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# Kuwait Principals: Preparation, Induction and Continuing Development

**Ibrahim Alhouti and Trevor Male**

***Abstract:** This research explored the leadership capability of principals in intermediate schools in Kuwait by examining the preparation and development programmes that were available to them. Ten intermediate school principals were interviewed to identify the qualities that they considered school principals needed to lead public schools in Kuwait, whether or not their own preparation, induction and continuing support were sufficient and their suggestions for what else was needed. The interviews revealed that principals in Kuwait are not prepared well for their positions due to the inadequacy (and absence) of formal preparation programmes, relevant learning experiences, induction procedures and continuing support. Participants identified a number of different experiences and activities that would help develop their practice in leading public schools in Kuwait and would help others in similar circumstances.*

**Keywords:** Educational leadership, principals, Kuwait, leadership preparation development and induction

## Introduction

An NIE-Singapore report, commissioned by the government in 2013 to examine aspects of the education system in Kuwait and contrast them with benchmarks of successful systems elsewhere in the world and best practices, indicated that the leadership capability of principals in schools in Kuwait was considered to be under-developed at a time when the government was expecting schools to lead a process of improvement that would lead to higher levels of student attainment on internationally recognised standards of performance (NIE-Singapore 2013). Central to the findings from this report was that most principals were considered to be only managing rather than leading the school (NIE-Singapore 2013). These findings reflected the fact that there was a 'lack of a formal preparation program for school principals and the lack of standards for that educational development program' (Alansari 2012: 2).

This prompted us to investigate the perceptions of serving principals of intermediate schools (for children aged 11 to 14 years) in Kuwait by exploring the preparation and development programmes in which they had been involved and additionally looking at the skills and qualities that they recognise as being significant for their position. From this study we aimed

to identify experiences and training that would help prepare school principals to lead public schools in Kuwait and support them after appointment.

## Education in Kuwait

Kuwait is a small prosperous country with a centralised education system in which school attendance is compulsory for all national students from the age of six to 14 years and is provided free in public schools. Whilst there are many private schools in the country, these cater mainly for the expatriate community, which largely forms the service industry, rather than nationals. Typically, private schools are considered to be inferior to public schools and are not used by nationals. The only exceptions to this are a few Kuwaiti parents who choose to send their children to fee paying international schools, mostly in order to enhance English language competency. The vast majority (87.5 per cent) of Kuwaiti children consequently attend public schools with a total of 317,713 students (Ministry of Education (MOE) 2015).

Public school student performance levels in 2007 were low on internationally recognised assessments, such as TIMSS and PIRLS (Alramzi 2015). Consequently, Kuwait established a long-term strategy to reform the education system and gave schools the main responsibility in this strategy (MOE 2008). There was no mention, however, of preparation and development programmes for principals, although an educational development framework subsequently published suggested that distinctive educational leadership needed to be the first steps to improving the capability of school principals (MOE 2013). At the same time the government was also considering the recommendations from a comprehensive study of the educational system undertaken by the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore in conjunction with the National Council for Education Development (NCED) which, again, made strong recommendations for enhanced principal preparation and development programmes (NIE-Singapore 2013). Finally, in this regard, due emphasis was also laid on recommendations on the development of school principals made in an NCED/World Bank project, commissioned by the MOE, which had been engaged in a multi-year, integrated modernisation programme to address critical issues in Kuwait's education system (Alkhoja, Halabi, Abdullah & Al-Shamali 2015).

## The Role of School Principals in Kuwait

Over 20 years ago the MOE (1995) defined the general skills necessary for a school principal as comprising 'leadership, human feelings, educational thought, model, democratic and flexible in dealing with others, broad-mindedness, decision-making, brother and a friend to his colleagues and, finally, capable of innovation' (p. 23). This list of skills (yet to be amended) was not linked directly to the role and was non-specific, effectively dividing the principal role into two parts: an administrative role focused on the relationship between the MOE and schools and a technical role more focused on the learning and teaching process. The administrative role encompassed 147 specific tasks to be done monthly, whilst the technical role encompassed six activities relating to monitoring staff and students in order to develop and increase performance. It was clear from our examination of government documentation (MOE 1995) that principals were likely to be spending more time on administration than on technical tasks, which was leading them to act more as managers than leaders. The role was thus akin to what is considered to be managerial leadership (Yukl 2012) where the delivery of

decisions made elsewhere is the key responsibility and the only leadership attribute required is to 'practise human relationships leadership to keep morale up' (Sergiovanni 1992: 69).

