

# Neoliberalism and Qatari preschools: A comparative study of England and Qatar

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## ABSTRACT

Qatar is in the midst of a massive systematic reform designed to convert its schools and Ministry of Education into a world-class competitive educational system according to *Education for a New Era*. Influenced by neoliberalism as a dominant ideology that treats education as just another service to be bought and sold on the market, Qatar is one of the most active importers of foreign education providers in the world and this adoption or borrowing of educational methods has drastically shaped the educational landscape in therein. Neoliberalism and the adoption of educational methods or strategies have influenced teacher licensing, curriculum, professional development and daily classroom instruction. One expanse of the educational system that has received little attention is the preschool classroom. This paper reports the findings from nonparticipant observations of preschool classrooms in the England and Qatar, followed by personal reflections and experiences regarding Qatari preschool education. The purpose of the study is to examine the policies and practices in the Qatari preschool system and to determine to what degree preschool pedagogical practices are similar to those practices found in England. The analysis illustrates that there are some teaching methods and pedagogical polices that reflect the British system, but teachers in Qatar still require additional professional development in order to adapt and utilize these pedagogical strategies and policies to better meet the Qatari context.

*Keywords:* teacher practices, preschools, Qatar, professional reflection, private schools, public schools, neoliberal education, educational adaptation

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## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education in Qatar has been shaped by different historical, philosophical and government policies. Since its formation in the 1950s, the Ministry of Education in Qatar played a dominant role in framing the educational policies and curriculum. However, in 2001, the government of Qatar grew concerned about the outcomes of the Qatari educational system. In particular, secondary students' lower scores in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Assessment (PISA), in addition to a system that was "rigid, outdated, and resistant to reform"<sup>1</sup> stood out as problems. This prompted the government to approach RAND, a nonprofit research organization, and request a comprehensive examination of Qatar's K-12 education system. The task was to investigate the existing educational system and provide recommendations and options for building "a world-class system that would meet the country's changing needs".<sup>1</sup> The end result was a systematic educational reform known as Education for a New Era (EFNE). In order to guarantee a successful implementation of the educational reform, the Supreme Education Council (SEC) was established to ensure that schools and teachers are functioning according to international, rigorous and high standards.

The SEC directly supports independent schools and is responsible for setting curriculum standards and broad goals for the school system, providing professional development for teachers and school leaders, and conducting evaluations of school performance and student progress. Operators of schools are granted a three-year agreement to run an independent school and are able to renew the agreement of performance if satisfactory. Each school produces an annual report and the Evaluation Institute at the SEC evaluates this report. Basically, the SEC verifies that "students are learning and schools are educating".<sup>2</sup>

Preschooling has grown tremendously since the Education for New Era (EFNE) reforms were initiated resulting in approximately 50 percent of appropriate age children being enrolled in preschools. The recent statistics indicate that 9 out of 10 children attend private kindergartens.<sup>3</sup> The EFNE program includes strategies that define preschools as essential for supporting early childhood development, which enhances a child's future learning ability. Therefore, it is clear that Qatar's education system is very comprehensive, ranging from early childhood education through to higher level education and additional training as well.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the principles of EFNE autonomy for schools, the SEC has begun to give schools more autonomy and freedom; it has initiated reforms based on a Western-style, child-centered teaching approach. Qatar's early childhood educational goals are aligned with international standards, Association for Childhood Education International, ACEI, and, specifically, ACEI Global Guidelines. Qatar's preschool educational goals/standards are very much aligned with what would be considered developmentally appropriate practice from an international perspective and reflect the "belief that all children are entitled to basic human rights and the opportunity to develop within a safe and secure environment that values and respects individual differences".<sup>4</sup> The ACEI Global Guidelines include 76 indicators of program quality that have global relevance. How standards are met vary from nation to nation. Thus the vision and goals of the SEC reflect globally recognized standards.

