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Teachers' experiences with school improvement projects: The case of Bahraini public schools

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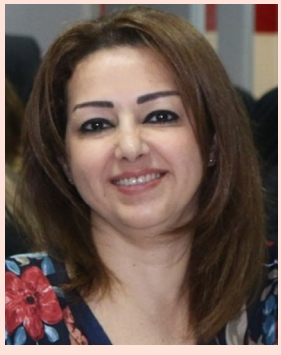
Abstract: For any school improvement (SI) initiative to succeed, teachers' *buy-in* is a must. Usually, such a commitment is weak when the needed resources, training, know-how, and support are lacking. Bahraini public schools require teachers' *buy-in* and commitment. The twofold question though is this: (1) What are the experiences of teachers in Bahraini public schools with respect to SI project implementation and (2) what are some suggestions they have, to possibly make such an implementation more successful? This is the research question that this mixed-methods study addressed by collecting data from (1) teachers in Bahrain, through their completion of a questionnaire containing closed and open-ended items; and (2) feedback sheets of in-service teachers who were involved in the training and implementation of one of the SI projects in Bahraini schools. The data analysis yielded interesting results, which can help enlighten policy-makers in Bahrain regarding the way forward with SI.

Subjects: Development Studies; Education; Social Sciences

Keywords: school improvement; school effectiveness; educational reform; in-service teachers' commitment; Bahraini public schools



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Nina Abdul Razzak is currently working at Bahrain Teachers' College (BTC) of the University of Bahrain (UoB) as Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology and Leadership. She has many years of experience teaching at all school levels as well as in higher education.

As a researcher, she has written and published in a variety of areas like: best practices in education, technology access and integration in schools, teachers' professional development, the effects of child maltreatment, and gender-related issues.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Successful school improvement is not possible without the commitment of all stakeholders involved. Teachers are probably the most important of these stakeholders; since, they are major change agents in schools by virtue of their direct contact with students. Teachers' commitment to school improvement, however, is usually weak when needed resources, training, and support are not provided to them. Since, public schools in the Kingdom of Bahrain are currently undergoing major reform projects and school improvement, it was necessary to assess the level of commitment of their teachers to such projects. Such an assessment was carried out in this study by investigating what type of experiences public school teachers go through, and what types of support they are provided with, with respect to school improvement implementation mandated by the Ministry of Education and also by exploring what suggestions they—as reform agents—may have to make such an implementation more effective.

1. Introduction and literature review

Achieving successful and effective schools is something not easy to do. The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2009a, June) describes six quality indicators of high-achieving or effective schools, which are: aligned and rigorous curriculum; effective instruction; use of formative assessment and student assessment data; positive school climate focused on achievement; effective school leadership; and family and community engagement (p. 2). To begin with, the achievement of all these requires the development and the preservation of positive relationships between school boards (or the leading authority administering education in a certain country, *usually the ministry of education*), on the one hand, and the school leaders and the community, including the school teachers, on the other. "Each of these relationships should be built on respect, trust, confidence, support, and open communication" (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009b, August, p. 3). Part of the work done by effective school boards and ministry directorates involves setting policies that "… emphasize school improvement (SI) initiatives and provide adequate resources to support them" (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009b, August, p. 4), all of which ultimately helps in increasing the effectiveness of schools in terms of the quality of student outcomes. For, school effectiveness is measured by the attainment of better student outcomes and can be achieved through SI, i.e. through successful change from old to new conditions (Gray et al., 1999; MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001). Teachers are key-players in the realization of the objectives of SI projects. Their beliefs, perceptions, and actions highly influence both structural and cultural changes needed in a school for successful change and improvement to come along (Stoll, Creemers, & Reezigt, 2006).

