

Synergy among School and District Leaders in the Application of Quality Standards in Kuwaiti Public Schools

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Abstract

This study sought to identify existing levels of synergy, or cooperation and compatibility, among school and district leaders and the impact of synergy on standards of quality in Kuwaiti schools. The researcher employed a qualitative methodology based on interviews with principals and administrators representing the six educational districts in Kuwait. Synergy was found to have positive effects on school performance and to be an important tool for implementation of quality standards. Despite the desire of both school and district leaders to achieve coordinated efforts, administrative workloads, centralization of decision making, and absence of dialog have hindered the realization of an effective synergy. Effective training programs may help broaden the scope of cooperation and interaction among school and district leaders.

Keywords: Synergy, Kuwaiti school system, standards of quality, school performance, school leadership

Introduction

Leadership bears ultimate responsibility for organizational success, and has been acknowledged as a priority issue in educational policy development internationally (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2009). Leadership answers growth needs, supervises educational processes, evaluates academic performance, and pursues improved student performance. Effective school principals strive to help those within the school setting make sense of what they do and ensure effective communication among stakeholders (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001). Leadership style plays a significant role in implementation of quality standards in school systems (Engel-Silva, 2009; Woodson, 2005). It is important in any study of educational performance to consider the leadership styles employed.

District administrators can use performance indicators of school leadership in professional development for school principals (Sanders & Kearney, 2008). To improve teaching and education quality and thus academic performance, we must enhance cooperation and synergy between school and district leaders (Fink, 2012). All stakeholders play important roles in the process of school improvement (Learning Centered Leadership Program, 2010). Understanding how they interact can provide insight into how they can best cooperate to enhance education quality.

This study attempts to identify prevalent leadership styles employed by Kuwaiti public school system administrators and investigate how interaction between school principals and district administrators affects implementation of standards in Kuwaiti schools. A series of questions were formulated to establish the existing state of synergy in Kuwaiti schools and its effect on standards and performance. After defining the key terms relevant to this investigation, this article provides a review of pertinent existing literature.

The study was conducted qualitatively employing interviews designed to elicit the perceptions of principals and administrators regarding the existing state of synergy between school and district leaders and its impact on standards. Results are presented as a summary of findings along with quotations of specific comments from the study participants, followed by a discussion of the findings and recommendations for further study and action, including but not limited to development of effective training programs promoting coordination between leaders across school and district levels.

Statement of the problem

The main aim of education in Kuwait in today's world, where a high quality of educational services has become essential, is to provide educational opportunities for all (Alobaid, 2006). Many countries have modified their educational plans and policies with an eye toward improving educational quality (AlKandari, 2013). A critical element of school administration is leadership style. Al-Safran, Brown, and Wiseman (2014) concluded that Kuwaiti school principals employed authoritative leadership styles, and concluded that a cooperative school environment would result in better outcomes. This raises the question of how stakeholders in the Kuwaiti educational system perceive the existing levels of administrative coordination and support in Kuwaiti schools and their importance in achieving and maintaining high standards of quality.

Study objectives and limitations

This study aims to identify the nature and importance of synergy among school and district leaders, investigate the importance of quality standards in Kuwaiti schools, and observe how synergy can affect educational

standards. This is the first study in this researcher's knowledge to investigate these factors in Kuwaiti schools. This study was limited to school and district leaders in Kuwaiti public schools during academic year 2015–2016.

Study questions

Four questions were formulated to help in isolating the relationships between synergy and standards of quality, in terms both of how they are perceived to exist and what importance they hold for district and school administrators:

1. How important is it to have defined standards of quality in Kuwaiti schools?
2. What is the existing state of synergy among school and district leaders in Kuwaiti schools?
3. How important is synergy among Kuwaiti school and district leaders to school performance?
4. How can synergy among school and district leaders affect the application of quality standards to schools in Kuwait?

Definitions of Terms

Synergy: Biavatt (2009:371) defines synergy as “combined or cumulative effects produced by interactions between various forces, particles, elements, substances, parts or individuals in a given context”. Synergy can be viewed as the elements, and in particular human resources, within an organization that interact to produce a combined effect benefiting all participants. The concept of synergy embodies the theme of creating a whole more valuable than the individual parts.

School leaders: Curry (2009:7) defines school leaders as “principals who lead a faculty of teachers”.