Publications such as *The Early Years Education Good Practice Guide* play a key role in shaping early childhood education and Qatar's main educational reform initiative: Education for a New Era. The guidelines fall short from global standards that emphasize current and child-centered, play-oriented activities and an integrated teaching approach rather than teacher-centered or subject-centered approaches that emphasize learning academic skills.<sup>5</sup>

Since Qatar is one of the most active importers of foreign education providers in the world<sup>6</sup> and this adoption or acquisition of educational methods has directly impacted classrooms at all levels, the purpose of this paper is to determine if Qatari preschools have embraced Western educational philosophies and models, and if so, which educational practices and policies were adopted. We realize that Western and global educational practices adapted to the Qatari context can be beneficial but there are many issues that must be considered in order to implement these in a manner that proves effective and worthwhile for Qatar. For example, educational products cannot simply be bought and "dropped" into schools without appropriate instruction that is culturally adapted to meet the culture, teacher and students' needs.<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, this paper describes three preschools' settings in the England, which were visited in July 2011, and then compares and contrasts with three preschools visited in Qatar in October 2011. The description includes the Western style curriculum, the school setting, school and classroom size, facilities provided, child-teacher ratio, teacher training and teaching practices.

Considering that England and Qatar have a very different cultural and historical backgrounds, this paper also considers what lessons might be learned from these schools, in terms of enriching our professional thinking and practice, along with questions that are to be asked regarding the acceptance of these professional practices.

### Preschool Standards

The EFNE program has opened the door to neoliberalism through Qatar's purchasing of Western educational products. Neoliberalism has drastically changed the Qatari educational landscape by influencing all levels of education with teacher licensing, curriculum, professional development and Western educational theories and models. This has impacted daily classroom instruction. Examining preschool in England will provide insight into how Western theories and models are emerging in Qatari preschools.

Early education providers, such as nurseries and kindergartens in the England, are registered and inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). All such organizations meet a set of 14 national standards for childcare. Nursery schools and reception classes in primary schools are also inspected by OFSTED. Many providers of early education are also accredited through a quality assurance (QA) scheme. QA schemes will only accredit providers if they meet certain standards, and are committed to keeping those standards by monitoring their work.

Early childhood education in England is generally regarded as child-centered, and is opposed to a subject-centered or teacher-centered approach. Until very recently there was little government intervention in preschool curriculum, planning and implementation. However, the current situation is changing. Recently, the government has paid particular attention to raising standards and measurable outcomes, emphasizing early years' numeracy and literacy. In England there is a back-to-basics element in recent directives from central government agencies, emphasizing early achievements in literacy and numeracy, causing the government to redefine their child-centered educational model and initiate reforms for raising standards.<sup>8</sup>

Traditionally, the Ministry of Education in Qatar has played a highly centralized, dominant role in framing the educational policies and curriculum. However amidst the massive educational reform, the government has started to provide individual schools more autonomy and freedom following an adopted set of standards for early childhood education that are very similar to the UK early childhood ones. The government has tried to reduce the prevailing academic emphasis and uniformity and has initiated reforms following a Western-style, child-centered approach that emphasizes integration and the child. In addition, one key document or resource providing preschools and preschool teachers with this Western-style approach to education is *The Early Years Education Good Practice Guide*. The Guide was originally written by a consulting firm *Cognition Education*<sup>a</sup> and later revised by Education Queensland International (EQI). The purpose of *The Early Years Education Good Practice Guide* is to provide:

1. A framework for policy implementation at the school and Education Institute level;
2. professional practice guidelines for implementing the *Foundation Curriculum*<sup>9</sup> and in alignment with the Curriculum Standards,<sup>10</sup> and
3. guidance for early years teachers in independent schools as they work towards the *National Professional Standards for Teachers and Leaders*<sup>9</sup> and professional licenses.<sup>5</sup>

*The Early Years Education Good Practice Guide*, written by Cognition Education provides research-based best practices in early childhood education, and includes sections titled: "Learning through Inquiry and Investigation," "Learning through Play," "Foster Language Development and Bilingualism," "Integrate ICT in Learning Experiences for Children," and "Apply Knowledge of Children to Plan their Learning and Build Partnerships with Parents" just to name a few. The text also includes information about school policies that strengthen good practice.

