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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The lived-through experience of the senior teacher: A closer look at a middle management and leadership position in Bahraini public schools

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Abstract: Senior teachers in Bahraini public schools are a part of the Kingdom's national educational reform initiatives underway. The main role they play is that of leading and managing a group or cluster of teachers who teach the same subject matter at the same grade level. They are therefore more or less like "department heads". With advances in education worldwide, the pressure on public schools in Bahrain to improve and raise their quality standards to the level of international best practices has increased. Accompanying this pressure are increased demands on school leaders in general and on senior teachers in particular. Many in leadership positions, however, tend to struggle in times of change dominated by educational reform. This phenomenological study examined how senior teachers see themselves as professional leaders and how they construct their identities in their schools, the educational spaces which constitute for them contexts of changes and flux. The results indicated a positive lived-through professional experience in essence on the part of the senior teachers participating in this study, despite many challenges and demands apparent on the surface. Such results yielded a number of significant recommendations for policy-makers in Bahrain related to how to better understand the role of the senior teachers as reform agents, how to invest in it and most importantly, how to support it.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Educational reforms bring with them plenty of demands on teachers, educational leaders and department heads. As middle managers, department heads or senior teachers, as they are called in Bahrain, can play an important role in embracing changes and new developments that help in realizing reform initiatives. Professionally and personally, this role however does not come free of challenges. A good way to understand this significant role is by looking closely at how senior teachers see themselves as professional leaders and how they construct their identities in their constantly changing schools. This is what this paper tried to do, in the hope that by highlighting the lived-through professional experience of the senior teachers, recommendations for researchers and policy-makers in Bahrain and elsewhere would be made in relation to supporting and investing in positive models of senior teachers and developing and empowering the less competent ones.

Subjects: Behavioral Sciences; Development Studies; Education

Keywords: senior teachers; school department heads; professional identity; middle management; Bahraini public schools; reform leaders

1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Bahrain has been lately undergoing a major national educational reform project consisting of a number of initiatives, which have led to increased pressures on the Bahraini public schools to raise their quality standards to the level of international best practices. The demands being placed on school leaders, as a result, have become immense. Many reports from around the world depict school leaders, in general, as being in a state of crisis mainly due to often being ill-prepared and inadequately supported to lead effectively (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, La Pointe, & Orr, 2010; Levine, 2005; Young, 2002). One can imagine therefore how more difficult it must be for school leaders in Bahrain to function effectively in educational workspaces that constitute contexts of major changes and flux. The most notable changes happening in the Bahraini public schools are the introduction of a new performance management system (PMS) for the evaluation of teachers and staff and the introduction of a number of school improvement projects that focus on: engaged student-centred learning; the integration of ICT; cooperative learning; differentiated instruction; higher order thinking skills and other twenty-first-century skills; assessment for learning; action research; discipline for learning; and instructional leadership for learning. Since most of the changes are expected to happen in the classrooms, the role of the teachers is obviously of crucial importance in the process. Of equal, if not of higher, importance is the role of the senior teachers (STs)—“or as they are sometimes called department heads, teacher supervisors, middle managers, department chairs, subject leaders, etc”—who manage, lead, monitor and evaluate all that the teachers do. The significance of the STs lies in the fact that they have opportunities to influence whole-school development and performance (Huberman, 1990). In addition, empirical research from the field of school effectiveness (Creemers, 1992; Fitz-Gibbon, 1992; Sammons, Thomas, & Moritmore, 1997; Scheerens, 1992) has indicated that “a substantial proportion of the variation in effectiveness among schools is due to variation within schools, particularly at the subject department level” (Harris, 2000). Deeply understanding, therefore, the STs’ experience on the job in times of reform is of utter significance, just as gaining insight into their motivations and actions as change agents and reform leaders. For with such a profound understanding, we are in a better position to determine how their professional identities change in the process and how their activities contribute to changes and development in their culture and environment.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to “capture the lived professional experience of a group of Bahraini STs and to uncover and describe the meaning of their lived-through experience, while emphasizing the way they see themselves as professional leaders and how they construct their identities in their schools, in the midst of an atmosphere of major reforms and changes”. This purpose was to be fulfilled through answering mainly the following research questions:

- How do the participating STs describe their job responsibilities?
- How do they perceive their professional identity in their specific workplaces?
- What challenges and concerns are reflected in their accounts of their role as senior teachers and as reform agents and leaders?

This study proved to be significant and necessary because—despite the major and highly important role played by the STs—they remain to be a group that is almost entirely neglected in research studies on Bahrain.