A more global view suggests schools need high quality leaders rather than managers to improve student performance (Earley 2013) and many countries have invested heavily in the preparation, induction and continuing support of school principals in order to achieve that aim (Bush & Jackson 2002; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen 2007). The characteristics of leadership differ from those of management in that the leader is a developer, an innovator, a visionary and a strategist (Bennis 2009). Leadership in this context, therefore, will be about decision making, whilst management is considered to be the effective implementation of processes that already exist. As the individual with formal authority within the school the principal will need, therefore, to be both a leader and a manager.

In this sense leadership is perceived as 'the ability to motivate, influence, and enable individuals to contribute to the objectives of organisation of which they are members' (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta 2004: xxxi). Leadership is a process that entails (1) general influencing; (2) influencing others, individuals or groups, not only for their own sake, but for a common and shared goal; and (3) influencing the aims and purposes to be achieved. This means that leadership involves the capacity to gain results from people through persuasion in order to achieve a shared purpose, which is seen as a requirement in an Islamic culture (Mir 2010).

The expectations of principal behaviour in Kuwait are rooted in the past, however, and based on delivery of national policy through a list of administrative, technical and managerial tasks. There have been significant changes to the working context, learning guides and tools, however, which have all changed since 1995. This suggests that the official guide to leading schools needs to be updated to fit with the reform strategies that have been planned, many of which are contingent on there being well prepared school principals. The proposals contained within the national education strategies (Alkhoja et al. 2015; MOE 2008, 2013; NIE-Singapore 2013) have yet to be manifested into action in terms of principal preparation and development and so this investigation was based on the existing system, rather than the recommended one.

## **Issues in the Preparation, Induction and Continuing Support of Principals**

School systems across the world have been subject to changed expectations that have typically significantly increased the accountability of the principal or headteacher. Such reforms have included almost total delegation of finances to schools in the UK, the introduction of formalised and state-mandated school improvement processes for schools in the USA and the desire for enhanced student outcomes in most countries which has been driven by national governments, but delivered through schools. The effects of these initiatives have been to systematically increase the responsibilities of principals, making them more accountable to their local community and national government. This often results in principals being required to act in two roles – chief executive and lead professional – with the emphasis being on school performance indicators that are aligned to student academic attainment.

A key feature of the formal leadership role that has developed is the need for principals to act on the boundary tensions between the core activities of their organisation and the wider demands, challenges and opportunities of its environment (Selznick 1992; Yip, Ernst &

Campbell 2009). This work of boundary spanning involves protecting and supporting critical organisational functions, while simultaneously attempting to accommodate external demands. Conceivably, the loosely coupled nature of educational institutions (Beekun & Glick 2001; Weick 1982) may make it possible for principals to negotiate between apparently conflicting needs and to play roles which, at first glance, seem to be contradictory. The diagnostic study of education in Kuwait undertaken in 2013 supports this view in that the task of principals in the twenty-first century 'has shifted from one who manages to one who innovates [and] the school is now seen as a corporation, headed by a chief executive officer whose key responsibility is to bring it to higher levels of excellence' (NIE-Singapore 2013: 110). Appropriate knowledge and skills are required in order to lead:

[...] through innovative actions and decisions in entrepreneurial leadership, knowledge management, global leadership, ethical leadership and social responsibility. They guide their teachers toward providing high quality education that caters for the holistic development of every child in the school. They articulate a vision of high achievement and foster an environment that is conducive to learning and growth, change and improvement, effort and excellence. (NIE-Singapore 2013: 110)