### Neoliberalism and Educational Reform

Neoliberalism can be defined as global market liberalism based on market-driven approaches to economic, social and educational policy. Under the guise of globalization, neoliberalism has become

<sup>a</sup>Cognition Education was established in 1989 as a Multi Serve Education Trust committed to providing the strategic thinking and planning needed by other countries to bring about reform in their education systems. Taken from <http://www.cognition.co.nz/index.php/about-us/about-us-overview>

the dominant ideology and has been embraced by countries all over the world.<sup>11</sup> Neoliberalism takes the form of exporting education that reflects market ideology, where education is a tradable commodity to be bought, and which develops a knowledge economy.<sup>12</sup> Educational commodities must be internationalized so that they appear to meet the needs of both the local and international consumers of the education product.

Exporting educational information is a lucrative business. For instance, Robertson et al.<sup>13</sup> examined New Zealand's educational industry and point out that New Zealand's exporting of education services to Asia generated larger economic gains than the export of New Zealand wines. Educational borrowing has become a profitable business where products are marketed to 'meet the needs' of the receiving culture. The question is then who defines these needs and to what degree are they met? More importantly, the open and hidden agendas that drive program importation might not be fully considered.<sup>14,15</sup>

Neoliberalism and the opportunity to import knowledge has led various governments throughout the world to rethink the purpose and structure of education, content and methods of delivery and the assessment of learning outcomes.<sup>16,17</sup> Thus they may 'borrow' policies and practices that were originally developed and operated, and which appeared to be effective, in a very different cultural context.

At the center of Qatar's education modernization and reform is the belief that the best educational practices emanate from Western countries.<sup>18</sup> The belief is that Western forms of knowledge are considered as superior to indigenous forms of knowledge and the Qatari people resistlessly incorporate these as the means to rescue the struggling educational system with the belief that this will move Qatar's educational system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a world-class system.

However, one of the major concerns suggest that educational adoption often denies or understates the influence of culture. Steiner-Khamsi<sup>19</sup> points out, "implicitly, the semantics of globalization promotes de-territorialization and de-contextualization of reform, and challenges the past conception of education as a culturally bounded system" (p. 5). Although "outsiders" might know the particular culture and write policies, they still lack an understanding of the diminutive and important aspects of culture. More importantly, these new educational policies or theories provide "cultural transformations and exchanges that challenge traditional values and norms in both sending and receiving countries".<sup>20</sup> Finally, educational practitioners may be ignorant of the differences between countries' inter-cultural values and, therefore, may draw fallacious conclusions and generalizations regarding policies and practices in other countries.<sup>21</sup>

Educational systems generally embrace educational policies and practices without much thought given to the appropriateness of the policies to their particular cultural context. Dimmock & Walker<sup>21</sup> argue that educational policymakers are "adopting policy blueprints, management structures, leadership practices and professional development programs fashioned in different cultural setting while giving little consideration to their cultural fit" (p. 147).

In light of the above discussion, neoliberalism has created a situation whereby countries unquestionably embrace new paradigms for learning and teaching that completely rely on systems developed for other educational contexts and built on different educational and cultural views. Although Western educational philosophies might work well in different cultures, all practices should be integrated to determine the overall value and the impact on education and culture. In what follows, we provide descriptions, comparisons and contrasts between the England and Qatari preschools in an effort to illustrate the influence of Western educational practices and policies on Qatari preschoolers.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study provides understanding how neoliberalism and the practice of adopting Western educational practices manifest itself within Qatari preschool classrooms. In order to determine how Western educational practices and policies are evident, non-participant observation and self-reflection were used in both England and Qatari preschool classrooms. The research objectives are as follows:

1. To compare and contrast Western England preschool practices and policies with those of Qatari preschools.
2. To determine the extent of Western educational practices in the England evident in Qatari preschools.