2. Conceptual framework

This study was conceptually based on activity theory, which evolved originally from Lev Vygotsky's works during the 1920s. This theory focuses on the activity as a unit of analysis (Nardi, 1996) and has four main principles, the first of which is object-orientedness, which states that all human activities are conscious acts that are guided by motives that humans have towards certain objects (objectives). For subjects to reach their objects (outcomes), the mediation of artefacts (i.e. the use of physical as well as psychological tools like language, systems for counting, mnemonic techniques, etc.) (Vygotsky, 1981) as well as mediation by a community are necessary. Mediation is another basic principle in activity theory. Every activity happens in a certain context, which is not something external to the subject; instead, it is also internal since it involves specific subjective objects (motives) and goals. This points to the fourth and crucial principle that states that the internal and external are fused and unified (Nardi, 1996) and that external activities and internal ones cannot be understood if analysed separately from each other. Activities are usually complex and for this reason, the initial activity theory was renamed as *the activity system theory* in its later stages of development. The emphasis in its developed form is on analysing the interactions of the different elements involved in an activity system like community, rules and division of labour. The theory also has as its unit of analysis *joint or collective activity* rather than *individual activity* and focuses on development and social transformation, which Engeström (1999) believed to be brought about by contradictions within activity systems and between and among networks of activity systems. Contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts; they are just tensions between two elements (like, for example, between a newly introduced element and an already existing one) that usually lead to disturbances or conflicts, but that also give rise to change attempts and to developments both in the environment or culture as well as in the individual. An individual's identity is formed and changed in this same dialectical process, with new knowledge forming in a person because of tensions that take place within a system and which become so forceful to the extent that a new system or some kind of negotiation becomes required. The type of identity that this study is mainly concerned with is professional identity, which can be understood as "subjects" conceptions of themselves as professional actors (Vahasantanen & Etelapelto, 2011, pp. 291–292) and which is also an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation that takes place through dynamic interactions with others (Chong, Low, & Goh, 2011). One of the major assumptions on which this study is based is that in a community which is a part of major reform projects, more tensions are bound to take place and the identities of individuals working in such communities are therefore expected to be more subject to development and change than the usual. This is supported by the view of Vahasantanen and Etelapelto (2011) that "at times of educational changes, one can anticipate that teacher identities will be dynamic and fragmented ..." (p. 294).

In this study, the activity that was analysed was the lived professional experience of the STs in their workplace and the analysis was conducted on the basis of the construction of the activity's meaning through the eyes and interpretations of a number of STs. In this sense, the approach of the study was a phenomenology, but unlike pure phenomenological research that seeks essentially to describe rather than to explain (Lester, 1999), this study attempted to include interpretive dimensions, which would enable it to be used to inform or support or challenge educational policy and action. In this sense, this study is more of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), in that the aim of it is to "say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of ... [the STs] ... rather than prematurely make more general claims" (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p. 55). It therefore involves two main interpretation stages: (1) the participating STs try to make sense of their professional world and (2) the researcher tries to make sense of the STs trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p. 53).

3. Literature review

Heads of departments (HODs) in schools (or STs as they are called in Bahraini public schools) have direct influence on the quality of instruction within a subject area (Harris, 2000). This is because of their close proximity to the teachers and, therefore, the opportunities they have to provide these teachers with the needed supervision, support and encouragement (Zepeda & Kruskamp, 2007). At

the same time, HODs teach alongside their department teachers, while fulfilling a number of managerial and leadership responsibilities, which place their role between that of a teacher and an administrator (Feeney, 2009) and make them act as bridges between those in upper management and the rest of the school (Kerry, 2003). Their role is therefore extremely demanding and is defined by expectations coming from the teachers they are in charge of and from the upper administrators; this is in addition, of course, to each department head's own expectations of the position that he or she occupies (Zepeda & Kruskamp, 2007). These varied expectations cause HODs to typically have a heavy workload (Early & Fletcher-Cambell, 1989) in addition to having to act as role models for the academic and teaching staff they are responsible for (Yue, 2012) and as change agents that help the schools respond to various challenges and educational reform demands (Onn, 2010). These roles of the HODs are not easy and research studies have highlighted difficulties and obstacles experienced by those occupying such positions, like: lack of time to fulfil all their duties, lack of curriculum stability, lack of professional development (PD) opportunities at the departmental level, lack of direction and vision from the senior executives and lack of effective communication between them and the senior management (Collier, Dinham, Brennan, Deece, & Mulford, 2002).

Such obstacles, along with the multiple expectations placed on the HODs, usually result in role ambiguity or conflict and, therefore, high levels of stress (Collier et al., 2002; Dinham & Scott, 1999). Role ambiguity occurs when professionals are not clear about what is expected of them in their particular positions (Huse, 1980; Katz & Kahn, 1978), which is what many HODs experience (Mayers & Zepeda, 2002; Weller, 2001; Weller & Weller, 2002), in addition to experiencing transformations and shifts in elements that make up their professional identities (Lee & Yin, 2011), especially in contexts of reforms where the professional identity is affected by both internal and external factors (Lee & Yin, 2011).

HODs, in addition, are faced with another major challenge indicated in the literature, which is that of leadership development, for they are expected to help in promoting leadership in the teachers they supervise within their schools. In other words, they are expected to take part in the development of the collective leadership capacity of their school and the investment in social capital and networks within its community (McCauly & Brutus, 1998). In addition, HODs are usually looked at as subject specialists and this, therefore, places on them the pressure of standing out as effective instructional leaders. *Instructional leadership* can be defined as providing guidance, materials and support to teachers and learners, with the aim of improving learner performance and maintaining educational excellence at all times (Kruger, 2003). In fact, it is strongly argued that education in a school can be positively impacted to a great extent if HODs perceive themselves as instructional leaders (Rajoo, 2012). How HODs thus perceive themselves seems to be extremely significant to the success of the teaching and learning processes.