In the island Kingdom of Bahrain, the Ministry of Education (MoE) is the "… party responsible for monitoring the educational system in the country …" (National Report of the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2008, p. 14). Since 2008, the MoE diverted its attention toward developing schools and reforming education by adopting a number of programs that would help in increasing schools' effectiveness. Among such programs is a SI one consisting of a variety of projects that tackle the school system from different sides and try to develop students', teachers', and leaders' competencies and performance (National Report of the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2008, pp. 18, 19). The most notable of these projects are "… the introduction of a new performance management system (PMS) for the evaluation of teachers and staff and … projects that focus on: engaged student-centered learning; the integration of ICT; cooperative learning; differentiated instruction; higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and other 21st century skills; assessment for learning; action research; discipline for learning; and instructional leadership for learning. The MoE has also succeeded at forming SI teams of specialists who work directly with the schools to help them with the implementation of SI projects introduced in their schools. Since most of the changes [for improvement] are expected to happen in the classrooms, the role of the teachers is obviously of crucial importance in the process" (Abdul Razzak, 2015). This last point is supported by many research studies in the literature (e.g. Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004), which have "… shown that teachers have greater influence on student achievement than any other school-based factor" (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009a, June, p. 3) and, thus, comprise a necessary element for improved school outcomes.

For schools to succeed in achieving higher educational outcomes for their students, however, a combination of effective instructional design and content delivery, as well as teachers' continuous professional development (CPD) and support, is needed (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009a, June, pp. 3–4). This is why it is important that there be "… a symbiotic relationship between professional development (PD) and SI efforts" (Hawley & Valli, 1999, p. 129). In other words, whatever PD of teachers is planned or provided, it must be aligned with improvement goals (Steiner, 2004) and directed toward the improvement of students' learning and the fulfillment of their achievement needs (Sappington, Pacha, Baker, & Gardner, 2012). This eventually leads to better student outcomes and school effectiveness as a whole.

In addition, what is needed for successful SI efforts is the establishment of clear, concise, continuous, and cumulative goals that are understood by, and have buy-in from, all stakeholders (Marzano, 2003) including the teachers, of course. Teachers' SI buy-in is referred to by Bernauer (2002) as teachers' ownership of the SI initiatives (p. 90), which means their sharing in the responsibilities of developing, implementing, and evaluating SI efforts. Buy-in, therefore, in this context implies taking a leadership role while being at the center of change. The full realization of such a teacher-leader role is seen by researchers, like Hall and Hord (1987) and Bernauer (2002), as the only hope of sustaining a focus on SI; while, the failure to realize it is considered as one of the main reasons for the collapse of most educational reforms. For this reason, school leaders must be willing to share the mantle of leadership with teachers, allowing them to "... become an extension of their own decision-making authority" (Bernauer, 2002, p. 92). Lumpkin, Claxton, and Wilson (2014) explain that administrators cannot provide all the leadership necessary to resolve the mammoth challenges facing schools' (p. 60) and agree with Danielson (2006) that to be effective, administrators need to unleash the leadership and instructional expertise of teachers, who work the most closely with students and therefore know how to help them learn. Lambert (2003) adds that the main challenge that school leaders have lies in the creation of a context that arouses the leadership potential of all teachers; for, every teacher has such a potential and just needs to be empowered and supported through continuing educational development to effectively exercise that potential. Implementing a distributed form of leadership by school principals is highly recommended, therefore, for the empowerment of teachers to work together toward SI (Heck & Hallinger, 2009); for, "when principals empower teachers by sharing decision-making, teachers become more willing to think divergently, accept responsibility for change, embrace opportunities to help all students learn, and solve problems collaboratively" (Lumpkin et al., 2014, p. 63). Teachers' collaboration with colleagues is a necessity for successful school change and improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2003); for studies (Little, 1999; Sarason, 1971) have proven that the persistence of teachers who work in a culture of isolation serves as a major hurdle in bringing about desired SI results (Ramberg, 2014). Rewarding, recognizing, and appreciating the work of all teachers is also a necessary ingredient in this context (Lumpkin et al., 2014), just as trust between the teachers and leadership; respect for teachers' opinions and efforts; time ownership in which teachers can plan their work productively; and availability of the resources teachers need, are Miller, Garciduenas, Green, Shatola, and Enumba (2008).