3. To determine if Western educational practices used in Qatari preschools are culturally appropriate.

Participant observation has been used as a research tool to study groups of people.<sup>22</sup> Thoughtful and non-participant observation as a research method provides one of the most effective ways to develop an understanding of what is happening in a particular setting.<sup>23</sup> Non-participant enables the research to become an accepted outsider watching the events taking place and recording these events as a “fly on the wall”.<sup>24</sup> Non-participant observation is especially useful when the purpose of the research is to describe the “taken for granted” day-to-day teaching practices and strategies that teachers use as they carry out their work.<sup>24</sup> For this study, non-participant observation is quite useful in assessing the level of influence Western educational practices and policies have on Qatari preschools and to determine the effectiveness and implementation of these policies.

All three England and Qatari preschools were selected based on access to the particular school. Our main aim was to investigate an area of policy acquisition and use this to identify similarities and differences arising between practices in England and Qatar regarding what we termed, “Western practices.” The educational practices of the three England classrooms were analyzed qualitatively considering the areas of curriculum, school setting, and teacher training. Considering the teacher and student actions, information was coded and categorized based on the previous categories listed above. The knowledge gained from the England preschool classrooms was then applied to three Qatari preschool classrooms and findings were used to respond to the research objectives. In order to assure confidentiality, we will use the following when describing the England preschools: School A Nursery School; School B Primary and Nursery School; and School C Nursery School.

### **Personal Self-Reflection**

According to Mruck<sup>25</sup>, the reflection of the researcher and the communicative content is often neglected in empirical studies. Likewise, Nadig<sup>26</sup> suggests that self-reflection is the constant examination of the researcher’s thoughts and beliefs in regards to the participants in the research process. This is especially useful when the researchers are embedded in the particular context. The lead researcher in this study is as a bilingual professor in primary education and has extensive experience working with Qatari preschools and visiting preschools in the England. The second author has extensive knowledge and experience regarding Western educational practices and policies and a wealth of knowledge regarding EFNE and the adoption of Western practices in Qatar. This diverse and comprehensive experience and knowledge complemented each other and provided valuable insight into not only EFNE but also insight into how the reform has impacted preschools and what is actually happening in Qatari preschools. Therefore, we provide our own reflective thoughts throughout this paper regarding our experiences as professors in Qatar, our involvement in the reform and preschools. This subjective element of the analysis was an important element for gaining a deeper understanding of the thoughts and motives of the participants. The examination of the researchers’ own thoughts and experiences also provided insights into the realities of the particular context. Throughout this study, we engaged in critical self-reflection, enabling a more critical examination of the results of the data analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Curriculum**

#### **British schools**

It was clear that recent British government policies, especially the introduction of curriculum guidance for the foundation stage, combined with the statutory inspection process, appears to have had a strong influence on the planning in preschool settings. All three British preschools adopt and follow the Early Years Curriculum Foundation Stage that centers on six areas of learning: personal; social and emotional development; communication; language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical and creative development. School A follows the HighScope curriculum model that encourages children to develop skills such as planning, evaluating and problem solving. HighScope states:

... as teachers, parents, and educational researchers have discovered, the HighScope Preschool Curriculum not only helps young children excel in language and cognitive learning but also promotes independence, curiosity, decision-making, cooperation,

persistence, creativity, and problem solving — the fundamental skills that help determine success in adult life.<sup>27</sup>

HighScope's curriculum is research-based and child-centered, using a carefully designed process called "active participatory learning." The day is structured in order that a child will have the opportunity to experience activities that are aligned with objectives of the early learning goals that form the early year curriculum in the foundation stage.

School B places a high priority on developing the children's knowledge, skills and understanding in the core subjects of literacy, numeracy, science and ICT. However, they also offer the children a broad and balanced curriculum that includes arts, humanities, personal and social education, sport and religious education. Finally, school C uses a curriculum that provides the children with a wealth of high quality learning experiences. The school adopts a "cross curricula approach." Enrichment is apparent in all areas of learning.

