incompatible knowledge regimes…which are more strongly linked to competing extra regional economic and political centers of power (EU vs. US) than horizontally across the Arab states" (p. 212). Mazawi (2010) rightly warns that the results of many reform attempts being sponsored by international agencies leads to an increase in "dependency on practices and technologies developed elsewhere and imported into the Arab region as part of free trade agreements, [and] as consumer ready packages under the banner of promoting a knowledge society" (p. 212).

On the other hand, the politicized nature of reform is resulting in difficulties regarding the effective implementation of its initiatives. The fact that the governmental reform is associated with the international donors' agencies is making many local practitioners skeptical of its goals and strategies, thus obstructing its implementation and successful integration (Sayed 2005). This skepticism is believed to be fueled by the absence of democratic dialogue at all levels of the educational system, especially when it comes to allowing active participation in the decision-making process of those who will be influenced by the reform, and in charge of its implementation (Mazawi 2010; Sayed 2005). In her case study on reform in Egypt, Sayed (2005) reported that this skepticism led to the marginalization of educational practitioners and the lack of institutional and societal support for desired reforms; both of which sometimes resulted in widespread resistance to the proposed change altogether.

Within these contentious environments, the Arab policymakers' vision for the kind of schools, teachers, and students they want, is at best blurred, and at worst

non-existent. In addition, reform strategies that are followed are totally disconnected from the social and cultural realities of school-level practices in their countries.

Reform is dominated by the top-down approach to change

Educational reform in the Arab countries has been mostly advanced in the form of large-scale, top-down strategic plans mandated through policies at the national level of school governance (Bashshur 2005, 2010; El Amine 2005; Karami-Akkary and Rizk 2011). In the last decade, there has been a growing number of small-scale reform initiatives based on the belief that effective reform has to be school-based (see for example the TAMAM project, www.tamamproject.org, and the Qattan foundation's experiences with school-based reform, http://www.qattanfoundation. org/qcerd/subpage/en/index.asp?SectionID=53). Both projects involve using action research as a catalyst for building capacity among teachers, and promote their level of professionalism. However, these, and other school-based initiatives, are still very rare, and remain disconnected from the national plans, thus limiting their promise to impact the nationally-driven reform agenda (Bashshur 2005; El Amine 2005).

It is becoming questionable regarding whether this top-down approach, coupled with the politicized and uncritical adoption of Western experiences, could lead to the improvement towards which Arab reformers are aiming. Contrarily, it is resulting in fundamental incongruence between the goals sought and the means used to achieve them. The current reform experience in the Gulf States in general, and the Qatari experience in particular, is an ongoing testimony to this observation (Bahjat 1999; Bashshur 2010). While the adopted Charter School model (named independent schools for Qatar) intends to move the system towards decentralization by giving more decision-making power to school level practitioners (Brewer and & Goldman 2010), its adoption and implementation come as top-down mandates. These mandates impose that the practitioners adopt these changes with a total disregard to their perspectives on the feasibility and responsiveness of these changes to the needs of schools and students. While noting some of its emerging gains (i.e. better facilities, more support activities like training and parental involvement), Bashshur (2010) highlights the apparent failure of this reform to transform the current trend of teachers feeling marginalized, especially with regards to their contribution to the decision-making process at their schools.

Moreover, the prevalence of the top-down approach to reform has resulted in deeply ingrained norms that revolve around the responsibility of initiating reform. In Arab countries, initiating reform is viewed as the sole responsibility of national governments. This paternalistic view of change is deeply reflected in the educational system. Teachers view change as being the responsibility of policymakers; as something that "happens to them" rather than something that "they initiate" (Bashshur 2005). This has resulted in a learned passivity, where teachers see no reason to become proactive agents of change in their institutions; a serious problem that is aggravated by a belief among teachers that taking initiative and bringing new ideas is too risky as it might upset people in critical positions and trigger retaliations (Karami-Akkary et al. 2012).

There is a lack of a culturally grounded knowledge base on effective reform

One of the challenges faced by reformers in the Arab region is the poor and stagnant knowledge base. El Amine (2005) reports: "we do not know much about reform in our context" (p. 337). He asserts that this comes as a result of: (1) the fact that Arab educators neither systematically document their experiences, nor have rich intellectual dialogues about these experiences (El Amine 2005); and (2) a stagnation in generating culturally grounded innovations, and accumulating a dynamic knowledge base.