To enjoy success within their role, therefore, those preparing for and entering the principalship should have a range of knowledge, skills and abilities which allows them to balance the demands of systemic expectations whilst also supporting the learning needs of students in schools (Coleman & Glover 2010). Inevitably, such preparation should take account of the type and size of school in which the principal is likely to serve, with this intent recognised with effective formal school leadership being 'situational and contingent on context and circumstance' (Male 2006: 3). Investigations into the transition to principalship typically suggested that beginning principals were often not fully prepared for their new job (Daresh & Male 2000; Draper & McMichael 1998). Although the situation has improved since the beginning of the century with licensure schemes being widely adopted in the quest to ensure engagement of prospective principals to a relevant body of knowledge and skills appropriate to the demands of the job (Oyugi 2015), mechanisms still need to be in place not only to prepare prospective principals, but also to support them in their ongoing role.

Making the transition to the principalship carries with it challenges that permeate the period of preparation, induction and consolidation in the new post and affect every newly appointed principal. These needs have been categorised as *personal*, *organisational* and *occupational* dimensions (Male 2006). The personal dimension of principal preparation and induction relates mainly to the issues of reconciling self-image and preferred behaviours with the demands of the post. The organisational dimension, largely informed by socialisation theory, highlights issues relating to understanding the culture of the organisation, including recognising the influence of the previous principal and encouraging the exploration of alternative structures and systems as the new principal begins to influence the culture of the school. The occupational dimension focuses on the generic issues relating to the adaptation required by the principal to become effective in post. This includes the development of skills in the preparation stage, with the need for differentiation according to the type of school and for that preparation to provide a range of learning activities appropriate to the reality of the job in action. Most preparation programmes have tended to focus on the occupational dimension, however, with the best offering a comprehensive range of learning experiences that include shadowing, apprenticeship, internship, coaching and mentoring which provide a theory base consolidated through action (Male 2004). Such learning experiences can be



accumulated through a combination of formal and informal education, field-based learning and personal and professional formation: the tri-dimensional approach to the preparation of principals (Daresh & Playko 1992). Features of effective preparation programmes that employ these approaches have now been consolidated in most US universities running principal accreditation programmes and in Australia, with emphases placed on the accumulation of theoretical and field-based knowledge which, in turn, is further supported in practice (Jacobson, McCarthy & Pounder 2015; Watterston 2015). As demonstrated by an in-depth analysis of provision across the US, these programmes are not only aligned to agreed professional standards, but also provide mentoring and career support to certificated principals (Winn, Anderson, Groth, Korach, Pounder, Rorrer & Young 2016).

These features are seemingly recognised in the findings of the 2013 report on Kuwait education which suggests that for aspiring principals 'knowledge on leadership goes beyond theoretical knowledge. It requires professional knowledge which is developed through practice and experience' (NIE-Singapore 2013: 109) and concludes, 'the most important concern is that principals should be better prepared through a good training program prior to taking up the position. This should be continued into their service as principals through in-service programs' (NIE-Singapore 2013: 116).

## **Preparation, Induction and Development Programmes for Principals in Kuwait**

The Kuwait MOE (2010) resolution on training courses indicated provision of a series of preparation workshops for suitable applicants which studied concepts of educational leadership and prepared them to:

- learn to develop a strategic plan for the school
- evaluate professional competence of school principals in terms of total quality
- learn how to manage the school activities
- understand the importance of developing communication skills
- learn the evaluation process of school staff and teachers
- learn how to write formal school reports
- learn the main concepts of educational law for their job.

Additionally, the MOE collaborated with other providers to offer workshops on leadership skills, which were mostly optional for principals (Alansari 2012). However, in the NIE survey, 46 per cent of MOE officers did not consider the preparation of principals as sufficient. Moreover, 88 per cent of the officers rated the programmes as insufficient, whilst 83 per cent rated the quality of the leadership training programmes as low (NIE-Singapore 2013). Furthermore 65 per cent of the same officers considered the current leadership skills of principals to be weak and considered them to be focusing on their managerial role.