All schools follow the curriculum guidance for the foundation stage that is designed and regularly updated according to research findings and emerging theories in the field of early childhood education. Schools are also inspected and evaluated regularly by the government to make sure they are implementing and working towards the achievement of the national standards. Parental involvement is very high and is considered of major significance to assure the success of the preschool role and vision.

### **Qatari schools**

The curriculum chosen and used by Qatari preschools is rather complex. In 1987, a governmentally designed experiential curriculum emerged that was based on the theory of experiential learning. Teachers had extensive instruction regarding how to effectively use this curriculum in the classroom. The experiential curriculum involves prescribed books that included five experiences related to: people, water, plants, animals and transportation.<sup>10</sup> The experiential curriculum is older. When teachers were given the freedom to choose the curriculum they selected the experiential curriculum because they consider it comfortable and useful because of the instruction they were given in how to most effectively use it. However, teachers also chose British, American or Canadian curriculum products and programs. Because teachers were free to use any curriculum, at times there was an eclectic array of curricula in use at one school. In 2012, the SEC provided a curriculum for preschools where books are purchased from Western publishers. Teachers are then required to select readings and develop lessons that meet the curriculum standards set by the SEC. This approach works well with teachers who received some form of teacher education, such as a bachelor's degree, in primary or early childhood education. For those teachers with little formal education beyond professional development workshops, the task of curriculum and text selection that meets SEC standards; the alignment of the curriculum to these standards, and the development of lessons that will enable students to meet these standards is a difficult if not impossible task.

### **School Setting**

#### **British schools**

British school A is an above average sized nursery school populated with all part-time students who spend between three and five terms at the nursery depending upon their birthdate. The child to teacher ratio was 11:1 at the time of the study. A majority of parents take advantage of the care facilities that enable children to have lunch and provide care for the part of the school day when they are not attending nursery. The daycare calendar is currently 46 weeks of the year. The school offers a number of other children's services. In association with a wide range of education, health, social care and community providers, many parenting courses and networks are facilitated and coordinated by the school. In addition to and in partnership with a local secondary school, the school provides a diploma in childcare and education for local sixth form students. There are also five care and toddler groups. The school has a kitchen area that is used to teach mothers how to cook for their children and encourages them to avoid canned food. A new project has been implemented recently titled "Infant and Mum."

British school B holds to a more structured curriculum and daily schedule than the other two schools. The reception class has to follow the five stages of the early years curriculum. There is a weekly planning for the lessons. The class starts with a morning hour of math or literacy—they start with direct

teaching and move towards corners. Children learn through a joyful environment. The school playground outside is divided into two sections. The small one has a water play area and the big one has a bicycle area, a climbing area and a field. The child to teacher ratio was 15:1.

British school C is a large nursery school offering a wide range of extended services for young children and their families. At the time of the study, 133 children attended part-time with a child to teacher ratio of 10: 1. Most pupils are white but the percentage of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds is higher than the national figure. The proportion of children with special educational needs (SEN) is above average but there are no children with statements of special educational need. The school was awarded an achievement award in 2000 in recognition of very high standards.<sup>28,29</sup> School C's building is unique. It has beautiful long glass windows and a large open space for children to move. The garden is well planned and developed, and there are learning areas available including storage and sand areas and a wooden house.