2. Conceptual framework of the study

This study takes into account the important factors mentioned in the literature as crucial for initiating and implementing school change initiatives, as well as for sustaining such initiatives beyond their initial stages of implementation. These factors mainly include shared leadership; clearly-communicated, concise, continuous, and cumulative SI goals; PD aligned to improvement goals; stakeholders' buy-in; teacher empowerment; teachers' collaboration; appreciation of teachers' work; and a supportive school environment based on trust, respect, time ownership, and provision of resources.

In addition, this study is conceptually based on the conviction that teachers can either make or break SI efforts, depending on the quality of their attitudes. What is taken into consideration here, in particular, is the classic tripartite view of attitude offered by Rosenberg and Hovland (1960). Before explaining such a view, however, it is important to provide a definition of what is meant by "attitude". One way of defining "attitude" is that of Carl Jung who considers it to be a readiness of the psyche to act or react in a certain way (Main, 2004). Another more common definition is that of considering attitude as an evaluation of a particular object, person, group, idea, event, or activity. According to Rosenberg's and Hoveland's tripartite view, *also known as CAB*, attitudes have cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that in a way influence (like a taxi CAB) where a person goes. The cognitive component refers to a person's belief or knowledge of a certain attitude object. The affective component refers to their feelings or emotions toward it and the behavioral component refers to how they intend to behave toward it based on their beliefs, knowledge, feelings, emotions, and sometimes previous experiences.

To put things into perspective, therefore, this study is conceptually based on the conviction that teachers can either make or break SI efforts, depending on their particular beliefs about, and perceptions of, a particular SI project; their feelings toward it; and what they intend to do about it. Of course, such internal beliefs, feelings, and intentions are highly impacted as well by external factors and conditions in the school environment, which have been already highlighted in the literature review, like: school leadership, clear communication of goals, PD opportunities, support and appreciation, time availability, provision of resources, quality of relationships, collaboration, and so on.

Still, the main point to be emphasized is this: Such teachers' beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and intentions (i.e. *attitudes*) can either lead to strong buy-in and sustained commitment to SI or to absolute indifference toward—if not total rejection of—change initiatives. For, it is well known that the more the proposed change coincides with people's values and attitudes, and the easier and more feasible it is perceived to be, the more the acceptance and the adoption of the change; while, the opposite is also true. In addition, the greater the degree of teachers' buy-in and commitment to SI, the higher are the chances of school effectiveness being achieved. Investigating teachers' attitudes, and understanding better their experiences with SI projects, is as a result crucial for assessing schools' capacities for improvement and effectiveness.

3. Background and purpose of the study

As explained by (Abdul Razzak, 2013), "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" (p. 2). These initiatives include major SI projects that aim at developing the competencies and performance of students, teachers, and principals. The literature indicates that traditionally, "... teachers' voices have rarely been included in discussions about what changes are needed in education or how to implement initiatives" (Hargreaves & Evans, 1997; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011). This has been seen by many as an obvious paradox, given (1) the general perception of teachers as change agents in the implementation of the initiatives and (2) the pressures placed on them to meet the persisting demands put forth by educational improvement policies (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2012). The literature is also full of evidence showing teachers worldwide ignoring educational reforms altogether or redefining them, when they are not entirely convinced with them or when they perceive them as incongruent to their own teaching and schooling philosophies. (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011; Noregs Forskningsrad, 2004). With this tradition in mind, the researcher of this study developed the serious concern that public school teachers in Bahrain may not yet be sufficiently convinced and committed to the SI projects being implemented in their schools, especially since they too are not usually involved in the initial discussions about the needed educational changes and initiatives. Rather, the initiatives are usually introduced into their schools as mandated projects from the MoE. Accompanying such a concern was the researcher's fear that the possible lack of teachers' commitment may weaken the SI projects' chances of success and, subsequently, lessen the chances of success of the national educational reform in Bahrain in general.