In fact, the lack of a knowledge base that El-Amine refers to echoes the situation of most developing countries, where the local knowledge is rarely recognized as being of value and is highly disregarded (Tilak 2002). In the presence of this vacuum, policymakers and reformers in the Arab countries are heavily relying on a knowledge base that is mostly imported, and highly disconnected, from the local realities of their practice (Bashshur 2010; El Amine 2005; Mazawi 2010). Many Arab scholars rightly warn against the prevalence of the uncritical adoption of pre-packaged foreign reform ideas, programs, and policies. Additionally, they also warn against the assumption that these are panaceas for overcoming the existing challenges simply because they have originated in more advanced countries (Bahgat 1999; Bashshur 2010; Bouchedid et al. 2002; El Amine 2005; Mazawi 2010). Bashshur's (2010) critical observations on the current reform upheaval in the Gulf States elaborate on the above concerns. He characterizes this reform as an "educational and revolutionary adventure" and highlights its full dependence on uncritically transplanting American ideas into the Arab context (Bashshur 2010, p. 260). Among those, the experience of Qatar's independent schools gives a representative example. Independent schools, the Qatari version of Charter Schools, were brought in through the RAND Corporation that sold to the Qataris as a gateway for their students to meet internationally accepted standards. Although the public schools in Qatar fully "converted" to the independent school model (Brewer and Goldman 2010), the effectiveness of the Charter School model and its accompanying standards movement are still highly contested by scholars and policymakers in the United States—the country of origin for the model (Imberman 2011; Ravich 2010). In fact, at the conclusion of an extensive review of research on the impact of charter schools on students, Imberman (2011) contends that "it is unclear whether charters are beneficial or detrimental to students…the empirical evidence has been mixed" (p. 417). He further elaborates that charter schools have "little effects on cognitive or non-cognitive skills…[and that] the discipline and attendance impacts found in start-ups do not persist after students return to regular public schools, so there do not appear to be long-term behavioral improvements" (p. 434). These facts seem to be widely ignored by Qatari reformers who continue to present the model as an ideal template that guarantees improved student achievements.

In parallel to this phenomenon of uncritical adaptation, little attention seems to be given to building the capacity of the local universities. The "transplantation" of Western universities to the Arab oil countries (like Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia), and the overdependence on foreign educational consultants all throughout

the Arab region, have neglected members of faculties of education in local universities (Bashshur 2010). Rather than playing a lead strategic role in this cultural exchange phenomenon by actively contributing to the process of cross-cultural adaptation of the imported knowledge, local educational scholars are, when included, only recruited to contribute to the mere execution of the imported models.

As Bashshur (2010) puts it, Arab reformers are faced with a strategic question: "How [can one] benefit from the West without crushing under its weight and losing one's soul and heart in the process?" (p. 269). According to him, the questions that need to be asked must focus on the manner in which this benefit should be "sought after and brought in and installed" into local contexts (p. 268), and on the processes that ought to be followed in designing interventions that can help achieve the goals they set in a way that is relevant to the local context and its priorities.

Planning for implementation is broadly neglected

Educational reform in the Arab region is still dominated by what Berman and McLaughlin (1974) and McLaughlin (1990) call the Adoption Perspective on Planned Change, where reformers hold a rationalistic view of organizational behavior grounded in the assumption that people in organizations are constantly eager "to seek better practices, have reliable means to identify superior behavior and are eager and able to adopt proven innovations" (Berman and McLaughlin 1974, p. 7). Taking a closer look at the top-down, politically driven, and mostly prefabricated reform ideas, reveals the neglect of those planning for reform to account for the multitude of factors that can hinder its effective implementation. The dominant design that reform attempts take consists of overly ambitious outcomes, large-scale goals, and poorly researched strategies that do not take into consideration the priorities of the local context. There is a general agreement that most of these plans have goals that are unrealistic when set against the available material and human resources, and the time frame allocated to achieve these goals (Bashshur 2005, 2010; El Amine 2005; Karami-Akkary and Rizk 2011). In addition, there are no channels of communication in place that bring the dialogue about the strategic goals to the stakeholders who will be directly responsible for their implementation at the school level (El Amine 2005). As a result, many of these goals are often left without implementation strategies; however, and in the event that those do exit, the goals are largely disconnected from them (El Amine 2005).

In addition, change seems to be mostly conceived in the region as introducing dispersed innovative practices while little attention is paid to connecting them to actual problems of practice, or to integrating these innovations in the school system in order to sustain their impact (Karami-Akkary and Rizk 2011). Jurdak and El-Amine (2005) report a "drop" in the scope and quality of the innovation during implementation as compared to its intended goals while studying the case of the Lebanese governmental initiative to reform its national curriculum.

Moreover, the scope of the adopted innovative practices is often limited by a prevailing belief at the school level that structures and policies are beyond "critical evaluation" and are seen as "non-modifiable" and too hard to change (Karami-

Akkary and Rizk 2011). Thus, the normative dimension of school change as encompassing beliefs and values is never targeted as a goal (El Amine 2005).