Quality: Malhotra and Pruthi (2012:66) define quality as “the degree to which a system, component, or process meets customer or user needs or expectations”. The perception of quality in any given activity is to some extent subjective, depending on the particular stakeholder's particular objectives and requirements. Thus in any measure of standards or performance it is important to capture the participants' varying perspectives regarding what constitutes acceptable quality.

Literature Review

Effective school leadership is an important factor in improving school processes and activities, leading to improved or sustained academic achievement (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2010). School leaders have many roles: they manage all activities occurring at the school level, develop employee job descriptions, encourage democracy and shared leadership, and organize communication channels between the school and other educational entities(Alansari, 2012). Many researchers have related effective school leadership to positive learning outcomes (Bailey, 2011; Clinton, 2013; Colema, 2008; Hornig & Loeb, 2010; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins, 2006; Willert, 2012). An understanding of what constitutes effective school leadership can serve to guide efforts to enhance school performance.

District leaders play an important role in the evaluation process, helping schools resolve problems and challenges through implementation of reform initiatives and exemplary practices (Epstein & Elmore, 2014; National Center for Educational Achievement, 2012; Spillane, 2000). They guide school initiatives and develop partnership programs among schools and educational stakeholders in the community (Epstein, 2005), play a pivotal role in encouraging participation in the district-level educational process (Messelt, 2004), and supervise plans and budget schemes (Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, & George, 2007). District leaders bear responsibility for developing a shared vision that supports change and develops trust, determining school culture, participating in designing curriculum to motivate student learning and understanding, encouraging integration of technology in the school environment, and training principals in effective leadership styles (Hilliard, 2013). It follows that the degree to which district leaders can develop an atmosphere of synergy with stakeholders, including school administrators, may well affect implementation of a variety of programs at the school level.

Today's educators must focus on quality of instruction rather than quantity of information delivered. Chapman and Adams (2002) found that many educational systems have tried to increase the channels of communication and interaction among different stakeholders to avoid misunderstandings or disagreements upon the procedures being established, especially regarding implementation of quality in schools. Quality affects student achievement, motivation to learn, language and mathematical literacy, learning outcomes, student satisfaction, and educational-system development (Dahil & Karabulut, 2013; Kösterelioğlu & Kösterelioğlu, 2015; Lucas & Mbiti, 2012; Saepudin & Marlina, 2013). Thus it can be seen that the concept of synergy among stakeholders reaches into and beyond the classroom.

The degree of synergy throughout an educational system has implications for performance of educators and ultimately students. Epstein et al. (2011) explored theoretical sociocultural and organizational learning constructs to isolate the effect actions taken by district and school leadership have on quality of family and community involvement programs. The researchers concluded that support at the district level contributes

significantly to quality of school programs, over and above the influence of measures taken within schools, and recommended that district leaders not only monitor schools for compliance with legislative requirements, but also actively guide and assist schools to improve the quality of their partnership programs. An avenue of further research indicated by both of these studies is how leadership styles tie into the creation of a sense of cooperation among district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and students.

Synergistic elements of administration may positively affect the effectiveness of leadership in the educational setting. Siders (2010) aimed at determining the degree to which various aspects of supervision were practiced by administrators in two South Carolina school districts. The study found several dimensions studied to be significant: community relations, planning and change, communication, curriculum, instructional programs, research and program evaluation, and motivating and organizing. Dimensions with no statistical significance included staff development, service to teachers, observation and conferencing, problem solving and decision making, and personal development. One of the school districts was found to have a more effective style because information and expectations were relayed through the superintendent and the deputy superintendent. A positive relationship was found to exist between supervisory and governance styles. The study recommended further investigation into how the dimensions addressed affect school performance. It is interesting to note that a number of the dimensions found in this study to be significant relate to the concept of synergy within the system, in particular community relations, communication, and motivating and organizing.

Student performance may benefit from synergy at district and school levels. Callender (2007) investigated practices used by schools rating highly in the Texas state accountability system's evaluation of student performance. The study found no correlation between highly rated schools and diversity, economic status, district size, community type, property wealth, or location within the state. District leaders in these schools provided direction and support in professional development; beliefs, mission, and goals; curriculum; instruction; assessment; and site-based decision making. The study recommended that all schools emulate the practices of the highly rated schools and research on the state's site-based decision-making process to determine whether it was meeting its original purpose of involving stakeholders in improving education. Here we can see the potential value of synergy between district and school administrators as it relates to student performance.