The rooms are open, and each room represents a particular domain such as the math room, literacy room, science room and so on. Children can move freely in each of the rooms. The main rooms are:

1. Eating Area
2. Math and literacy room with a quiet-time corner
3. Creative room, including a sand box and wood working area
4. Creative room, includes computer, dress-up, and kitchen area
5. Construction room with a "imaginative people area"
6. Garden consisting of a children's area, sand, small house, hills, hidden area, steps, waterfall, two sand areas, two storages, two wooden houses, and a shaded area
7. Science room with a small writing board, computer and other science games

### **Qatari Schools**

The Qatari preschools are very similar in their setting. With the implementation of EFNE, all three Qatari preschools exist in new buildings allowing for a great deal of commonality regarding the physical structure of the buildings and classrooms. All three schools have preschool classrooms that include adapted corners and learning centers, colorful rooms and modern technology that is available for teacher use. All schools included: an eating area, a math and literacy room with quiet time corner, a sand box wood working area, a computer area, a play area, a kitchen area and a garden. The preschool setting provides varied activities: home corner, kitchen, imaginative play, art, story-telling, construction toys, as well as more exploratory activities such as water play, sand play, computers and physical activities that are usually available during free activity time. Qatari Preschool A provides a half-day program running from 7:15 a.m. to noon.

Class size is much higher than those schools visited in England with Qatari school A having a 25:1 student-teacher ratio. Qatari school B has the same type of building providing a similar program with a 26:1 student-teacher ratio while Qatari school C has the lowest student-teacher ratio with 18:1. However in order to address this concern, all three Qatari preschools have a teaching assistant with one qualified teacher.

Regarding class size, according to the American National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a preschool should have one teacher for every seven children, with no more than 14 children. This Western standard seems to be attained by the English schools. According to many studies, this has a positive effect on the child's future learning. Preschools in Qatar are not required to follow NAEYC's recommendations and most seem not to be following the prescribed child to teacher ratio. Although a good Qatari preschool would keep groups of children small no matter how many teachers in order to encourage interaction and individual development.

### **Teacher Training**

School A has a staff that provides pre-school training. All staff has the responsibility for different areas of learning. They grasp these duties with relish and check provision and progress. The leadership team, which is complemented by the preschool/day care manager and training coordinator, is particularly effective and provides a clear direction for the school and for its continuing improvement.

School B provides teacher training sessions twice a year, a session at the end of each semester. Other training sessions are held at the training office throughout the school year. Finally, School C is now playing a leading role in disseminating and sharing good practice with other educational

institutions both in this country and abroad. The teachers have visited nursery schools in China and Belarus and are driven to integrate best practices into their educational system. Teachers are provided with training sessions regularly conducted by experts in different fields of education. This usually includes lectures, as well as visiting other classes, seminars and discussions. In addition, there is some professional development that includes learning about the curriculum standards. However, most of the programs are limited to induction modules that take place during the first month for a new teacher to the job. These arrangements benefit staff and pupils as well as ensuring that good practice is passed on to others.

According to the SEC,<sup>30</sup> more than 30% of teachers in Qatar are not qualified to teach; 31% of teachers in Qatar have no formal qualifications to teach, 35% of who are teaching in independent schools. In addition, there is no a centralized system for the recruitment of preschool teachers in Qatar, and the lack of qualified teachers is problematic for some schools. Schools are forced to select and hire the best teachers available and at times, these are under or unqualified. This is much different than in England where teachers are required to be educated as a primary teacher that specializes in early childhood education. An important note regarding Qatar is that Qatar University is the only national university in the country and the only university that prepares teachers to offer little regarding early childhood education prior to 2002. At one point, there was a track in the home economics program that offered some early childhood courses. This ended in 1997 and it was not until 2002 that the College of Education began a diploma program in early childhood education. In 2005 a diploma program in primary education was additionally offered, in partnership with Texas A&M University. The lack of opportunity for education as a preschool teacher has resulted in a lack of qualified teachers.

## DISCUSSION

Qatar is in the midst of a massive educational reform that is adopting and adapting various “outside” or “foreign” educational practices. First, we see that the curriculum designed and later adopted in the Qatari preschools was designed based on Western educational theories. For example, the experiential curriculum is based on the theory of experiential learning that draws upon Dewey’s and Piaget’s work, which considers learning through reflection on doing and centers on the learning process for the individual. When teachers chose curriculum for their classes, British, American or Canadian curriculum products and programs were used and preschools books are purchased from Western publishers. Second, the physical structure of Qatari schools reflects those of British schools. Finally, the SEC has adopted standards written by professionals outside Qatar and these standards are used by preschools. Preschool teachers look to documents such as the *Early Childhood Education Good Practices Guide*, written by a Western company, for knowledge and practical guidance about their teaching and running their classrooms. More importantly, there is evidence from these findings that indicate on the one hand Qatari preschools have adopted some Western educational practices and theories while on the other hand they have continued to cling to the status quo. There are several explanations for this behavior.