4. Methodology

This study followed the phenomenological method of inquiry in general and was therefore of a qualitative nature because of its focus on personal aspects (Bryman, 2004), like the STs' perceptions and the meanings they personally attach to their professional role. In more specific terms, this study was more of an IPA since its main aim was to help the researcher discover how the STs perceive and interpret the particular situations they face in their workplace. From the lens of activity system theory, the unit of analysis was the lived-through professional experience of the STs in their workplace, and it was analysed through the eyes and interpretations of a number of STs, three in particular. These three STs participated in the study on a volunteer basis, after the purpose of the research was explained to them, as were the intention to publish and the confidentiality guarantees. They were non-randomly selected since they came from a class of 26 experienced Bahraini public school STs who were enrolled in the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program at Bahrain Teachers' College (BTC) in the first semester of the academic year 2012–2013. BTC is a "... key player in the professional development (PD) of Bahrain's public school teachers and school leaders. It offers a multiplicity of programs that were developed in collaboration with the renowned National Institute

of Education (NIE) in Singapore. Among its programs are the Bachelor of Education program for fresh high school graduates and the Educational Leadership Program (ELP) for senior teachers and assistant principals (APs) working in the public school system” (Abdul Razzak, 2013, pp. 732–733). The ELP equips participants with “management and leadership knowledge, skills, and attitudes which would help them professionally develop and gain promotion ...” to higher levels and posts (Abdul Razzak, 2013, p. 733). As a programme, the ELP consists of 10 modules—each of 30 h—and the senior teachers are required to take only 2 of them for their PD. One of the modules focuses on *leading and managing curriculum innovation and development*, while the second focuses on *leading and managing professional development in schools*. The ELP also includes “... a number of individual and group projects and school visits that work in an engaged learning paradigm since participants are responsible, strategic, collaborative, and energized through them” (Abdul Razzak, 2013, p. 735).

The sampling strategy followed in this research project was that of *purposeful sampling* because of the primary investigator’s desire to gain insight of what was being studied, and so the sample of three STs that was selected was one from which there was a lot that could be learnt (Merriam, 1998). The sampling selection criteria used were mainly the following: the participants had to (1) have more than three years’ experience as STs; (2) have more than 10 years’ experience in teaching; (3) represent boys’ and girls’ public schools in Bahrain; and (4) represent schools from all levels. The participants also came from a bigger sample constituting the bounded system to be studied, which is the CPD class of 26 STs. To ensure the privacy of the three participants, they were given the following pseudonyms: *Amani*, *Hamed* and *Suha*. The reason why only 3 participants were selected for this study rather than the whole group of 26 STs is mainly because of the nature of the study as an IPA, which is by definition committed to a detailed interpretive account of the cases under examination—something that “many researchers recognize can only realistically be done on a very small sample” (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p. 56). In addition, this sample size of three was sufficient for meeting the research objective of this study as well as for reaching saturation. This is consistent with sample size specifications mentioned by researchers like Boyd (2001), who indicated 2 to 10 participants or research subjects in a phenomenology as sufficient for reaching research saturation.

The tools and data collection steps involved in this study are described below with the method of analysis used for each set of data:

- (1) The class of 26 experienced STs was asked to participate in a whole-class activity to generate a written report of all the job responsibilities they are engaged in as STs in their schools. The objective of this report was to help the researcher gain insight into what the STs exactly do, for how could the researcher possibly understand the lived-through experience of the STs without having a clear idea of their main duties? The class activity consisted of each ST writing down their job description and then sharing their description with the group of STs on their table. They were given an hour and 30 min to complete this part of the exercise. After that and from all these different descriptions, one report was put together by the 26 STs summarizing all the duties and responsibilities mentioned, after of course leaving out redundancies and repeated answers. The STs were given a week’s time to submit this report. This first step of data collection was done in class in the first week of October 2012 and it was done as a class assignment independently of and before the study began. Content analysis was conducted on the collected data from *the job responsibilities report*, meaning the text was read through numerous times and annotated, where some of the notes and comments made were just attempts at summarizing and paraphrasing, while others were more associations and connections that came to the researcher’s mind regarding interesting and significant points made by the participants. After that, the notes were used to establish emerging theme titles and to try to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text. The main theme titles here were straightforward since they were ones related to the types of tasks and duties the STs engage in, namely *instructional*, *managerial* and *leadership* responsibilities. These themes were finally translated into a narrative account where they were explained, illustrated and linked to the literature review and conceptual framework.

- (2) Each of the three main participants—*Amani, Hamed* and *Suha*—was asked to fill out an inventory of closed demographic items regarding their age, years of experience, location of school, original area of specialty, etc. They were given three days to complete and send back their inventory. The data here were described as is, in order to draw a clear and accurate picture of whom the STs are, and this data were only analysed on the basis of how the STs fit the sample criteria of the study.
- (3) They (i.e. the three main participants) were then asked to engage in an individual written exercise through which they intuitively utilized a metaphor that they felt best described their professional identity at school and provided a justification for their metaphor selection. Again here, content analysis similar to that done for the *job responsibilities report* was conducted, with the aim of seeing how the STs perceive their professional identity and then trying to make sense of the STs experiences of perceiving their identities in those particular ways. Specific phenomenological techniques of bracketing and suspension of judgement from the side of the investigator were also used. What this means is that the content was analysed with the researcher consciously, leaving out her own presuppositions and preconceptions, in order to avoid inappropriate subjective judgements. This was mainly because of the researcher's desire to examine how the phenomenon or experience of being a ST presents itself in the world of the participants and to explain it in terms of its own inherent system of meaning.
- (4) Finally, the three STs were asked to engage in a fairly long reflective exercise, composed of responding in writing to 11 open-ended items (Appendix A), related to their ST role, worries and concerns, personality traits, challenges they face, etc. The purpose of this exercise was to help in shedding light on what goes on with the STs both on the inside and the outside and to possibly show the interrelatedness between them. As with the metaphors, content analysis was used here, as well as the phenomenological techniques of bracketing and suspension of judgement.

While the first step of data collection was done in class, the last three steps were done online over the course of four weeks after the study began, mainly by electronically sending through email the demographics inventory and the exercises (metaphor exercise and reflective exercise) to the participants and requiring them to complete and send them back to the researcher in the same way.