Lastly, an intense sense of pride among the people of the Arab world causes discomfort when it comes to acknowledging mistakes, and becomes a barrier to any attempt at evidence-driven evaluation, self-reflection, and critical thinking (Karami-Akkary et al. 2012). Maintaining good relationships with others and protecting personal feelings take precedence over seeking evidence/data as the basis for constructive criticism and action towards the achievement of goals. This makes the school practitioners avoid engaging in evaluation, thus rendering the decision-making process mostly impulsive, reactionary, and without careful strategic thinking and planning. Preliminary results from the project implementation of TAMAM reveal these challenges (Karami-Akkary et al. 2012). Similarly, Jurdak and El-Amine (2005) conclude their study of the Lebanese curricular reform, noting that there is a lack of institutionalized processes for monitoring the progress of implementation and ongoing evaluation of reform initiatives that serve the purpose of improving their design.

There is lack of professional capacity for those participating in the reform

Arab scholars agree that there is a major gap between the ambitious ideas of their reform plans and the professional capacity of key stakeholders: practitioners at the school (i.e. teachers and their supervisors) and university (academics as researchers and trainers), as well as policymakers (ministries of education personnel) in the region. Faour (2012) reports that a "substantial number of teachers in most Arab countries lack pre-service training and readiness for facing the challenges of a changing society" (p. 10). As such, they are ill-prepared for handling the regular demands—let alone the added burdens and tensions that reform initiatives usually bring about (Fullan 2007; Evans 1996). Formal role expectations for teachers in Arab countries depict teacher work as time spent on instruction inside the classroom, hence completely filling teachers' contractual hours with instructional duties. Arab teachers are not prepared to engage in inquiry, critical thinking, the generating of innovative ideas, or the taking of initiatives necessary for improvement in their schools (Bashshur 2005; Jarrar 2007; Karami-Akkary et al. 2012). Moreover, decision-making authority—especially related to planning for improvement—is accorded strictly to those in formal positions at the top of a steep hierarchy while teachers are expected to be mere executers and uncritical followers (Bashshur 2005; Jurdak and El-Amine 2005). Lastly, there are no expectations for teachers to share their experiences through collaboration or professional dialogue, or to document and disseminate their success stories (Karami-Akkary et al. 2012). As a result, teaching is more of a bureaucratic task than a professional endeavor.

The challenge of having qualified professionals carry out reform initiatives is aggravated by the questionable quality of the available teacher preparation programs in the Arab countries. As Jarrar (2007) notes, the majority of the training institutions of teachers in the Arab countries struggle with outdated content, pedagogical approaches that do not align with current research

recommendations, and faculty members that are ill-prepared for adapting new approaches and educational paradigms. Moreover, prevalent beliefs on what constitute effective professional development confine its practice to the lower levels in the taxonomy of learning (Anderson and Krawthwohl 2001). Mainly, professional development consists of technical training targeted mostly at the factual and conceptual levels while ignoring the developing of procedural and meta-cognitive knowledge (Karami-Akkary et al. 2012). Additionally, these beliefs advocate practices that adopt highly prescriptive approaches that maintain a passive role for teachers with respect to setting their learning goals. These beliefs also neglect the special needs of teachers as adult learners, and do not provide the continuous follow up and mentoring that they need (Jarrar 2007). As a result, most professional development activities are far from being responsive to the teachers' needs, or aligned with their priorities.

The road to travel: Towards effective educational reform in the Arab region

The challenges of educational reform are not unique to the Arab region. International scholars note major difficulties that educational reformers face, especially in translating large-scale reform initiatives into effective new practices that impact the classroom (Berman and Mclaughlin 1974, 1978; Mclaughlin 1990; Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Cuban 1988; Fullan 2007; Hargreaves 2007; Seashore Louis et al. 1999). However, the international literature offers a substantial knowledge base of what does and does not work in the area of school improvement (Seashore Louis et al. 1999). Educational reformers, policymakers, and scholars in the Arab region have a unique opportunity to benefit from the wealth of international knowledge as they work on setting new directions that avoid repeating failed attempts.

In 2005, and after a long career as an Arab scholar studying reform in the area, Bashshur concluded:

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

The remainder of this paper presents strategies for educational reformers and policymakers that align with the above view bringing the focus towards new conceptions of change, the implementation process, capacity building, and knowledge-base-building about reform in the region.

Changing the prevailing beliefs on educational reform and organizational change

Bringing the focus to developing new conceptions about what constitutes effective educational change is a critical step for reformers in the Arab region. I propose that this can be achieved by: (1) adopting a view that is substantiated internationally by the available empirical and theoretical literature, and (2) questioning and reconsidering the prevalence of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Adopting a transformative view of change