Conversely the NIE survey showed principals as having a perception of themselves as being effective leaders, although their teachers did not fully agree with them in that regard. The findings show school leaders saw themselves as having twice the amount of leadership skills as the teachers see in them (NIE-Singapore 2013). The overall conclusion, however, was that:

- Leadership skills of school leaders are not what they assess themselves to be when seen through the eyes of teachers.
- Most principals are only managing the school instead of leading the school.
- There is a lack of provision of professional training opportunities. (NIE-Singapore 2013: 118)

These findings present a conundrum in that whilst the majority of MOE officers are not happy with principal preparation, at the same time they have the authority to make it better, a finding which partially prompted our further research into the perceptions of principals themselves. Consequently, we sought to investigate the views of intermediate school principals in Kuwait by exploring the programmes in which they have been involved and additionally looking at the skills and qualities that they recognised as significant for their position. The research questions were:

1. What qualities do school principals need to lead public schools in Kuwait?
2. What programmes and experiences are currently available to develop school principals?
3. What experiences and training would help prepare school principals to lead public schools in Kuwait?

The data are used to compare and contrast the situation in Kuwait with leadership preparation and development programmes with theoretical constructs established through research conducted elsewhere in order to make recommendations for the preparation, induction and continuing development of principals in Kuwait.

## Research

A purposive sample of ten principals of intermediate schools provided the data that inform this study which were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in their respective workplace. As gaining access to schools in Kuwait was not easy due to cultural and political considerations, we used the snowball sampling technique as principals would not have participated or welcomed us without a recommendation from one of their colleagues. This resulted in six male and four female participants. Experience as school leaders ranged from two to ten years with an average of 20 years' experience in schools prior to reaching the position of principal. It needs to be noted that all schools in Kuwait beyond kindergarten (ages four to six years) are gender segregated, with the principal being male or female accordingly. Apart from this factor there is no distinctiveness between the academic and professional background of the participants due to the centralised nature of the education system. Consequently, no differences were drawn between participants in terms of their qualifications, experience or gender when analysing the data.

Each participant was interviewed for a period of about an hour in a private environment within their school using a combination of direct and open questions which were developed from the literature review. A pilot interview was undertaken with one school principal in order to improve and evaluate the interview protocol which included questions on:

- why and how they became a principal

- how they perceive their aims and role, including differences in expectations from their former role(s)
- the skills and qualities they consider are important for the role
- the help and support they have received in becoming a principal
- the help and support they need as a serving principal
- what additional skills they need to implement planned government reforms.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic in 2015 by the first author, were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English by a qualified translator. The transcripts were analysed by both authors and categorised into in-vivo codes developed from the data, and not by pre-existing conceptualisations: the process of open coding (Charmaz 2006). Saturation in terms of responses allowed for axial coding and the development of themes (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

Standard ethical procedures were followed with each participant being informed in writing about the purpose of the study prior to data collection. Interviews for this study were conducted with signed participant agreement and the right to withdraw at any time. Copies of transcripts were shared with participants in order to ensure an agreed record of meeting, thus improving the veracity of the data. In reporting the findings participant identity was kept anonymous.

## Findings

Analysis of the interview transcripts led to the creation of three core themes which illustrated the participants' views. These themes were:

1. The participants' understanding of the requirements of the position
2. Participants' view of the current situation with regard to training and development programmes
3. Participants' needs and aspirations in terms of school leadership.

### ***The Participants' Understanding of the Requirements of the Position***

In relation to the requirements of the position, six participants suggested that the principal's role was to improve the teaching and learning in their school. Typical of one of these responses was:

The aim of a school principal is to provide students with an excellent education, make students feel comfortable inside the school building, provide students with all the things they need, control the behaviour and ethics of students and develop their skills.  
(P1)

This typical response suggested the six perceived the key role of the principal to be leading teaching and learning. Three took a differing view, however, claiming that the aim of the school principal is just to act as a link between the MOE and the school and to take responsibility for any mistakes made. As one participant claimed: 'If any problem occurs at school the principal is deemed responsible for it even if he/she has no relation to it' (P8).