A comparative perspective

The objective of the current study is partially consistent with Kösterelioğlu and Kösterelioğlu (2015), who evaluated how students perceived the quality of their school life affected their academic-motivation levels. The current study isn't consistent with Callender (2007), who sought to isolate effective school practices for improving student success and ratings on a state-accountability system, or Siders (2010), who sought to determine the degree to which 12 dimensions of supervision were practiced.

This study sample isn't consistent with the previous studies reviewed, as it addresses school leaders and district leaders, while Siders (2010) depended on school-based administrators and Callender (2007) depended on elementary and secondary students. Moreover, the methodology of this study isn't consistent with those employed in the previous studies, as it uses qualitative methodology, while Kösterelioğlu and Kösterelioğlu(2015), Siders (2010),and Callender (2007) employed a descriptive-analytic approach. The study tool used is neither consistent with Callender's (2007) and Sider's (2010), who used surveys, nor Epstein's et al. (2011), who used scales.

Reliability and Validity

Validity in qualitative research means "appropriateness" of the tools, processes, and data. The research question should be valid for the most wanted outcomes; the selection of methodology ought to be appropriate for answering the research question. The design needs to be valid for the methodology and the sampling and data analysis must be appropriate, and finally the results and conclusions must also be valid for the sample and context (Cozby,2001).

Many researches show that in terms of unfavorable impact, interviews give fairer results than many other extensively used selection tools including psychometric tests (Moscoso, 2000). However, the various human biases are very relevant in conducting interviews. For example, the interviewee appearance, accents, physical appearance, and interviewer's experience can all have a significant impact upon the outcome of an interview.

In this study, the respondents were asked the same questions in the same manner. This makes it easy to duplicate the discussion. That is to say, this type of research method is easy to regulate. The validity of the interviews stems from being an influential form of formative assessment that used to discover how a respondent feels about a specific topic.

Joppe (2000:1) defines reliability as, '*The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable.*'

The conducted interviews are quite reliable since such interviews can be easily repeated over time. Qualitative researchers prefer interviews to questionnaires since concepts are clarified, and there is more opportunity for respondents to express ideas in their own way and explore issues in depth.

Methodology and study sample

The qualitative methodology which used semi-structured interviews was applied to elicit perceptions among stakeholders regarding the state and desirability of synergy in Kuwaiti educational administration. The semi-structured interview is a more flexible version of the structured interview as *“it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses”* (Rubin & Rubin, 2005: 88). When using such interviews, it is recommended to use a basic checklist (Berg, 2007) that would cover all relevant areas in the research questions. The advantage of such a checklist is that it *“allows for in-depth probing while permitting the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study”*. In this present study, each interview lasted from 10 to 20 minutes and revolved around four questions modeled on the original study questions. The aim of the interviews was to provide a flexible platform for delving into perceptions and realities regarding school standards and their relationship to synergy between the school and district levels. It was anticipated that this approach would reveal greater insights in comparison to any attempt at quantitative measures would afford at this stage in the research on this subject. The main questions of the interviews were:

1. What is the importance of applying quality standards in Kuwaiti schools?
2. Is there real synergy between school leaders and district leaders?
3. What is the effect of synergy between school and district leaders on the performance of schools?
4. What is the impact of school and district leaders' synergy on the application of quality standards to Kuwaiti schools?

The study sample consisted of 12 male and female school principals, and 6 district leaders (three male and three female) representing Kuwait's six educational districts.

Results

Referring back to the semi-structured interviews conducted with the subjects, this section summarizes the responses received for each question and provides quotes of typical perceptions voiced by study participants. The overall participants were found to be in agreement with the view that establishing standards of quality in Kuwaiti schools is essential to improving school and student performance. Synergy among administrators was seen as a desirable component, but one which is lacking in the current educational environment.

Question No. 1: What is the importance of applying quality standards in Kuwaiti schools?