All the data sources therefore were in the form of written documents, mainly researcher-generated ones, except for the whole-class written report. They were also all primary sources since they were written accounts by those living the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1998). This rendered the study more accurate and vivid, making it therefore more real, believable and easy to imagine and, as a result, more credible since according to Polkinghorne (1983), *accuracy* and *vividness* are among the qualities that add to the trustworthiness of phenomenological research. Still, however, because these data documents did not originally exist independently of a research agenda, there was the concern that they may have been affected by the research process one way or the other. Despite this limitation, though, data found in these documents still had the potential to furnish descriptive information, advance new categories and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. In addition, what made this study more credible is the fact that all its findings were recognized and agreed on by the participants when the researcher asked them for verification of the data descriptions and interpretations.

5. Results, analysis and discussion

For organizational purposes, the data from the first two sources are categorized below under the following headings: (1) the responsibilities and duties of the ST and (2) the participants' profiles, whereas the data from the last two sources are presented in the format of separate accounts of the lived-through experience of each of the individual participants, so as to be able to ferret the essence of the experience for each participant on his or her own. For clarity, each separate account of the individual participants is given its own ST's pseudonym.

5.1. Responsibilities and duties of the ST

Based on the written report of the class of 26 experienced senior teachers, the senior teacher in the Bahraini public school is involved in a plethora of tasks and duties, consistent with what is mentioned in the literature on the role of the school department head. These tasks and duties can be organized into three main themes as follows:

- *Instructional*: for example, teaching classes, substituting and covering classes as needed, participating in curriculum innovation and development, supporting teachers, providing instructional materials, etc.
- *Managerial*: like scheduling classes, monitoring teachers' lesson plans, troubleshooting problems and conflicts that occur between department members on the one hand and between the department and senior executive members on the other, etc.
- *Leadership*: like orienting newly hired teachers, participating in the setting of the school's strategic plans, leading by example by implementing model lessons for members of the department, etc.

The long list reported by the senior teachers reflects well their extremely demanding job, as well as the numerous and multifaceted expectations placed on them, which usually make their path unclear and uneasy to follow (Gabriel, 2005). It also reflects how they are expected to act as role models for the teachers they supervise, which adds to the burden of their heavy workload, as explained by Yue (2012), and reflects how they act as change agents working with all stakeholders to help their schools respond to various challenges and educational reform demands (Onn, 2010). As change agents, they are, according to activity theory, *subjects* who are guided by their motives towards realizing the reform initiatives (*objects*), through the utilization of a number of artefacts within their school communities (*mediation*). Examples of some of these artefacts are new strategic plans, curricula and instructional resources, standards and benchmarks, new forms of assessment, modes of communication, technology, values and beliefs, expectations, etc. In these communities, the STs do not work alone; rather, the nature of their activities is collective (in teams, committees, departments, units, partnerships, etc.). The meaning of what they do, therefore, is strongly tied to their relations and interactions with other members in their communities. These relations and interactions are not free of conflicts, struggles and tensions, which many times may be the result of covert internal conflicts within the members themselves. Based on activity theory, these tensions and the like are not to be looked at negatively nor should they become a source of frustration and despair for the STs since they are in actuality the driving forces of change and the desired development—both development of the organization and of the individuals working in it. Bahraini senior teachers, therefore, like school department heads elsewhere, by being forced to juggle a complex and often conflicting set of duties, are actually fulfilling their key role of initiating and responding to change in all areas imaginable in a school setting (Collier et al., 2002). The expectation here therefore is that most, if not all Bahraini senior teachers, may be prone to suffer from job-related stress and burnout, as well as role conflict and role ambiguity, as pointed out in the literature for department heads (Collier et al., 2002; Dinham & Scott, 1999), all of which leads to major shifts and transformations in the elements that make up their professional identities (Lee & Yin, 2011).

5.2. Participants' profiles

The demographic inventory yielded the following participant profiles: (1) Amani is 36 years old with a total of 15 years of teaching experience. She has been in her current secondary girls' school for the past 10 years and has been a ST for 9 years. Her school is in a rural area and is considered to be big in terms of student enrolment. Most of its students have either a low or middle socio-economic status and are good achievers. The school is located in a safe area, but its facilities are old; its technology resources however are good and are sufficiently available. The school performance is considered satisfactory as per the last evaluation report of the Quality Assurance Authority (QAA). (2) Hamed is 33 years old with a total of 13 years of teaching experience. He has been in his current intermediate boys' school for the past 5 years and has been a ST for the same time. His school is in an urban area

and is considered to be average in terms of student enrolment. Most of its students have a middle socio-economic status and are weak achievers. The school is located in a relatively unsecure area and its facilities are old, but its technology resources are good and are sufficiently available. The school performance is considered unsatisfactory as per the last evaluation report of the QAA. Finally, (3) Suha is 41 years old with a total of 14 years of teaching experience. She has been in her current elementary girls' school for the past 5 years and has been a ST for the same time. Her school is in a rural area and is considered to be average in terms of student enrolment. Most of its students have a middle socio-economic status and are good achievers. The school is located in a safe area and its facilities and technology resources are new. The school performance is considered good as per the last evaluation report of the QAA.

If we analyse these three profiles, we notice that the participants meet the criteria of the purposeful sampling followed by the primary investigator, and although there are some similarities between them and their schools, there are also differences, which are useful for the study, since through them, the researcher guarantees that the ST experience under scrutiny is not coming only from one type of school context or workspace.