There is growing awareness in the region that making the re-culturing of schools at all levels a central goal of reform is inevitable (Faour 2012). In fact, it is well established in the international literature that adopting a transformative view of change is an essential step towards shifting existing paradigms of praxis (Argyris and Schon 1996; Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Cuban 1988, 1992; Sarason 1996; Mourshed et al. 2010; Wilson and Daviss 1994). This systemic transformation is located primarily in the transformed educational values of individuals (Capelo and Dias 2009). It requires learning that engages a person in a "fundamental reordering of the paradigmatic assumptions, patterns of unexamined beliefs, and taken-for-granted values that are built into educational processes he/she holds" (Werhane et al. 2011, p. 23). Accordingly, reformers commit to critically exploring, articulating, negotiating, and revising their beliefs about themselves, their colleagues, and their schools (Argyris and Schon 1996; Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Sarason 1996). Through this process, they re-examine not only the kind of students they should graduate but also the processes that can lead them there: how to teach, lead, organize the educational system, and how to reform it. Thus, their actions go beyond "repairing" towards "discerning a new vision" (Wilson and Daviss 1994, p. 8) in order to build new models and approaches.

Abandoning the one-size-fits-all and prepackaged designs of educational reform

Many Arab reformers are growing critical of the "one-size-fits-all" approach that has dominated the attempts at reform in the region as it ignores the peculiarities of the context and the specific needs and priorities of the practitioners at the school level (Abi-Mershed 2010; Bashshur 2005; El Amine 2005). Some are becoming aware of its problematic nature in an area that tends to "consume" prepackaged ideas and interventions for reform (Mazawi 2010; El Amine 2005; Sayed 2005). Awareness of the salience of cultural and contextual factors in shaping the change process and impacting its implementation is very well established in the international literature on school change (Berman and McLaughlin 1974, 1978; Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Drago-Saverson 2004; El Amine 2005; Finnan 2000; Hallinger and Murphy 1987; Mclaughlin 1990; Mourshed et al. 2010; Murphy and Datnow 2003; Sarason 1996; Seashore Louis et al. 1999; Wilson and Daviss 1994). These scholars contend that a major challenge to successful implementation of reform initiatives is that these initiatives bring forth a set of assumptions, values,

and norms that are often in direct conflict with those embraced by the context where they are implemented. Thus, successful implementation requires not only an understanding of the content and processes of the proposed practices, but also of the philosophies and values that underlie them (Bajunid 1996; Hallinger and Murphy 1987; Hallinger 2010). It also necessitates an understanding of the social and cultural setting in which these ideas and plans need to take root if they are to become "weaved into the dense cultural fabrics" (Wilson and Daviss 1994, p. 113).

To achieve this, Arab reformers at all levels of the educational system (i.e. schools, universities, ministries of education) should stop viewing reform as merely the acquisition of pre-packaged prescriptive models, and instead, consider the change process as a cross cultural adoption process that makes inquiry and critical reflection embedded in how we consider the conducting of reform. This means that any program, innovative idea, or procedure needs to be critically examined not only for potential effectiveness but also for its relevance to the particular context. In light of this view, the focus of the regional educational summits and meetings needs to shift from developing unified goals and strategies to offering a forum for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to engage in reflective dialogue, exchange of experiences, and the sharing of resources in order to cultivate locally-generated ideas and proposals for improvement.

Adopting a systemic view while setting goals for reform

A system view of change avoids depending on limited narrow innovations as quick fixes for isolated practices. Rather, it views educational organizations as systems with interconnected parts. In this view, effective reform calls for initiatives that consist of coordinated interventions that target practices at the school and classroom level, and takes into consideration factors in the broad organizational context (Mclaughlin 1987, 1990). Consequently, designers of change initiatives need to join policymakers at the ministries of education, university scholars, and practitioners at the school level in a concerted effort in every step of the process, if improvement is to be effective and sustainable (Seller and &Hannay 2000). This is to ensure, as Wilson and Daviss (1994) recommend, that there is a "continuous circuit of information through which researchers, policymakers, and school practitioners constantly communicate about their needs, strategies and goals" (p. 24). Mclaughlin (1990) also points at the criticality of bringing together two different communities of discourse: that of the policymakers and the educators at the school level. While policymakers advocate for reform models that stress regularities of process and organizational structures as sources of stability for the system, educators see the problems of everyday functioning, and demand organizational action that is responsive to the peculiarities of their context, and that welcomes unpredictable and autonomous initiatives by individual practitioners.

Arab reformers are facing the challenge of bridging the acute divide between the macro top-down goals typically set by policymakers, and the micro realities of practitioners at the school level (Abi-Mershed 2010; Bashshur 2005). A promising direction for Arab educators is one which involves the adopting of a reform approach, as Fullan (2007) suggests, that follows a model where top-down

policymaking is congruent with, and supports, school-based bottom-up initiatives for change. This requires redefining the traditional roles educational policymakers, researchers, and school level practitioners have in the reform process. First, reform initiatives should be embraced by all regardless of whether they have been generated at the top or at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy. Second, the drafting of reform goals needs to engage all three groups in collaborative actions, mainly in: identifying problems, researching solutions, and making decisions regarding the choice of improvement goals and the designing of action plans. Third, the design process of these initiatives has to include roles for each of those three key players: ministries of education, universities, and schools. Fourth, collaborative channels and coordination mechanisms need to be built concurrently with the process to ensure active participation of all stakeholders, and to overcome the current isolation across the hierarchical structures. These channels should aim at loosening the bureaucratic rigidity by relaxing the rules so as to accommodate the variability of emerging needs during the implementation process.