Consequently, with the Bahraini public schools being nowadays the vibrant contexts they are in terms of implementation of SI initiatives, the researcher felt a serious need to investigate (1) the SI perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of teachers in such contexts and (2) their suggestions, if any, for possibly making the process of SI implementation smoother and more successful. This investigation eventually aimed at making, based on its concluding results, relevant recommendations for educational key players and policy-makers in Bahrain. Carrying out such an investigation proved to be highly interesting, simply because not much has been written, if anything, on SI in Bahrain. The scarcity of research studies in this area, therefore, critically called for a study such as this.

4. Significance of the study

This study is a part of a larger research project on SI in Bahrain. On a wide scale, the results of this particular inquiry can benefit the educational reform initiatives in Bahrain, as well as, the educational key players and policy-makers in the Kingdom, by shedding light on how the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of teachers involved in SI could be acting as either catalysts for, or impediments to, school effectiveness, educational change, and national reforms.

This study, in addition, can also be of benefit to other similar reform initiatives regionally and internationally, through its contribution to the SI literature, which is a contribution mainly in the form of knowledge that should be taken into consideration for successful SI and promising educational reforms.

5. Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to fulfill this study's research objectives. This is because while the researcher aimed at reaching a wide sample of research participants (*which normally requires a quantitative methodology*), she was also interested in exploring personal aspects of the participants—like their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences—which can usually best be exposed through a qualitative method of inquiry (Bryman, 2004). The research instruments used for data collection are described in the subsequent paragraphs.

5.1. Questionnaire

A survey (Appendix A) in the form of a questionnaire was used to explore Bahraini public school teachers' perceptions, feelings, and experiences with SI projects. This questionnaire consisted of 25 closed-ended items and two main open-ended ones. While the closed-ended items attempted to reveal teachers' attitudes and experiences, the open-ended questions attempted to unveil obstacles faced in the SI process, if any, as well as, teachers' suggestions for facilitation of SI implementation. All the questionnaire items were developed based on the objectives of the study and were based on its literature review.

The questionnaire was sent by email to 436 in-service teachers and 144 completed copies were successfully returned. This response rate (33%) is considered to be relatively high for an online survey. The participants were selected through convenience sampling and in a non-random fashion, since they represented a target population of in-service teachers in the public schools of Bahrain, who had either graduated from the Bahrain Teachers' College (BTC) or had taken some PD course at the BTC. The BTC is the only teachers' college available in the country, and was established in 2008 as one of the national educational reform initiatives (Abdul Razzak & Albaker, 2015). The programs it offers are the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) for fresh high school graduates; the Educational Leadership Program (ELP) for assistant principals (APs) working in the public school system; and the CPD for practicing in-service teachers (Abdul Razzak & Albaker, 2015). The participants completed the questionnaire only after their official consent was taken and their involvement in the study was in the form of rating the questionnaire items on a Likert scale of one-to-five, where *1 = strongly disagree*, *2 = disagree*, *3 = undecided*, *4 = agree*, and *5 = strongly agree*. They were also required to fill a prequestionnaire, which included demographic items related to their age; gender; years of experience; and type, level, and location of the school they work in. Of course, since the mother tongue of the participants is Arabic, and since they vary greatly in their English language proficiency, the questionnaire and prequestionnaire were given to them in Arabic and were then translated, along with the participants' responses, to English by the researcher herself. After that, they were all submitted for assessment by an additional qualified translator, who was also familiar with the target population. To preserve the meaning of the original documents, symmetrical translation was applied, which is a type of translation that warrants an equal sense of familiarity and maintains cultural relevance between the original and translated documents (Davison, 2004).