5.3. Amani's account

Amani considers her role as a ST to be that of a facilitator and a developer. She says, "I am expected to connect my small community of teachers to the bigger world of the MOE. Many times, I have to persuade my teachers to do something that I myself am not really convinced of doing and have to help them develop their skills and knowledge, for them to be able to adopt the launching and application of newly introduced Ministry projects". Trying to persuade teachers to do something as a Ministry requirement while she is not really convinced of it indicates, according to activity theory, a struggle between external requirements and internal convictions, and such a struggle can bring rise to social transformations and change. It also demonstrates Amani's willingness to negotiate so as not to impede the achievement of the desired object (i.e. the implementation of the new Ministry projects). This is a perfect example of infusion of the internal and the external activities, for to accurately make sense of what Amani does externally, we need to also take into account her internal feelings, values and beliefs. To be such a facilitator and developer, Amani metaphorically explains that she has to be like a battery in an electrical circuit in which her teachers are the light. To keep the light on, she has to remain strong and function properly. Such a metaphor demonstrates, according to activity theory, the interdependency of, on the one hand, what Amani does (*her activity*) and, on the other, what other members of the school community do (*their activity*), and proves that what she does (*her activity*) actually derives its meaning from her relations to others in the institution. One problem Amani has is that she worries about there being in the future lack of collaboration from her staff members as well as from the senior executives of her school, while the main concerns she has in relation to her own future career are best expressed as worries of remaining in the same position of ST for a very long time. Already, she has been in this position for a total of 10 years and has witnessed many other colleagues who are less qualified from her being offered higher positions. This appears to point to a flaw in the promotion system followed in the Ministry and represents a contradiction since what normally should be the case is that the person with higher qualifications is the one who should be promoted. Based on activity theory, such kinds of contradictions, although may lead to all sorts of tensions, can bring about social transformation and development in both the organization and the individual. For example, in this case, they may be a reason for Amani to put in more diligence into implementing in her school the new PMS that the Ministry has just adopted and is desperately trying to introduce into all Bahraini public schools. This worry of hers is reinforced by the fact that the curriculum subject that she is a leader of happens to be a core subject and, as a result, finding somebody experienced enough to replace her as a ST, were she to get promoted, would be very difficult. Despite this personal concern of hers, Amani considers herself to be a patient, flexible and easy-going person and believes that such personality traits are her strengths, which help keep her going on in life and at work. Being a perfectionist, however, is her main weakness since it keeps her continuously unsatisfied with anything she does, unless she puts into it 100% of her effort and time. This is a true challenge for her since, as a ST, the time that she needs to perfect a task

is not always available for her. Again, this is another example of what in the eyes of activity theory is a conflict between an internal factor (*perfectionism as a trait*) and an external one (*the allocation of time*), where to fully understand the situation of Amani, we need to consider both. If it turns out that she actually is a perfectionist, then to help her achieve her objectives, she may need to undergo some kind of training that focuses on effective goal-setting and priority-listing. Other challenges she faces at work have to do with old school facilities and with a community of parents that is generally disinterested in taking part in school activities. Once more, this is another example of where to attach true meaning to the type of activity Amani is engaged in, what is needed is to, according to activity theory, look at the types of relations she has with this specific group of stakeholders. It may be the case that the ties being established with the local community are being formed on a weak basis and that there isn't enough nor effective communication that would help the parents take more interest in their children's school. Another possibility may be that the types of artefacts (correspondence, terms of agreement, expectations, etc.) being used in the process with the parents are simply unproductive. In this case, Amani may need to consider replacing the existing system of communication in her school with a new one or to undergo some form of negotiation in identity by which she modifies some of her beliefs and convictions about how to achieve parental involvement.

What adds to the burdens of Amani's work are the big number of meetings she has to attend during the school week, the classes she has to teach, the number of staff members and students she has to supervise, and the huge amount of paperwork she has to handle. She explains further by saying: "As STs, we have to have a secretary and should have no classes to teach". Despite these challenges, she remains positive by being able to see that what helps her in her job are the few student disciplinary problems available at her school. This she considers to be one of her school's main strengths. Another area of strength is, in general, the good relationship existing between her school's staff members, whom as she describes, constitute "a professional community with strong sisterhood ties but with different levels of contribution". Within such a professional community, she feels somewhat fulfilled, especially when she succeeds in helping some of the teachers in finding solutions to problems they face inside or outside of class. Her positivity and feelings of fulfilment are therefore, according to activity theory, infused with—and cannot be understood separately from—the external aspects (activities) that give rise to them and to maintain such desired feelings, she needs to ensure in her school the sustenance of the external activities behind them. She experiences such fulfilment, even though she does not really feel that she is getting the sufficient support she needs as an educational leader in her field of work. She does not blame her school for the lack of support and explains by saying: "I do not blame members of my school because they too feel lost, simply because there is insufficient collaboration between different departments of the MOE". Despite not seeing the collaboration between Ministry departments as being sufficient, Amani sees that some of the changes that have been lately introduced through Ministry channels in response to the national reform initiatives as being useful in helping teachers focus on their own PD. She mentions as an example the introduction and implementation of the new PMS, which was not there before, and explains that it has helped her and other teachers realize they have to get trained to look after their students not only academically but also emotionally and physically. This demonstrates, based on activity theory, that even though the lack of support Amani experiences presents a conflict, she has developed enough to be able to reach some form of negotiation through which she sees the good in things, rather than just focusing on the bad or the ugly.