Following an evolving design approach for the planning of the implementation of the reform initiatives

Breaking the rigidity of the current organizational system and increasing the responsiveness of initiatives for the improvement of the local context and the needs of its practitioners can be achieved if Arab reformers use an evolving design approach refined through continuous monitoring and evaluation (Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Mclaughlin 1998; Murphy and Datnow 2003; Wilson and Daviss 1994). In the 1970s, the Western knowledge base on organizational change and school improvement was deeply influenced as a result of the RAND Change Agent study of federally sponsored programs in the United States. Insights from this study brought to the forefront what became known as the "implementation problem" (McLaughlin 1987). After examining 293 reform projects, the RAND study found that the majority of these projects did not go past the adoption phase, with few reaching implementation and much fewer achieving incorporation and continuity. Stressing the complexity of the change process, the study pointed that the source of the ineffectiveness was the organizational barriers that emerged during the implementation process and that transformed innovative interventions into "new ways of doing the same thing," thus generating little improvement in educational practices and student outcomes (Berman and Mclaughlin 1974, 1978). The study concluded that effective change was characterized by "a process of mutual adaptation rather than uniform implementation and that local factors (rather than federal program guidelines) dominated project outcomes" (Mclaughlin 1990, p. 11). These conclusions have been since then reaffirmed, shaping the subsequent wave of reform in the US and establishing the dominant paradigm of school reform in the Western world (Murphy and Datnow 2003; Seashore Louis et al. 1999). The new paradigm emphasizes implementation and advocates the view that change is evolutionary and not revolutionary (Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Mclaughlin 1990; Wilson and Daviss 1994). It also highlights that the outcome of the change

process is impacted by the decisions made during implementation. These decisions are described as "mundane and incremental and often in response to continuing problems coped with daily by many individuals" (McLaughlin 1990, p. 13). As such, implementation plans have to deal with the emerging organizational obstacles that treat the improvement attempts as a crucial step needed for sustaining the change (Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Mourshed et al. 2010). Obstacles such as hindering structures, lack of training, and lack of support for the change become opportunities for learning to anchor the change rather than reasons to give up on it.

Planning for reform in the Arab countries has consisted of setting broad goals, and mandating interventions through top-down policy directives that practitioners at the school level need to implement (Abi-Mershed 2010; Bashshur 2005; El Amine 2005; Mourshed et al. 2010). Analysis of plans for reform revealed that these attempts do not follow any specific design, and neglect the planning of the implementation process (Karami-Akkary and Rizk 2011). Consequently, a new direction for developing reform plans in the Arab region requires the following:

1. Development of an initial design that lays down the intended activities/interventions of the change process, with clear goals and strategies that include built-in procedures for monitoring the progress of the implementation, and for evaluating its impact. The design needs to be held provisionally and improved in light of the emerging insights during the implementation process. As an example, refer to the design adopted in the TAMAM project (Karami-Akkary et al. 2012).
2. Identification of the obstacles faced while re-culturing to minimize resistance and conflict in the system. This requires paying attention to how the local practitioners are making sense of—and embedding—the new practices. It can be achieved through replacing the current view of the evaluation process as one of inspection for conformity and assessment of success or failure, with one of monitoring and support, thus generating formative feedback for continuous refinement of the process (Chenoweth and Everhart 2002; Darling-Hammond 1994; Sarason 1996).

Building capacity for change at the individual, social, and institutional level

Accumulated evidence has pointed international reformers towards viewing the process of educational reform as essentially a human endeavor (Evans 1996). Effective change requires directing the efforts towards building human and social capital as the best way for creating the conditions necessary for its success (Fullan 2007; Hargreaves 2007; Murphy and Datnow 2003; Sarason 1996; Seller and Hannay 2000; Smylie and Hart 1999). Scholars agree that successful improvement initiatives incorporate building the capacity of practitioners as part of the core activities of any reform initiative (Bashshur 2005; Fullan 2007; Darling-Hammond 1994). They also agree that building professional networks to engage teachers in ongoing dialogue and reflection is a promising approach for generating commitment and achieving effective and sustainable change (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009; Lambert 2003; Leithwood and Jantzi 2002). Moreover, a comprehensive

multifaceted view of capacity building that targets the individual, the social, and the institutional level is often found to guarantee commitment, quality, effectiveness and sustainability of reform initiatives (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2009; Mclaughlin 1990, 1998; Seashore Louis et al. 1999; Seller and Hannay 2000; Smylie and Hart 1999).