All ten respondents showed that they consider themselves to have a range of duties which must be carried out in order to achieve these aims, divided into two types: administrative duties and technical. One participant comment was:

[...] a truly successful leader is the one who can strike the balance between technical and administrative work. (P4)

We concluded principals still considered there was a need for them to focus on the tasks required by the 1995 government guidance, although they were also to maintain a balance between leadership and management. An assessment of the balance of work between leadership and management was made by one female principal when she described her role:

The duties we assume are much more than those determined by the MOE. The role required from a school principal is to be present in the morning line, make observations round the school building, visit some classes, read the mail, make teachers' competence reports and meet counsellors of study courses. These activities are techno-administrative, not leadership activities. The school principal who likes to practice leadership duties must change their management system. (P3)

Three participants perceived their role as being to improve teacher performance and claimed that their duties and roles were very different from what the MOE asked from them. They suggested they focused more on the leadership role as their main responsibility, with one principal reporting: 'The most important duty of a school principal is to follow up teachers' performance by visiting them in the class. Through follow-up you find out the shortcomings that a teacher has' (P6). This led us to conclude that these three principals perceived they had a responsibility to focus on the quality of teaching and learning; this represented role development more in keeping with concepts of leadership for learning that are seen more frequently in other school systems.

When identifying the skills and qualities they thought necessary five participants agreed that strategic planning was the core skill and without it principals would not be able to lead their school, as one participant illustrated: 'Strategic planning is one of the most important skills that must be held by a leader [to] lead people towards a certain aim. Without a plan the leader cannot lead followers' (P2). Likewise, four participants illustrated that decision making was seen as a significant skill for school leaders. As one participant stressed: 'Without making decisions many issues cannot be solved. There are school principals who fear making decisions as they are not confident of the consequences because they do not have the skill that helps them make the right decision' (P6). This was further evidence of Kuwaiti principals adopting a leadership role, in this case in response to the needs of their organisation.

Furthermore, time, priority and budget management skills were identified and summed up by one who said:

We need the skill of timing and prioritising so as to be able to manage our time efficiently to have better achievement. We need also to differentiate among priorities in order to avoid doing the unimportant things instead of the important things. (P3)

Problem solving was identified as central to their work with four participants suggesting that principals needed to have skills to be able to do so in conjunction with other staff as: 'Forming work teams. This reduces stress on the leader and makes others feel that they are a vital employee and an effective part of school' (P8). In other words, it seemed these principals were

creating a wider discussion base in order to improve decision making and develop collective leadership responsibility.

In summary, therefore, not only did participants recognise the need to exhibit more in the way of leadership behaviours and spend less time on management, but they also identified areas where further development was needed. These were strategy, decision making, problem solving and the management of time, priorities and budgets.

### **Participants' View of the Current Training and Development Programmes**

This theme presents details of the preparation and development programmes that they attended throughout their career in order to explore and assess what is currently available to school principals in Kuwait. The interviews showed some good practice with a few participants being prepared for the position of principal in different ways. For example, one participant said: 'There are training programmes the MOE provides the school principals with. The theme of such courses is leadership. The courses were provided at the beginning of our occupation of this leading position' (P6). This was evidence that there had been some attempt to prepare principals for a role that was wider than envisaged in 1995 and one that required leadership capability.

Three participants showed that they were prepared for this position when they were assistant principals through being given the opportunity to perform some of the principal's tasks to help them gain skills. One participant commented:

I received support from my ex-principal when I was assistant. He would assign me some leadership activities which qualified me for this position. When you work like this you start to gain skills and be ready to occupy the new leading position. (P5)

This type of support appeared idiosyncratic, however, and reliant on the goodwill and enthusiasm of serving principals as opposed to a systemic response from the ministry. The interviews showed, for example, that seven participants were not happy with the preparation programmes run by the MOE and they related this to several reasons. For instance, one respondent claimed: 'Most courses focus on the theoretical aspect of leadership and abandon the real practical aspect. I attended 12 courses, none of which touched the reality' (P3). Along the same lines, one respondent commented: 'There are a number of courses given to school principals, but they are so shallow and weak. These courses do not meet the principals' requirements. The programme was for two weeks only' (P8). Another participant linked the weakness of these programmes to trainers who do not specialise in leadership. He said:

On about five training courses we had trainers who are not specialised in leadership. They were just people with leading positions in MOE and most of their speech was about their experience and impressions. Who said that their experience was true? (P2)

This view of inadequate pre-service principal training was given more credence when participants were asked about development programmes that were available to them. The interviews indicated that these were not of high quality and did not meet participants' expectations. In this regard, an interesting claim arose from one participant who commented:

All the developmental courses available are useless. They are like the preparation courses we attended when we assumed the position. So, I am not motivated to attend and I try to escape it to spare my time from the silly things that I hear in such courses. The mere names of the courses suggest the vapid and trivial contents. For example,

there was a course for assistant school principals under the title 'Know your personality through your signature'. Furthermore, while the title of a course may be accurate, such as 'strategic planning' the disaster is that the duration of such a course is only one hour. Who in the world can train leaders in strategic planning in just one hour? (P2)

To conclude, one participant tried to clarify why the preparation and development programmes were not good and claimed:

The intention of the MOE is not bad. The problem lies in bad management. The ministry has a training centre and there are huge budgets allocated for training, but the bad management has negative effect on that and the training outputs. (P2)

In summary, therefore, the participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the range of support they were offered in preparation for and induction into their new role and were particularly critical of the MOE provision.

### ***Participants' Needs and Aspirations in Terms of School Leadership***

This third theme developed foci on what school principals considered they needed in order to increase their leadership abilities. Participants highlighted some difficulties and suggested different activities and programmes that would have helped them to enhance their abilities to be more proactive in leading their schools. In relation to the difficulties all participants agreed that the criteria and mechanism for choosing school leaders in Kuwait were not valid as one of participants stated:

The criteria do not include certain competencies or skills required to occupy such a position and are not enough. It is shameful that we are in the twenty-first century and these criteria are still used for selecting school principals for the most important institutions. In our present time, we need to concentrate on competencies, not on years of experience. The number of years of experience does not make you a leader. We do not have the principle of comparison. No consideration of Master's or Doctoral degrees or training certificates. (P3)

Another participant suggested that it was not just the criteria that were invalid but the mechanism as well, claiming:

Unfortunately, there is no clear mechanism to occupy such a leading position. Sometimes, there is a course, then an interview. Sometimes they interview first and then the course. Some other times there is only an interview without a course. There must be one standard and it must be based on scientific grounds in order to have a selection process made according to proficiency. (P1)

As a result, one of the participants claimed that the lack of these criteria meant principals are not qualified to lead schools:

From my view 90 per cent of school principals are not qualified to manage schools [and] are not qualified to lead. They have not undergone professional development. (P6)

These findings suggested a need for the revision of selection criteria, pre-service preparation and appointment to the principalship. Interestingly the power of principals was also mentioned by participants as one of the difficulties that they faced, with seven participants

claiming that their limited powers prevented them from reaching their aims. As one participant commented:

The powers of a school principal are extremely limited, s/he cannot engage in any activity or change anything without returning to the MOE to get permission and approval. As a school principal I have no right to organise a lecture without going back to the management and getting their approval. (P7)

On the other hand, the other three participants claimed that the powers they had were sufficient and that there was no need for more:

Many school principals think that they have no powers, [but] the rules are flexible and you can act within laws and regulations. True, there are limits to powers, but it is not acceptable to attribute my failure as school principal to that reason. (P2)

The balance of opinion was in favour of more decentralisation, therefore, with the majority of participants seeking to have more power to handle issues that were specific to their context without having to refer back to the ministry for permission to act.