5.4. Hamed's account

Hamed considers his role as a ST to be that of an inspiring leader, who can influence others through effective models of success. He also considers himself to be a role model who has the responsibility of first adopting certain changes before he can persuade others of taking them on. He explains metaphorically by saying: "I am like the sea. I try to be large and spread out in terms of giving and contributing; strong in the face of any storm no matter how forceful; deep in terms of richness of knowledge and resources; and possessing a beach to which people can resort to when in need of shelter (help) or contemplation". He considers this metaphor to be a positive one since when he thinks of it, it makes him feel proud, valued and generous in terms of his role as a ST and an

educational leader. Like Amani, and from the perspective of activity theory, Hamed's positivity and feelings of fulfilment make sense in the light of his external relations with others and so to maintain such desired feelings, he needs to ensure in his school the sustenance of these types of relations. Despite the positive feeling Hamed gets through this metaphor, he suffers from certain worries and concerns, like being worried of his school's capacity remaining to be weak in the future and, as a result, the school's performance ratings remaining to be unsatisfactory. He also worries about not being able to keep up with the school improvement and the PD requirements that are being called for because of the national educational reforms in the country. Activity theorists would explain that the school's struggle with weakness and with keeping up with the improvement requirements is an external activity infused with what is going on internally with Hamed (*worry*), and so the latter (*i.e. his worry*) cannot be understood separately from the former. In addition, because there is a high chance that the worry Hamed is experiencing may be negatively impacting his performance and his ability to assist the school in overcoming its weaknesses, there is a need for him to examine his internal activity and try to replace it with something more positive in order to gain a better understanding of the school's external activities and try to improve on them.

Hamed feels, however, that his team spirit as well as his flexibility and ability to act as a positive role model will help him in overcoming some of his concerns; although, many times he still finds himself getting unintentionally swamped with managerial details at work, which he considers to be one of the negative aspects of his personality and which constitutes a challenge for him in the workplace. Another challenge he mentions is that of having to deal with staff members who are resistant to change, and who therefore reject the new reform initiatives being introduced and sometimes even try to put up obstacles in their way. This is in addition to the challenges of having to work in a school where there is a general indifference on the part of the staff members towards the holistic development of students and where the security personnel are usually absent in a striking manner. Cases of indifference and of resistance to change are, based on activity theory, the sort of tensions that lead to social transformation and change attempts and are what may require Hamed to form some kind of negotiation or to even establish a whole new system of dealings, if the tensions persist and become too forceful; whereas, the types of relations Hamed has with these cases and with others are what really give meaning to the activities he engages in. The activity theorists may suggest to Hamed here to try to consider using more powerful mental and physical artefacts, setting stricter rules in the school community and dividing up new duties and responsibilities in a realistic but evolutionary manner in order to get those who are indifferent and are rejecting change on board of the reform ship.

What eases things up a little bit for Hamed, however, in such a workspace are the good social ties existing between the school community, on the one hand, and the surrounding local community, on the other. These ties he considers to be one of his school's main strengths. Another area of strength is, in general, the good relationship existing between members of his school staff, whom he likes to describe as members of one big family. He explains, "In this family, he constantly provides its members with a sense of his competency, so as to convince them to positively respond and cooperate with him in any development initiative he may approach them with". Working in this way with the school family gives him a sense of fulfilment, especially when he succeeds in persuading some of the teachers of the importance and benefit of taking part in PD opportunities and in improving themselves. Describing his staff as a family is, according to the activity theory, an indication of his relations with others within the collective activities taking place in the school community and these relations are what really give meaning to his individual activities. In this case, it seems that by referring to his staff as family, the types of relations he has with others are ones of warmth, understanding, care and support, just like the relations that exist within the members of a real family. The activity theorists could also add here that the types of artefacts (cultural aspects, language and modes of communication, rules and regulations, etc.) that he must be using to achieve such relations, which in the end serve the main object (reform), most probably happen to be considerate and positive in nature and they are what he needs to continue with.

Hamed considers the introduction of new teachers PD opportunities and the continuous follow-up of their impact on teachers' performance to be one of the most influential and positive factors that have entered his school as a result of the national reforms. This is in addition to the big improvement and development of the school environment, as well as in the hiring of special education specialists, who have helped turn things positively around in his school for the inclusion of both students with special needs and students who are gifted and talented. Recently, Hamad has started feeling that he is receiving sufficient support as an educational leader, and this is all due to the unsatisfactory performance rating that his school received before a year-and-a-half, which ultimately led to the positive consequence of the school administration realizing a need to increase the training of staff and to develop their competencies, which certainly act as a major support system for a ST. Hamad remains positive and explains, "We are still in the beginning of the road towards achieving radical educational changes, which we believe are coming no matter what".