The data collected from the closed-items were analyzed (1) quantitatively through the use of simple descriptive statistics, i.e. by counting rating responses on the predetermined scale and displaying their distributions in percentages, and (2) qualitatively through interpretations indicated by those particular distributions and organized into eight main themes. The responses of the open-ended items, however, were analyzed only qualitatively through applying a general inductive analysis. What this means is that the responses were collected, read through carefully for numerous times, and simultaneously coded and annotated. Some of the notes were just summaries but others were more associations and connections made by the researcher regarding interesting and significant points made by the participants. These notes were afterwards used to develop views related to the main points of focus of the open-ended items, basically the challenges faced in SI implementation and the teachers' suggestions for facilitating the SI process.

5.2. Feedback sheets

In addition to the questionnaire, data was also collected and analyzed from feedback sheets completed by evaluators of in-service teachers. The teachers who were evaluated had received prior training in, and had attempted to implement in their classroom instruction, a particular component of an SI project known as *Teaching for Learning Academy II* (*T4LA II*). The particular component had to do with the implementation and infusion of HOTS in instruction and evaluators from the Directorate of Supervision at the MoE had to assess such teachers' implementation attempts. The primary idea here was to try to analyze, through the feedback provided by the evaluators, a particular component of an SI project that is being currently implemented (*in this case HOTS*), in order to shed more light on teachers' related level of performance, the aspects they were succeeding at, and the things they were having difficulty in, in order to understand better what kind of changes and/or additional support may be needed in the process to facilitate SI implementation.

The data collected from the completed feedback sheets were for nine in-service teachers, who were selected non-randomly and through convenience sampling from a pool of 21 outstanding teachers (*as identified and described by the Directorate of Supervision at the Bahraini MoE*), who had already completed the HOTS training and attempted to implement it in their classrooms. All the feedback sheets had one standard template (Appendix B) which included the following information: name of the teacher being evaluated; the subject and grade level being taught; name of the HOTS activity being implemented; and the evaluator's notes and comments in relation to accepting or rejecting the teachers' particular implementation of the activity. It is important to mention here that the activities implemented were all selected from the training sessions that the teachers had attended.

The data collected from the nine feedback sheets were subjected to a translation process and to a qualitative inductive analysis similar to those used for the translation and analysis of the open-ended items of the questionnaire.

6. Results

6.1. Closed-ended items of questionnaire

Table 2 displays the findings of the closed-ended items of the questionnaire completed by 144 participants. Preceding Table 2 is a chart (Table 1) summarizing the demographic data of the respondents.

The demographic data collected indicate a wide range of years in terms of participants' age and years of experience. They also indicate an almost equal number of participants in terms of gender (74 males and 70 females) and an almost equal number of girls' and boys' schools (27 boys' schools and 28 girls' schools) represented. Similarly, the distribution of the boys' schools in terms of level seems to be very close to the distribution of the levels of the girls' schools (11 elementary schools for

Table 1. Demographics chart

Demographics' data				
Gender		74 males; 70 females		Total = 144
Age range		22–60 years (males); 22–55 years (females)		
Years of teaching experience		1–30 years (males); 1–31 years (females)		
School gender	Working in boys' schools	74 males	6 females	Total = 80
	Working in girls' schools	0 males	64 females	Total = 64
School level	Teachers working in elementary schools	32 males	24 females	Total = 56
	Teachers working in middle schools	26 males	26 females	Total = 52
	Teachers working in secondary schools	16 males	20 females	Total = 36
School location	Teachers working in urban centers	50 males	50 females	Total = 100
	Teachers working in rural areas	24 males	20 females	Total = 44
Represented of schools #	Elementary school for boys	11		
	Middle school for boys	10		
	Secondary school for boys	6		
	Elementary school for girls	12		
	Middle school for girls	8		
	Secondary school for girls	8		Total of schools represented = 55

boys and 12 for girls; 10 middle schools for boys and 8 for girls; and 6 secondary schools for boys and 8 for girls). There is also an equal number of male and female teachers (50 each) working in urban schools and almost equal number (24 males and 20 females) working in rural areas. There are more teachers (80 in total), however, working in boys' schools than those (64 in total) in girls' schools and the explanation for this could be that in Bahrain, women are allowed to work in elementary boys' schools; whereas, men are not allowed to teach in any girls' schools. This is why we find in the demographics female teachers (six of them exactly) working in boys schools but zero males in girls' schools. Finally, there are more teachers working in elementary and middle schools (56 + 52 = 108 teachers) than there are in secondary schools (36 teachers). An explanation for this could be that currently in Bahrain there are, according to the statistical reports on the MoE official website, more elementary and middle schools (168 schools) than there are secondary schools (36 schools).