Evidence shows that preschools have been given a Western educational product, but lack the adequate instruction regarding the use of this product. We would argue that the majority of preschool teachers are limited regarding their teacher education background and often serve as simple technicians: “uncritical, “objective,” and “efficient” distributors of information” who neglect the more critical aspects of culture and schooling”.<sup>31</sup> This is problematic because these teachers do well if taught how to teach and use a particular program or curriculum. For example, Qatari preschool teachers seemed to do well with the life experience curriculum because of the extensive instruction they received as to how to use and teach this curriculum. When they are asked to use a new curriculum or teaching method without extensive instruction, they struggle and resort to teaching from the text and to memorization of information with little student involvement.

The curriculum standards serve as one example. Preschool teachers are given standards written by professionals outside Qatar. One problem is that instruction is limited to curriculum standards and teachers cannot develop lessons linked to the standards and curriculum on their own. Teachers are taught the standards but never given enough instruction regarding how to learn the standard and then adequately apply it to classroom instruction, lesson planning and assessment. In addition, books are bought from Western countries, and the teachers are asked to pick readings from the textbooks and develop lessons. However, from our experiences teachers do not have the abilities at this point to

develop and deliver those lessons. Therefore, some teachers use the books while others resort to old textbooks and teaching strategies. However, we have experienced preschool teachers who have at least diplomas in early childhood education who do very well teaching and adapting various curricula and teaching methodologies to meet the needs of Qatari students. This leads us to argue that the education of these teachers is vital so they are able to critically adapt effective Western education methods to the Qatari context.

Most Qatari preschool teachers lack the skills to develop lessons that promote creative and critical thinking. Materials are used in a limited fashion and are often dumbed down. They seldom challenge students and fail to consider the research about neuroscience and intellectual development and how teachers can utilize materials to develop students' cognitive abilities and skills. For example, teachers in Qatari preschool often tell students the story from a book rather than reading the book, and this type of instruction in itself does not aid in the development of literacy. Furthermore, Qatari preschool classrooms are teacher-centered, illustrating a much different approach than teacher in England preschools.

There is a conflict that seems to surface regarding the use of Western educational practices and policies. Some adoption of Western educational practices can conflict with Qatari values and beliefs. For example, although Western educational philosophies and practices profess a child-centered approach to teaching, it is noticeable that Qatari teachers far more frequently reinforce discipline and try to attract attention using various techniques in order to lead whole class activity. The teachers also seem to stress an egalitarian approach, with less emphasis on individual differences and particular needs of individual children. Teachers in Qatari preschools use teacher-centered activities more often than child-directed activities. The role of the teacher is not far different from the traditional role as a direct instructor rather than a facilitator. This apparently contradicts with the Early Childhood Education Good Practices Guide of the SEC.<sup>10</sup> From our experiences, preschool teachers spend a greater proportion of the instructional time in whole class instruction. This can be interpreted by reference to the Arab culture that emphasizes teacher's authority, teacher's leadership, and child's obedience.

As previously mentioned, Qatari and English schools have similar settings and organizations, including technology, play opportunities, literacy rooms etc. However, a main difference is that Qatari schools do not utilize these areas to their full potential. For example, although smart boards are available, these are not used or are used to a limited extent in Qatari preschools. Literacy corners are available but seldom used in ways that can promote and develop students' skills and desire to develop literacy. Basically the structure, organization and opportunities are available but either not used or under used in Qatari preschools.