Question 1 elicited the participants' attitudes about application of quality standards in Kuwaiti schools. Most agreed that application of quality standards helps improve school-system outputs, represented primarily by student academic performance. Table No. 1 presents the views of some principals and leaders concerning this question:

Table 1: Importance of applying quality standards

Principal 1	They help us in the development of the educational processes and activities. They can be considered as the first step towards accreditation. They help in improving the school system.
Principal 5	It helps in providing safe and healthy environments for learning, creating an atmosphere that encourages all stakeholders represented in students, parents, and community representatives to take part in the educational decision making.
Leader A	They provide a systemic mechanism through which one can evaluate students' progress. They also pave the way for respecting diversity and encouraging equity in education
Leader B	They help to evaluate the performance based on certified and accepted standards, as well as identifying areas of strength and weakness in Kuwaiti educational system

Question No 2: Is there real synergy between school leaders and district leaders?

The second question elicited responses regarding the reality of cooperation and synergy between school and district leaders. All of the principals expressed a lack of synergy. Table No. 2 presents the views of some principals and leaders concerning this question:

Table No. 2: Synergy between school leaders and district leaders

Principal 3	There is no place for real synergy in a community that depends on centralization of educational decisions.
Principal 6	The cooperation process between schools and district leaders isn't good enough. We are too busy to find methods of synergy. The administrative workloads don't give us the opportunity to activate this synergy.
Principal 12	Synergy is something like one-way direction. There is no discussion or dialogue to reach to effective decisions regarding the critical issues that we face in daily routines
Leader C	Despite the real desire to activate synergy between district and school leaders, we don't have time or clear strategies for effective cooperation.

Question No. 3: What is the effect of synergy between school leaders and district leaders on the performance of schools?

The third question attempted to identify the on-going viewpoints regarding the effect of synergy on school performance. All the participants agreed that synergy is the benchmark to school development. Table No. 3 presents the views of some principals and leaders concerning this question:

Table No. 3: The effect of synergy between school leaders and district leaders on the performance of schools

Principal 2	Synergy between both parties can positively affect school performance through identifying the best strategies that can be implemented to develop the school outcomes. This synergy helps in avoiding any misunderstanding or conflict between the different educational stockholders
Principal 7	Effective synergy between school and district leaders can lead to overall development of the school system to find effective solutions to the school problems. The synergy process can be a diagnostic for principals' shortcomings and help in designing professional-development programs.
Leader A	Synergy helps educators in the process of decision making, mentoring students' and school principals' success, encouraging participation of community in school decision making and playing central roles in the process of planning and designing educational curriculum and activities.
Leader D	Synergy has great implications on the school performance through providing bidirectional communication between the two parties through identifying the viewpoints of the different stakeholders related to the problems facing the educational process, and to the improvement of the performance of the school.

Question No. 4: What is the impact of school and district leader synergy on the application of quality standards to Kuwaiti schools?

The fourth question investigated the relationship between school and district leader synergy and the application of quality standards to Kuwaiti schools. All the principals felt that there are many ways of applying quality standards in schools, among them the creation of an educational environment based on cooperation and synergy among different educational stakeholders. The viewpoints of district leaders were similar to their school leader counterparts as all agreed that coordination of efforts helps in the implementation of quality standards and in improving overall performance of schools. Table No. 4 presents the views of some principals and leaders concerning this question:

Table No. 4: The impact of school and district leader synergy on the application of quality standards to Kuwaiti schools

Principal 4	Synergy between both parties is an important tool for the activation of quality standards in schools as it helps in identifying the requirements of quality, and in applying them in the school setting and in identifying the responsibilities of each party in the application of quality standards
Principal 11	Cooperation can help us to identify areas of weaknesses and to find effective solutions. It also helps in executing all initiatives of quality in Kuwaiti schools through sharing responsibilities.
Leader B	The issue of quality is one of the controversial issues in academia. Policy makers have developed standards in order to identify the degree of quality application in schools. Among these standards is the quality of synergy between school principals and district leaders. This synergy is considered as a must in current learning environments to identify the most important challenges that may hinder the effective implementation of quality standards.
Leader F	Quality standards have many indicators through which we can rely on measuring their activation; among them is synergy between district and school leaders. This synergy helps in creating an environment characterized by shared vision and goals, with the overall aim of developing the school setting and providing students with high-quality education.

Discussion

A number of interesting and valuable observations can be drawn from the participants' responses to the interview questions. From the analysis of the responses to Question 1, one can conclude that quality has an important role in the educational process. The principals agreed that quality is the first step in the accreditation process and accountability, helps in creating a safe and healthy environment for students, and stimulates responsible involvement in the educational process. These results are in consistent with Dahil and Karabulut's (2013) who found that a focus on quality played a prominent role in overall development of the educational process.