With respect to the findings of the questionnaire, they are displayed in Table 2 in number of responses and in percentages.

These findings indicate important interpretations or themes organized into the following eight categories with their corresponding labels, descriptions, and data. The categories were derived from the focal points of the 25 survey items and it is important to note that, for convenience, the interpretations below were made on the basis of combining together the percentages of *agree* and *strongly agree*, on the one hand, and *disagree* and *strongly disagree* on the other.

Table 2. Participants' responses to closed-ended items of the questionnaire

Item	Scale					Item	Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5
# 1	16	52	16	54	6	# 14	22	24	30	48	20
	11.11%	36.11%	11.11%	37.5%	4.17%		15.28%	16.67%	20.83%	33.33%	13.89%
# 2	6	28	8	74	28	# 15	24	54	20	24	22
	4.17%	19.44%	5.56%	51.39%	19.44%		16.67%	37.5%	13.89%	16.67%	15.28%
# 3	18	18	12	34	62	# 16	20	42	12	44	26
	12.5%	12.5%	8.33%	23.61%	43.06%		13.89%	29.17%	8.33%	30.56%	18.06%
# 4	14	36	28	52	14	# 17	8	16	34	50	36
	9.72%	25%	19.44%	36.11%	9.72%		5.56%	11.11%	23.61%	34.72%	25%
# 5	12	24	12	38	58	# 18	8	26	16	68	26
	8.33%	16.67%	8.33%	26.39%	40.28%		5.56%	18.06%	11.11%	47.22%	18.06%
# 6	8	32	32	56	16	# 19	24	32	16	48	24
	5.56%	22.22%	22.22%	38.89%	11.11%		16.67%	22.22%	11.11%	33.33%	16.67%
# 7	24	34	24	54	8	# 20	34	46	18	34	12
	16.67%	23.61%	16.67%	37.5%	5.56%		23.61%	31.94%	12.5%	23.61%	8.33%
# 8	10	32	16	78	8	# 21	30	48	22	40	4
	6.94%	22.22%	11.11%	54.2%	5.56%		20.83%	33.33%	15.28%	27.78%	2.78%
# 9	12	28	16	72	16	# 22	0	26	36	64	18
	8.33%	19.44%	11.11%	50%	11.11%		0%	18.06%	25%	44.44%	12.5%
# 10	12	26	20	68	18	# 23	22	40	30	50	2
	8.33%	18.06%	13.89%	47.22%	12.5%		15.28%	27.78%	20.83%	34.72%	1.39%
# 11	34	16	30	50	14	# 24	28	54	32	26	4
	23.61%	11.11%	20.83%	34.72%	9.72%		19.44%	37.5%	22.22%	18.06%	2.78%
# 12	14	50	14	36	30	# 25	26	38	36	25	17
	9.72%	34.72%	9.72%	25%	20.83%		18.06%	26.39%	26.39%	17.36%	11.81%
# 13	44	46	22	22	10						
	30.56%	31.94%	15.28%	15.28%	6.94%						

Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

6.1.1. Category 1: importance and purposefulness of SI projects (Items 1, 2, and 3)

The focus here is on how the participants perceive the SI projects introduced in their schools in terms of importance and purposefulness. Almost half of the participants (47.22%) disagree that all the SI projects are important and purposeful and the majority (70.83%) feels that only some projects are so; while, a considerable number (66.67%) find some of the projects lacking importance and a total waste of time. This indicates that there are at least some SI projects that the participants are not convinced with and this could lead them, therefore, to either ignoring these projects altogether or to trying to redefine them, as demonstrated in many previous studies in the literature (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011; Noregs Forskningsrad, 2004). This of course can act as a major obstacle in the face of any SI initiative.