In terms of training and development programmes needed to provide them with an appropriate range of skills, participants suggested some activities and programmes that could help, for example:

Contracting with specialised training companies [who can] compete to offer their services including training programmes and distinguished trainers [from which] the MOE selects. (P2)

Participants also called for more opportunities for experiential learning with visits between school principals being declared as one of the activities that could help them gain some leadership skills from their colleagues. One participant suggested:

Exchanging field visits with school principals is one of the most helpful ways to acquire new skills and ideas at work. If we imagine that the assistant school principal before he becomes a principal had made visits to a group of successful school principals, during his visits he would see with his own eyes how things are managed and how some practical skills are acquired which it is so hard to acquire from training courses. (P8)

There were two key issues that arose from this theme, therefore, in regard to the nature of the principalship with the majority considering that better selection criteria and processes were needed to ensure candidates were qualified for the position through expertise, rather than just experience, and that the locus of power needed to shift from the MOE to the principal. Not all were in agreement with the last conclusion, however, with three participants considering there was already enough scope for them to exercise leadership in their school. Participants also offered suggestions for improvement in terms of outsourcing leadership development programmes and encouraging visits to other schools to broaden their personal view of being a principal.

## Summary and Discussion of Findings

In relation to the first research question – *the requirements of the position* – participants were able to define their role and identify the qualities and skills which would help them in leading public schools in Kuwait. The interviews demonstrated that their main aim was to provide

students with an excellent education and to make students feel more comfortable in schools. That reflects other studies that indicate effective principals deal with teaching and learning so they can improve student outcomes. Participants stressed that they aimed to change schools for the better, reflected on how they act as leaders and understood that the position they occupied was very sensitive, with the success of the school being based on the principal. This aligns to the work of Huber (2004) and NIE-Singapore (2013) who argued that effective principals focus on changing schools and play a critical role in transforming schools.

Decision making was also seen as important because principals faced a number of issues that needed a decision from them, and without this skill they will not be able to take the right decision. This corresponds to the work of Coleman and Glover (2010) and to the MOE (1995) who also listed decision making as one of the essential skills. Furthermore, participants stressed that managing meetings, time and budget management were significant skills for principals. Participants claimed that if leaders know how to manage their time and their meetings they may better achieve their tasks. Similarly, in order to use the school's annual budget appropriately to improve the learning and teaching outcomes, for example, a principal needs to know how to manage this budget. Such skills are confirmed by Coleman and Glover (2010). Problem solving was also seen as a skill that would help them in leading schools, with principals being able to solve the problems they have to address and refer issues they do not know to others who are more skilled.

The interviews show, therefore, that participants identified different qualities and skills that helped them in leading public schools in Kuwait and agreed that strategic planning was the most important skill. They asserted that they should lead people towards a certain aim and involve others to achieve their goals, for without planning leaders would not take the right direction and would fail to achieve their aims. In fairness to the MOE, this is an issue clearly identified as a development need in the NIE study which stated:

The primary function of the school leader has changed much in the new century. He or she does not just manage the school. The leader must now have the competencies to inspire others to do things they might otherwise not do and encourage others to go in directions they might not otherwise pursue. In short, the leader must have qualities of visionary and instructional leadership. (NIE-Singapore 2013: 156)

These interviews thus reflect a need for the MOE to review the processes that relate to the occupational dimension of the transition to becoming a principal. In other words, the participant responses highlighted a requirement for more focused training and development opportunities to develop the range of skills necessary for the role.

Participants in this study reported their role to be divided into administrative duties and a focus on teaching and learning. The central claim, however, was that the role defined by the MOE was not one of leadership and the required duties kept them away from supporting and changing the teaching and learning process in their school. Nevertheless, some principals in public schools in Kuwait claimed to undertake roles that went beyond what was set out by the MOE, such as developing teacher performance, creating team work and planning. Moreover, they sought to assign their administrative duties to others, such as the assistant principal or head of department or the secretary, so that they could focus on their leadership role. These interviews illustrate a low level of support in terms of the organisational dimension of the transition to formal school leadership, however, with participants signalling



a need for more help and guidance for developing the capability to inspire others and encourage involvement and engagement in decision making within the school.