The dominant understanding of capacity building in the Arab world restricts the target of its activities to school practitioners—mostly teachers—and limits its scope to providing technical skills in order to execute the prescribed directives of the reform initiatives (Bashshur 2005; El Amine 2005; Karami-Akkary and Rizk 2011). This falls very short of what the literature recommends for effective school change. Capacity building for sustainable change in the Arab world should therefore target building human capital [professional expertise], and social capital [interrelationships and informal aspects of organizational life], in order to ultimately build institutional capacity [supportive and enabling structures that enhance learning and professional development] (Smylie and Hart 1999).

At the individual level, building human capital for change can start by building leadership capacity among a select group of practitioners with high levels of expertise in order to prepare them for pro-active and skillful participation in the change initiative (Lambert 2003). This capacity building should include developing higher order skills like inquiry, critical reflection, problem-solving, and engaging in reflective dialogue. It should also be directed towards increasing their competencies in creative planning, decision-making, and interpersonal skills. To achieve that, approaches to professional development should be problem-based (Bridges and Hallinger 1995), experiential, ongoing, connected to emerging needs, and aimed at preparing self-directed professionals and not dependent workers (Glickman et al. 2010). Moreover, building human capital needs to include: (1) putting the emphasis on personal transformation and meaning; (2) preserving idealism within the teaching profession as a way to enhance individual motivation and "unleash positive emotions and inner resources" among those closely involved in reform (Seashore Louis, et al. 1999, p. 265); and (3) nurturing a sense of activism by channeling the feelings of discontent with the status-quo that practitioners usually harbor towards taking action to remove the conditions constraining improvement attempts. As such, skillful "pro-activism" at all levels of the educational system becomes widespread making educational practitioners ready to "lead by outrage" in order to achieve effective reform in the region (Sergiovanni 2001).

At the school level, building social capital is manifested in relationships built on: (1) trust; (2) shared visions, norms, and expectations; (3) openness to exchange information about one's practice; and (4) willingness to be subjected to others' scrutiny (Leana 2011; Smylie and Hart 1999). It requires strengthening a technical culture within the educational system: one that builds on expertise and specialization, is rooted in research and experimentation, and has well-established processes for converting learning into practice (Hargreaves 2007; Seashore Louis et al. 1999). This can be achieved by forming leadership teams and preparing them to collaboratively become agents for change. Sergiovanni (2000) contends that developing these teams requires engaging them in collaborative inquiry, reflective dialogue, and an open sharing of their challenges and successes.

There is growing evidence in the literature (e.g. Fullan 2001; Harris 2001; Sarason 1996; Smylie and Hart 1999) suggesting that improvement attempts are bound to fail if the school does not create conditions that foster its institutional capacity for sustainable improvement. Hence, educational reform in the Arab countries should focus on introducing structural and institutional arrangements that promote collaboration (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995) by establishing shared professional norms and values among practitioners at all levels (Louis et al. 1996; Smylie and Hart 1999). Thus, collaboration becomes the main mechanism both for improving teaching and making teachers accountable to each other (Mourshed et al. 2010).

Promoting collaboration and professional collegiality constitutes a major challenge in the context of Arab schools, where the existing bureaucratic structural arrangements serve to keep school practitioners, especially teachers, separate from those who conceive and plan reform initiatives (El Amine 2005; Bashshur 2005). Consequently, flattening the pyramid by "placing the power to change and mak[e] decisions during implementation in the hands of those in the front lines" (Wilson and Daviss 1994, p. 46) becomes necessary. A more distributive approach to leading change can break the current cycle of dependency among teachers. It will ensure that responsibility for improvement is shared, and that all are contributing to the process based on their expertise and their strategic location in the formal structure.

Lastly, schools and their practitioners should not be the sole target of capacity building. Universities and ministries of education in the Arab countries need to build their capacity for change as well. This means that they have to: (1) critically examine their existing world views; (2) evaluate their readiness to contribute to the change process; and (3) seek professional development accordingly in order to build their individual and institutional capacity to achieve sustainable school improvement through engaging in what Bashshur (2010) calls "horizontal cooperation" among universities in the region and across the world (p. 271).

Making action research embedded in the design of reform initiatives

Building a knowledge base that is grounded in cultural realities to inform practice and policymaking is widely viewed as a priority in the Arab region (El Amine 2009). The absence of such a culturally grounded theoretical and empirical base, and the consequences this has on the decision-making processes both at the school and country levels, is viewed as one major impediment to the success of educational reform in the Arab world (Mazawi 2010). Mazawi rightly invites us to deconstruct current research practices in the region and calls for new conceptual approaches to educational research and new research agendas […] if the knowledge that inform educational policies and reforms is expected to reflect the plurality of societal, cultural, and sociopolitical experiences, tensions, and voices prevalent across the region (p. 218). Action research as a methodology that connects knowledge production to social action can be one of these new research practices to be adopted in order to envision alternative realities. If brought to the center of the design of

reform initiatives in the area, it can be the process that simultaneously generates: (1) culturally grounded actionable theory, (2) evidence-based decisions, and (3) policies tightly connected to the realities at the school level. It can also engage a broader base in knowledge production by connecting knowledge production to the finding of evidence-based solutions for problems of practice.