The views of district leaders didn't differ greatly from those of principals, reflecting that quality standards can serve as an approach for respecting different backgrounds of students and assessing student progress. These results are harmony with Kösterelioğlu and Kösterelioğlu's (2015) who found that quality of the school environment greatly affected student achievement and motivation.

Question 2, which assessed the existing synergy and cooperation between school and district leaders, revealed that despite a common desire among principals and district leaders to achieve coordinated efforts, administrative workloads, centralization of decision making, lack of clear strategies for effective cooperation, and absence of dialogue between school and district leaders hinder meaningful synergy. This result is consistent with Fink's (2012) who found that there is lack of cooperation and strategic vision among school and district leaders.

Question 3 explored the viewpoints regarding the effect of synergy on the performance of Kuwaiti schools. All the participants agreed that synergy has positive effects on school performance. The principals expressed that synergy helps in development of the school system, provides opportunity for solving problems, and identifies the best strategies to implement to improve outcomes. These results harmonize with Callender's (2007) who concluded that districts can implement identified successful practices to assist their schools in achieving and maintaining exemplary student performance. Moreover, Sanders and Kearney (2008) used performance indicators to demonstrate that collaboration of administrators and teachers positively affects outcomes. The synergy process can be a diagnostic activity through which district leaders can identify principals' and teachers' shortcomings and strengths and design professional-development programs to enhance strengths and remedy weaknesses.

The district leaders confirmed that synergy must be taken into consideration while discussing development of the Kuwaiti school system. They asserted that synergy is one of the best techniques for enhancing school performance, encourages community participation in school decision making, and plays a central role in planning and designing educational curricula and activities. These results are in consistent with Epstein's (2005) who found that district leaders play an important role in guiding school initiatives and developing partnership programs among schools and educational stakeholders in the community, especially in culturally diverse learning communities.

Question 4 attempted to identify the impact of synergy between school and district leaders on effective implementation of quality standards in Kuwaiti schools. The principals considered synergy as critical to activation of quality standards in schools by establishing agreement regarding the requirements for quality education and thus helping to identify areas of weaknesses and develop effective remedies. Quality standards have many indicators by which they can be measured; among them is synergy among district and school leaders, which helps in creating an environment of shared visions and goals. Epstein et al. (2011) found that direct facilitation of partnership programs by district administrators contributed to quality of implementation by principals. Quality is an important part of the educational process, and establishment of standards of quality may be considered the first step in achieving accountability. Standards of quality help in creating safe and healthy environments for students, stimulating responsible involvement in the educational process; and they can be used as an approach for respecting diverse backgrounds of students and assessing students' progress.

Despite the desire evident in most study participants to coordinate efforts, administrative workloads, centralization of decision making, lack of clear strategies for effective cooperation, and absence of dialog among school and district leaders are perceived as factors that hinder synergy. Therefore, Synergy has positive effects on the school performance. It helps in the development of school systems and offers the opportunity to solve problems and identify the best strategies for improving outcomes. The synergy process can be a diagnostic activity through which district leaders can identify principals' shortcomings. It encourages community participation in school decision making and plays a central role in development of educational curricula and activities.

Synergy is an important tool in the establishment of quality standards in schools. It helps in isolating areas of weakness and opening the door to effective solutions. Synergy helps stakeholders to create an environment characterized by shared vision and goals.

Recommendations

The findings of this study lead to a number of recommendations for further study and action. The primary recommendation of this researcher is to broaden the scope of cooperation and interaction between school and district leaders in Kuwait as a strategy for improving the quality of educational processes and outputs. Engendering a spirit of cooperation and concerted effort among administrators at both the school and district levels will give impetus to the search for different methods through which schools can apply standards of quality to the end of improving school performance.

Among the factors that can be brought to bear on achieving synergy between school and district leaders is leadership style. Further research to isolate the best leadership practices can guide development of training programs to inculcate effective leadership styles in both school and district leaders.

Setting realistic and attainable performance standards can establish a common vision that both enhances synergy among stakeholders and provides a framework upon which to build policies and programs for achieving those standards. Research into what types of activities and programs have been effective in raising performance standards will be valuable. Investigation of what elements of such programs have an impact on their success may well lead to more insights into the significance of such factors as leadership style, in-service training, and other support systems.

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