From these observations and our own experiences as professors in Qatar, it is often the case that preschool teachers are given tasks that they are not able to complete. For example, in the England and in the United States, schools are given a choice of several books to select. Committees are formed, books examined and the long process leads to a decision as to what book best meets the needs of the school, students and standards. Qatari preschool teachers are asked to select the best book from a wide range of publishers and this can be a difficult task for those who have little experience and are limited regarding their ability to examine the text to determine if they meet national curriculum standards.

It is apparent that the initiation of the child into the socially accepted norms is a crucial goal of the Qatari preschool teachers. It seems that the child's ability to achieve good behavior is considered an important objective for the teacher. Qatari teachers seem to place great emphasis on overt propriety such as being clean, orderly and well mannered. They attribute great importance to helping children develop a feeling of belonging to one's country and have a strong belief in the religious and moral values of the society.

Finally, the focus on the society's demands seems to be more than on the development of the individual child. Qatari preschool teachers seem to focus on developing the child's ability to adjust to the demands of the school, the family, the community and the society at large. To get along in school, the child should be helped to wait for his or her turn, learn how to explain his or her ideas, share teacher's attention with other children, accept and respect authority and fit in with the routines of the preschool. Reflecting on the society's concerns for the moral development of the child, the teacher seems to attribute great importance to helping the child acquire the moral values, accept and respect the traditions and understand certain cultural practices.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, these findings illustrate the role neoliberalism and the adoption of educational practices and policies play in Qatari preschools. What is occurring in Qatar at the preschool level is that the SEC and those in charge of reform are adopting Western policies but there is a gap as to the instruction needed for teachers to implement those policies, not exactly as they are implemented in the West, as adapted to the Qatari context in order that the educational practices be effective for students therein to learn. Therefore, we offer several recommendations as follows.

First, we realize that Western educational practices adapted to the Qatari context can be beneficial but we do not accept the pure adoption of these practices without contextualization where these educational practices are integrated into Qatari preschools in a way that is appropriate to the context and beneficial for students. Therefore, as there is a wide gap between adoption of practices and application, a well thought out plan is needed, which develops preschool teachers' practices and the use of Western educational policies and practices. There is a need to develop a Qatari model of education that adapts the best of Western practices and implements these in a way that will provide similar effectiveness in a Qatari context. This should not include limited "training" regarding a particular practice, or reducing teachers to technicians, but rather teachers must be provided with the skills to adapt Western practices to the Qatari context. Teachers need skills to utilize materials, plan lessons, critically read adopted textbooks, determine good and correct practice, examine the underlying assumption and principles in Western educational practices and policies, and shift their thinking from adoption to adaptation of educational practices.

Second, several studies demonstrate that early childhood education is embedded in social and cultural contexts.<sup>32,33</sup> Although Western educational practices and policies have influenced the Qatari early childhood education system, theories and models, the Arab and Islamic culture still influences teachers' practices in preschools. It can be argued that Qatari preschool education will continue to reflect traditional, educational values, such as the authority of the teacher, the teacher's authoritative classroom management style, and the emphasis on whole-group activities because of the influence of culture. This should not be viewed as a conflict or obstacle, rather, as previously mentioned above, teachers need to possess the skills to adapt educational practices in a manner that these practices can be compatible with society and religion.

Finally, Knight<sup>34</sup> makes an important point when he states "teachers have been close to unanimous in criticizing professional developers who fail to recognize teacher expertise" (p. 51). Cherif et al.<sup>7</sup> argue when teachers think "their abilities and competency is in question, they will resist educational reforms and thus become more resistant to the needed changes or the ability to change themselves as effective practitioners" (p. 480). A key question that must be raised regarding the reform of Qatari preschools is; Are educators they involved in the process? Teachers are thinkers and simply ignoring autonomy guarantees that educators will not implement new practices. Teachers must be included in the initial development of any program and be actively involved in not only expressing their needs to policy makers but having a voice in ways that their professional needs are met in order to implement a successful reform in order to improve student learning.

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