In fact, action research has widespread support in the international educational community and is viewed as a powerful tool that supports educational stakeholders at all levels while implementing improvement initiatives. The appeal of action research is based on the promises it offers with regards to promoting evidence-based decision-making, and serving as a channel for collaboration among various educational stakeholders (Gall et al. 2005; Sagor 1997). Moreover, action research is viewed as being capable of equipping practitioners with the skills they need to continuously study their own practice in order to promote sustainable improvement. (Gall et al. 2005; Gillies 2009; Mitchell et al. 2008; Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007). The essence of action research is that practitioner-researchers choose issues to investigate that: (1) pertain to their everyday teaching and learning; (2) are within their sphere of influence; and (3) are topics about which they care deeply (Sagor 1997). In the domain of systemic educational reform, approaches to action research that promote investigations involving several stakeholders (teachers, administrators…) are commonly referred to as participatory action research (PAR), collaborative action research (CAR), cooperative inquiry, or action learning (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). The rationale behind such approaches is that people who hold the same goals, beliefs, and visions constructed from the ground-up work more efficiently and harmoniously towards achieving improved performance.

Therefore, collaborative action research, if adopted in the Arab World, can present a tool for reform that brings together practitioners from all levels of the educational system. Moreover, by using action research in its various forms (on action, in action, and for action), (Calhoun 2002; Sagor 1997) and documenting the process, Arab educators in all roles (i.e. as school practitioners, policymakers and university scholars) can collaboratively generate empirically-based: (1) need assessments, (2) monitoring of progress, and (3) evaluation of impact. These can become the building blocks for a much-needed empirical knowledge base that can inform policymaking, future research, and improvement initiatives. Last but not least, expanding the number of educators with research skills beyond the confines of academia will help in the making of better decisions regarding the cross-cultural adaptation of ideas and practices.

Concluding note: Lessons learnt

In developing countries around the world, educational reformers are struggling to respond to increasing demands brought forth by globalization and the technological revolution. Despite the noted differences in the conditions of their respective countries, educational reformers seem to agree that for reform to have a positive effect on students' learning, they need to be willing to reinvent educational practice and search for new platforms for growth. Looking at the current challenges of

educational reform in the Arab world in light of what is currently known on effective educational reform invites reformers in developing countries to fundamentally re-consider their old approaches. A paradigm shift in educational reform in these countries, means breaking free from the old established patterns of uncritical adaptation of Western practices and ideas that characterized their previous attempts. Scholars, policymakers, and school practitioners need to work collaboratively on designing reform initiatives that are grounded in the specific problems and cultural contexts of their schools. Improvements in teaching practices and a resultant improvement in student achievements can only be accomplished through a culturally grounded understanding of the recommended Western practices on effective school improvement and implementation.

Moreover, educators contributing to education reform in developing countries need to be critically selective when adopting internationally recognized best practices and ideas. They also need to give priority to developing home-grown designs informed by these best practices yet emerging from the unique needs of their societal and cultural context. For that, they need to act as inquirers as they collect data, examine their experiences, and derive new insights that become the basis for their future improvement initiatives. Along the way, they would build the foundation of a culturally grounded knowledge base on effective reform. Only then, would educational reformers in the developing countries be ready to go beyond being knowledge consumers to becoming knowledge producers capable of contributing to the global knowledge base.

Finally, despite the optimism displayed, the abundance of reform initiatives driven by national policies in many developing countries, and the promising direction educational reform is now headed towards (ARAIEQ, 2012; Hallinger and Bryant 2013), reformers in developing countries still need to control their urges for imported quick fixes as a means for hastily turning around their failing educational systems. Rather, they should accept that transformational improvement that can be sustained is a process that takes time and comes at the end of a long journey of learning (Wilson and Daviss 1994; Fullan 2007, Fullan et al. 2006; Murphy and Datnow 2003). This learning involves capacity building at all levels of the educational sector in order for it to be able to break old habits and deeply rooted norms of practice in teaching, leading, and managing our educational institutions.

Appendix 1: National educational reform plans in select Arab countries

Jordan

- Educational Reform for a Knowledge Economy. (ERfKE I). http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P075829/education-reform-knowledge-economy-program?lang=en.
- Educational Reform for a Knowledge Economy (ERfKE II). http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/01/17148284/jordan-second-education-reform-knowledge-economy-p105036-implementation-status-results-report-sequence-07.