6.1.2. Category 2: need for SI projects (Items 4 and 5)

This category relates to how much the participants perceive a need for SI projects as a means for increasing effectiveness of their schools. Although more rather than less participants (45.83% exactly) feel that the SI projects are needed for increased school effectiveness, there is a good number (34.72%) who do not feel this and there are several (19.44%) who are undecided, which could mean that they are probably not sure. At the same time, the majority (66.67%) believe that their schools are capable of improving their performance and increasing their effectiveness with or without the SI projects introduced by the MoE, which seems to indicate that this majority does not perceive the SI projects as a necessity. The data here show that the need for SI projects as a means for increased school effectiveness is not a strong feeling shared by the participants. When the perception of need for something is weak, this logically means that that object of need is not considered as something of great importance. The object of need in this particular case is the SI projects and the lack of perception of them as being important, especially from the side of the teacher participants, can be seriously damaging to their success potential. For, again like the point above and as clearly evident in the literature, the lack of conviction and belief in such projects could seriously act as an impediment in the way of their implementation, mainly by weakening teachers' commitment and buy-in.

6.1.3. Category 3: impact of SI projects (Items 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10)

The focus here is on how the participants perceive the effect of the SI projects. Half of the participants admit to noticing positive changes in their schools since the introduction of SI projects in 2008. The other half of the participants is divided between those who have not noticed changes (27.78%) and those who are undecided (22.22%). The possible reason why some of the participants are undecided could be because some of them were not yet working in schools before the introduction of the SI projects and so are unable to tell if changes have taken place after the implementation of such projects. With respect to whether SI projects are capable of improving student achievement, increasing teacher and leadership competencies, and enhancing the school environment, there were more participants who agreed to this than less; however, whereas, the number of participants who agreed to positive results on school environment and teacher and leadership competencies was considerably higher than half (59.72, 59.76, and 66.11%, respectively), the number of participants who agreed to SI projects' capability to improve student achievement was only less than half (43.06% precisely) and was interestingly very close to the number of participants (40.28%) who disagreed to such a capability. Having half of the participants admitting to positive changes in their schools as a result of the introduction of SI projects is extremely positive because it could possibly lead to stronger conviction in such projects and help in gaining teachers' buy-in. Having a considerable number of participants not agreeing that SI projects are capable of improving student achievement, however, is alarming because in principle this is one of the key aims, if not the chief aim, of SI efforts leading to school effectiveness, as established in the literature (Gray et al., 1999; MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001). What this seems to possibly imply therefore is that either (1) the SI projects in these participants' schools failed in fulfilling their key objective or (2) that the participants themselves lack faith in the SI projects' capability of improving student achievement or maybe (3) they are not completely clear on the main goals of SI initiatives. Regardless of which case applies here, the situation is a negative one for the success prospects of the SI efforts, since faith and conviction in SI capabilities, and understanding of and clarity on SI goals, are all necessary ingredients for SI success (Marzano, 2003).