5.5. Suha's account

Suha considers her role of ST to be one of the most important leadership roles in the school since she supervises a quarter of the teachers and about half of the student population. This is in addition to the effective role she plays in fulfilling certain managerial responsibilities, contributing to the PD of teachers in her department, following up on the implementation of remedial and enrichment programmes and the handling of student disciplinary problems. She compares herself to a butterfly since as she explains, "I move from class to class and from one administrative office to another more than twenty times each day, to stay updated with the latest developments and to communicate all that needs to be communicated, whether to the senior executives or to the members of my department, in the fastest and most efficient way possible". She considers the butterfly metaphor she uses as a positive one because of the important role she attaches to the activity of the butterfly in helping flowers in nature reproduce and multiply. To her, students and teachers in the educational sphere are like the flowers, which she as the ST helps develop and grow. Like Hamed and Amani, and from the perspective of activity theory, Suha's positivity and feelings of fulfilment make sense in the light of her external relations with her colleagues and so to maintain such desired feelings, she needs to ensure the sustenance of these types of relations. One of Suha's major concerns in relation to the future of her school is that the achievement level of the students regresses and that the teachers' and the school's performance receives a lower rating on future QAA rounds of evaluation. In relation to her personal professional concerns, she is worried that she would never be promoted to the post of Assistant Principal, although she had applied for it several times before and although she has already passed all the requirements for it. To truly understand such concerns and worries, we need—based on activity theory—to look at what external activities may be giving rise to them and need to also examine how they themselves may be impacting such external activities. Suha in addition has several positive personality traits that characterize her and which help her perform better at her job, like: optimism, desire for change and innovation, sense of humour, cooperation, consideration for others and for their circumstances, efficiency and organization. As regards to her negative personality traits, she is unable of multi-tasking and she feels that this sometimes constitutes a challenge for her at work. Other challenges she faces at work have to do with the size of the school facilities not being large enough to accommodate all of the students and, as a result, many of the cycle 2 (grades 4–6) students are forced to be placed in portable classrooms which are not very well equipped for instructional activity; the frequent absences and tardiness of some of the teachers and the lack of availability of substitute teachers to cover for them; a teacher culture of working in isolation dominating the school in the place of a culture of collaboration; low levels of motivation on the part of some teachers; the lack of availability of STs for all the school departments; the unavailability of a common free time for the teachers of her department to meet or to undergo job-embedded PD; and the huge number of teachers she supervises while having to simultaneously teach six classes per week. Such challenges that Suha struggles with are, according to activity theory, what bring about change attempts and development in both her and the organization. Suha, as well as Hamed and Amani, should think of them as both positive and necessary forces. On the other hand, what helps Suha with her job are some areas of strengths available in her school, mainly the presence of some highly competent teachers; the availability of new technological resources; the

availability of sufficient special education specialists and sufficient social workers; the big number of high student achievers; and the good and healthy relationships existing between and among the staff members, which make her describe the teachers in her department as her sisters. These positive aspects of her school help Suha experience a strong feeling of job fulfilment since they help her in assisting and developing others more—an action which provides her with a sense of satisfaction, content, pride and accomplishment. Again, here, this is a perfect example of what activity theorists consider the infusion of the external and the internal, for Suha's positive feelings of fulfilment cannot be fully understood if analysed separately from the positive aspects in her school environment.

Still, however, although Suha feels that she is receiving the needed material and moral support from her senior executives, she finds the teacher PD and training opportunities provided inside and outside of school to be scarce. She also finds some of the changes that were introduced into her school as a result of the national educational reforms as having had a negative impact on things; for example, she mentions the decision to cancel what was known as the cooperating schools project through which exchange visits and idea-exchange sessions between schools, as well as student contests and activities, were coordinated as having had a negative effect on the performance of her department. Activity theorists would suggest to Suha to consider the challenge of scarcity of PD opportunities and the cancellation of the cooperating schools as not only leading to disturbances or conflicts but also as being capable of giving rise to change and development through which she may need a new system of some kind or some form of negotiation.

6. Implications and recommendations

From the participants' accounts, the lived-through professional experience of the STs seems to present itself as being a positive phenomenon in essence, despite the apparent nature of the role as being highly demanding, leading to conflict and ambiguity, resulting in stress and burnout and requiring several identity negotiations. This is noticeable through the many positive meanings each of the three participants happened to attach to the experience, first through the use of positive metaphors like the battery that lights up others, or the sea that stretches out to help those in need or that is deep in the knowledge and resources it provides others with or with the beaches that shelter others in times of stress and when in need of contemplation and relaxation or the butterfly that contributes to the growth and development of those it touches or impacts; second, through the use of positive descriptors, like *facilitator*, *developer*, *inspirational leader*, *positive role model* and one of the most important, *leadership roles*. It is also noticeable through the positive emotion that each of the three participants associated with the phenomenon, mainly the positive emotion of fulfilment due to being able to: help others solve problems, change their beliefs about the results of a certain significant aspect like PD or develop themselves professionally. Based on activity theory, these positive meanings of the three participants could not have been derived independently of the external collective activities they are involved in within their schools. Even when the lived-through experience presented itself to the participants as involving challenges, this did not totally blind the participants from seeing positive attributes in their own personalities, as well as areas of strengths in their schools that could possibly help them overcome these challenges. Furthermore, although in essence the lived-through experience of the ST is not worry-free, a closer examination of the worries expressed by the participants indicates worries that are all motivated by positive desires or ambitions, like: the desire to sustain good student achievement levels and good school performance ratings in the case of *Suha* and the personal ambition to move up the career ladder to a higher position; the desire to sustain the good and collaborative relationship among staff members in the case of *Amani* and the similar personal ambition of getting promoted; and finally, the desire to build the school's capacity and to improve its performance ratings in the case of *Hamed* and the ambition of keeping up with PD demands placed on him and on teachers in general. Looking at the desires and ambitions that are behind the participants' worries, we easily notice that they all focus on personal and social transformations and development and, based on activity theory, they cannot be analysed separately from the external activities they are linked to.