- Jordan Education Initiative. http://www.unesco.org/iiep/PDF/pubs/JEI.pdf.

Morocco

- The National Education Emergency Program, 2009-2012. http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/Kingdom%20Of%20Morocco%20-%20National%20Education%20Emergency%20Support%20Programme%20-%20Project%20Appraisal%20Report.pdf.
- Morocco Advancing Learning and Employability for a Better Future (ALEF) http://gendercenter.fhi360.org/Projects/NAfrica/c_morocco_alef.cfm.
- 'LearnLink', Modernizing Moroccan Education.http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACK879.pdf.

Qatar

- K-12 Education Reform in Qatar's Schools, 'Education for a New Era'.http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG548.html.
- AED Support for 'Qatar Changing its Educational Landscape'.http://cge.aed.org/Projects/NAfrica/amal-north-africa-and-middle-east.cfm.

Egypt

- The National Plan for Education for All, 2002–2015 (Egypt). http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Egypt/Egypt%20EFA%20Plan.pdf.
- Egypt Education Initiative (EEI).http://www.eei.gov.eg/.
- The UNESCO National Education Support Strategy (Egypt). http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001777/177703e.pd.
- AED, Approaches and Methods for Advancing Learning Projects (AMAL) (Egypt). http://gendercenter.fhi360.org/Projects/NAfrica/amal-north-africa-and-middle-east.cfm.
- The National Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education Reform in Egypt. http://erawatch.jrc.ec.europa.eu/erawatch/opencms/information/country_pages/eg/policydocument/policydoc_0003?tab=template&country=eghttp://www.worldbank.org/projects/P050484/secondary-education-enhancement-project?lang=en.
- Egypt Education Enhancement Program and Egypt Secondary Education Enhancement. http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P050484/secondary-education-enhancement-project?lang=en.

Lebanon

- The National Education Strategy, 2010–2015. http://www.mehe.gov.lb/Templates/Internal.aspx?PostingId=20.
- The General Education Development Project I, 2000–2009. http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2000/04/13/000094946_00041205302824/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf.
- The General Education Development Project II, 2012 http://www.mehe.gov.lb/Templates/Internal.aspx?PostingId=9.
- USAID/Lebanon LEAD Program. http://transition.usaid.gov/lb/programs/people.html.

Appendix 2: Scope and budget of national educational reform plans in select Arab countries

Project name	Scope of coverage and budget
Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy I & II (ERfKE I & II), Jordan, 2003–2015	The ERfKE Projects target education policy and strategy, curriculum and teacher upgrading, infrastructure and physical upgrading, and Early Childhood Education. The budget is estimated to be around 318 million USD
	Beneficiaries included: 10,600 kindergarten children, 1,000 ECE professionals, 65,000 students, 16–18 years old, studying in the MI stream, 2,000-to youth participating in the School-to-Careers (STC) pilot program for grade–11, 1,000+ teachers receiving training through YTC, 1,200 teachers receiving training through Shorouq, and 28,000 students benefiting from Shorouq improvements to schools
The National Education Emergency Program, Morocco 2009–2012	The Project targets: (1) Reform of the education and training system so that it can meet development needs, (2) Compulsory school enrollment for all children aged 6–15 years, (3) Promotion of initiative and excellence in qualifying secondary and higher education, (4) Development of research, and (5) Rational management of resources and introduction of a culture of results-based management
	The budget is estimated to be around 3,068 million Euros
K-12 Education Reform in Qatar's Schools, 'Education for a New Era'—2001	46 Independent Schools were operating alongside approximately 164 Ministry schools and 292 private schools. The number of continued schools has continued to grow, with 19 more opening in 2007–2008 and 15 more opening in 2008–2009. By 2010, all public schools in Qatar are expected to be Independent Schools
	The budget is estimated to be around US $137,313 for each school
The National Plan for Education for All, Egypt, 2002–2015	The Project targets: (1) Continuing to provide all target groups (children and adults) with equal educational opportunities without any discrimination, and ensuring their enrollment and continuation, while taking into account the increase in numbers due to population growth; and (2) Achieving quality of education in all stages according to international standards in order to ensure competitiveness of Egyptian pupils in the era of globalization
	The National Plan for Education for All includes 23 programs addressed to the four sectors as follows: (1) Early Childhood Education and Pre-school; (2) Formal Basic Education; (3) Children and Young People outside Schools, and (4) Adult Literacy and Continuing Education
	The budget is estimated to be around 20.7 Billion USD
The National Education Strategy, Lebanon, 2010–2015	The National Education Strategy covers five major foundations: (A) Education Available on the Basis of Equal Opportunity; (B) Quality Education that Contributes to Building a Knowledge Society; (C) Education that Contributes to Social Integration; (D) Education that Contributes to Economic Development, and (E) Governance of Education
	The budget is estimated to be around 262 Million USD

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