In regard to the second research question – *their view of the current situation with regard to training and development programmes* – participants indicated there was some evidence that showed a few participants considered they were prepared by a combination of training programmes and support from their ex-principals. The majority of participants were clear that they were not happy with what had been available to them, however, and claimed that they were not prepared well for their position. The MOE programmes were considered inadequate, insufficient and did not prepare participants for real-world experiences. Moreover, the trainers had not been specialised in the field of leadership, but were just officers with leading positions in the MOE who tended to present their experiences to the participants, which were not felt to be relevant. Participants typically felt these training programmes to be a waste of time as they were almost identical to programmes they had attended as assistant principals, reflecting the fact that their preparation was not directly related to their role. This lack of suitable development programmes seemingly pushed principals to attend some training courses at their own expense in order to increase their leadership capabilities in their schools. It can be concluded, therefore, that, in contrast to some other countries like the USA, Australia and England where practical experience coupled with more formal learning was the norm, Kuwaiti participants in this study typically considered they had not been prepared well to lead schools. Participants were not happy with what had been available to them and asserted that those development programmes had not been of high quality and had not matched their expectations and needs. This demonstrated a need for there to be much greater support for the development of the personal dimension of the transition to the role, with participants illustrating a demand for better and more focused training and development opportunities in order to build their leadership capability.

In response to the third research question – *their needs and aspirations in terms of school leadership* – participants indicated they were far from happy with selection criteria and processes which did not match the profile of the twenty-first century principal. This contrasts to findings from other studies which report that other countries request an approved qualification in order to become a school principal (Bush 2008; Daresh & Male 2000). Furthermore, they considered greater devolution was needed, although a small minority felt there had been sufficient room in the system for principals to exercise their own power. They made recommendations to improve principal preparation and development through offering ideas for experiences and training programmes that would help them lead public schools in Kuwait. These findings thus correspond with the work of Bush and Jackson (2002), Bush (2008) and Alansari (2012) who all emphasised that school leaders need specific preparation programmes that link to their duties and match their position in order to be ready to lead schools. These demands were also consistent with the works of Daresh and Playko (1992) and Winn et al. (2016) which both concluded that suitable learning experiences could be accumulated through a combination of formal and informal education, field-based learning and personal and professional formation. In summary, therefore, greater consideration needed to be given to all aspects of selection, preparation and induction to the post and for programmes and development activities that support the personal, organisational and occupational dimensions of the transition to becoming a principal.

## Conclusions

To sum up, the interviews supported the argument that principals need to be of high quality in order to be able to lead Kuwaiti schools, particularly in the light of the reform initiative set out by the MOE and the World Bank and this could be achieved by providing them with specific preparation and development programmes. Consequently, based on the evidence of this study participants considered:

1. The MOE needed to set new criteria for the selection of school leaders.
2. There is a need to identify a national curriculum for preparing and developing school leaders.
3. The MOE should reform the preparation and development programmes to match what is available globally and should co-operate with different sectors such as private training centres or public sector bodies in order to fulfil its responsibility for increasing the leadership capabilities of school principals.

From the reports commissioned or conducted by the Kuwait government it seems these recommendations had been recognised, but needed to be implemented in order to ensure that not only would there be candidates for the position of principal in Kuwait public schools who would be well-prepared in terms of the demands of the twenty-first century, but that there would also need to be adequate support mechanisms for their induction and continuing development. Such provision would support principals as they grow in the personal, organisational and professional dimensions of the post and create a body of principals that could improve learning outcomes for students in Kuwait public schools. Given the expectation that reform and improvement in Kuwait should be led by schools, it was considered essential to ensure that principals are provided with appropriate training, development and educational opportunities to enhance their leadership capacity prior to taking on the role and support during their induction. This suggested there were implications for the MOE which required review and improvement to their support mechanisms for aspirant and newly appointed principals in line with the recommendations of their own commissioned report (NIE-Singapore 2013).

Caution needs to be exhibited towards the findings, of course, as the sample of participants was small in number and this indicates an opportunity to explore this issue more fully as the state of Kuwait moves from a centralised system to one of greater school autonomy. Such models of school systems that have been operating in other nations, and in particular in the USA and UK, have indicated the need for effective leadership at the institutional level if governmental ambitions are to be achieved. It would seem from these interviews that the ambitions of the education reform signalled by the Kuwait government ran ahead of the ability of principals to deliver and, consequently, identified a need to review and amend the process of principal preparation, induction and ongoing development.

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