In addition, the lived-through professional experience of the STs presents itself for *Amani*, *Hamed* and *Suha* as being something valuable and highly significant in essence. This is because each of the three participants was ready and willing through it to renegotiate their professional identity in one way or the other, in response to newly introduced changes and reforms, and especially—as explained by activity theorists—in the presence of forceful conflicts, tensions and contradictions. This means they were willing to sacrifice something old in their existing professional identities, instead of just taking a negative stance and responding by sticking rigidly to their identities, which had developed as a result of the influences of earlier historical internal and external factors. This sacrifice and renegotiation points to the STs' understanding of, and appreciation for, the importance of their role especially as change leaders, and this was mostly evident in the case of *Hamed*. *Hamed* went as far as totally surrendering himself to the fact that radical educational changes are on the way and are inevitable and, as a result, someone in his position is in need of first adopting these changes himself before being able to convince others of them. He was therefore prepared for major transformations in his identity in order to be able to perform his role and lead others. In the case of *Amani*, renegotiation of identity was also evident, although differently, and in a somewhat less positive manner than *Hamed*, through her description of her role as a leader and promoter of change even in times when she is not totally convinced of the changes. The renegotiation is evident in her willingness to compromise, which was reflected in her belief in assisting, and in her actual attempts of helping others develop the skills and knowledge needed for the adoption of the changes, instead of her just resisting the changes she is not totally convinced of and acting as an obstacle in their way. Finally, in the case of *Suha*, despite seeing some negative effects in some changes that were introduced into her school as a result of the reform initiatives (like the decision to cancel the cooperative schools' project), she did not take a negative stance in the face of any newly introduced changes; instead, she insisted on identifying the desire for change and innovation as one of her personal strengths that helped her in her job and saw her professional fulfilment as being achieved through assisting others develop and change for the better.

From these implications, we notice that the lived-through professional experience of the STs, as an activity system, could not have been explained accurately or understood deeply, independently of an analysis also of internal factors, like personal meanings, emotions, motives, desires, ambitions, personality traits and renegotiations of professional identities. This is supported by the primary principle of activity theory that states that the internal and external are fused and unified (Nardi, 1996). Without a consideration of internal factors, this ST experience could have been easily mistaken to be judged as mostly a negative experience in nature for those living it because of the many demands it carries with it, as well as the stress, role conflict and ambiguity, and identity shifts it usually results in. The recommendation of this study therefore is this: for researchers, policy-makers and school principals in Bahrain to truly understand what STs go through on the job, they need to stretch beyond what the work conditions, job descriptions, evaluation reports, etc. seem to convey; they need to dig deep by (1) listening to the inner voices of the STs themselves, who are living the experience and (2) analysing their interpretations of the phenomenon as it presents itself to their consciousness. They also need, as suggested by activity theory, to look at the types of relations with others from which the senior teachers' collective activities derive their meanings. The resulting picture may turn out to surprisingly be a much brighter one in essence than what may seem on the outside. This recommendation could actually apply not just for the senior teachers' experiences but also for understanding anyone working in the field of education, which by being a human-oriented profession is complex in nature and so traditional research methods of quantification and measurement alone are usually insufficient to offer a detailed insight into what employees in the field go through both externally and internally.

This being said, school principals and policy-makers in Bahrain also need to invest in cases like *Amani*, *Hassan* and *Suha*, who see the essence of their ST lived-through experience as something positive, valuable and important since it is exactly professionals like these who can continuously interpret and reinterpret their professional identities in ways that help push reforms forward. Professionals, like these, however are in need of support, mainly in the form of: reduction of teaching

load; establishment of specific and clearly communicated work expectations; reduction of administrative duties or instead provision of administrative assistance; increase in leadership training; increase in teacher PD; provision of substitute teachers; increase in support staff; increased communication and better collaboration between their schools and the MOE departments; improved facilities; and increased appreciation in the form of well-deserved and relevant rewards and incentives. This is where the role of the school principals is crucial since a lot of this type of support could actually be provided through particular management and leadership strategies, policies and actions of the school administration. With such support, the role of the ST will become less stressful and less confusing; more time will be allocated to the essential pedagogical and curriculum-related tasks for which the ST position was originally created, mainly those of instructional leadership; the positive essence of the experience of being a ST will be more strongly reinforced in those who occupy the position; and motivation and work performance on the part of the STs will be positively impacted, which will ultimately result in pushing national educational reforms in Bahrain forward.

Finally, one last recommendation is to try to follow up this research study with inquiries that investigate exactly what type of changes and transformations are happening internally in senior teachers in Bahrain, both personally and professionally, because of the current school reforms. This would help increase understanding of their experiences, identities and roles as reform agents. Another possible inquiry that could be of great benefit is that of investigating the impact of a training programme like the ELP on senior teachers' work performance and accomplishments to assess its degree of effectiveness on their development and on the positive transformation of their professional identities in ways that better serve the reform initiatives in Bahrain. Investigating such an impact is extremely necessary since the ELP is the only university-based educational leadership programme available in Bahrain and its effectiveness has not yet been measured since its establishment in 2008.

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Appendix A. Reflective exercise questions

- (1) Write a paragraph or two in which you describe what your role as a ST means to you and what you consider it to be.
- (2) What are the main concerns or worries you may have in relation to the future of your current school?
- (3) What are the main concerns or worries you may have in relation to your future career?
- (4) What do you consider as being your strong personality traits? And what do you consider as your weak ones?
- (5) What do you consider as your current school's strengths and what do you consider as its weaknesses?
- (6) What are the main challenges you face (if any) in your leadership role as a ST?
- (7) What do you believe to be the best description of the staff members you work and interact with at school?
- (8) Do you find your position and role as a ST a fulfilling one? If yes, how? If no, why not?
- (9) What are (if any) some examples of things in your school that provide you with a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment?
- (10) What are the main changes introduced into your school in the last two years, as a result of the national educational reforms, that have had the greatest impact on your role as a ST and what is the nature of this impact?



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