6.1.4. Category 4: emotional reaction toward SI projects (Items 11, 12, and 13)

This category relates to the types of feelings experienced by teachers when first presented with SI projects at their schools. The highest number of responses (62.5%) indicates that the participants do not feel indifferent toward new SI projects, which on first sight appears to be something positive. However, when the remaining responses show that a considerable number (44.44%) of participants do not feel excited when they hear of a new SI project and an equal number (44.44%) feel burdened and somewhat frustrated by it, this makes it obvious that the lack of indifference is not really an indication of concern and interest. Still, however, the situation is not as gloomy as it may first seem, since a good number of participants (34.72%), on the other hand, feel excitement with the introduction of new SI projects and a considerable number (45.83%) do not feel burdened or frustrated with them. The data indicate a variation in emotional reactions among the participants, fluctuating between lack of excitement and feeling burdened to excitement and lack of frustration with SI projects. Such reactions are significant since they, of course, help in determining participants' degree of acceptance, or rejection, of improvement or change efforts. The variation in reactions noticed here is quite natural and expected, since as research studies have proven, no change can be introduced without ending up with proponents and opponents; for, no change is truly objective or value-free (Burnes & Jackson, 2011; By & Macleod, 2009). Based on the data obtained in relation to the participants' emotional reactions, the positive aspect evident here is that the number of those feeling burdened and frustrated with SI projects is very close to that of those who are excited about improvement. There seems to be room, therefore, for acceptance of initiated changes. The pressing question, however, that continues to be in need of an answer from school principals, MoE officials, and policy-makers in Bahrain is how to better gain greater buy-in and commitment from a greater number of teachers.

6.1.5. Category 5: teacher responsibility with respect to implementation (Item 14)

The main concentration in this category is on whether teachers have a responsibility toward SI projects' implementation and the responses indicate that almost half of the participants (47.22%) do not believe that all teachers should ensure the implementation of SI projects in their classrooms and only some (31.95%) believe so; while, a few (20.83%) are not decided. Having almost half of the participants not believing that SI implementation should be ensured by all teachers in their classrooms is a matter of concern, since this indicates that SI projects' implementation is not perceived as a shared responsibility among all school stakeholders. Failure to perceive SI implementation as a shared responsibility clashes with what researchers prescribe as being necessary for successful SI efforts, mainly shared SI goals and cumulative teachers' collaboration (Marzano, 2003; Mujis & Harris, 2003; Ramberg, 2014).

6.1.6. Category 6: teachers' training and readiness (Items 15, 16, 17, and 18)

The main focus here is on the sufficiency of training provided in relation to SI implementation and also on the readiness of the participants. More than half of the participants (54.17%) believe that the training of teachers on ways of implementing SI projects is sufficiently provided and almost half (48.62%) feel that they do not need more related training. Still, however, there is a considerable number of participants (42.99%) who feel they are in need of more training and also a good number (31.95%) who do not believe that the training provided is sufficient. Consistent with this, there is a big number of participants (59.72%) who do not yet consider themselves as competent in the implementation of SI projects and several (23.61%) who are undecided, meaning that they do not know whether they are competent or not. Surprisingly, despite this, the majority of the participants (65.28%) do not agree that they need more time to feel comfortable with planning and implementing SI projects in their classrooms. Since there is a good number of participants who feel that the SI training provided is not sufficient and that they are still in need of more training, and since there are more than fewer participants who still do not consider themselves as competent with SI project implementation, then this indicates a serious need for filling this PD gap regardless of the number of participants who think otherwise. The most important point to remember here, as was mentioned in the literature review, is that whatever PD is provided, it must be aligned to the improvement goals (Steiner, 2004) and directed toward addressing students' academic needs and improving student achievement (Sappington et al., 2012).

6.1.7. Category 7: SI instructions (Items 23 and 24)

This category is related to the quality of instructions and guidelines provided in relation to SI projects implementation. According to a good number of the participants (43.06%), the instructions provided are clear. A bigger number (56.94%) also consider the instructions to be coherent, consistent, and delivered by one source. Despite these significant numbers, there is a good number of participants (36.11%) who do not find the instructions and guidelines clear and there are some (20.84%) who do not find them to be coherent, consistent, and delivered by one source. This could create a problem for SI implementation, since as was mentioned in the literature review, clarity and understanding of SI projects constitute an important factor needed for their successful implementation (Marzano, 2003). Similarly, the perception of the projects as easy and feasible is also necessary for change to be accepted and adopted, as was explained in the conceptual framework; however, there being some participants who do not find the projects' guidelines clear nor consistent, this most probably means that they do not also find the projects to say the least easy.

6.1.8. Category 8: support (Items 19, 20, 21, 22, and 25)

The main area here is on support in terms of resources, facilities, assistance, follow-up, and specialists' help and advice. With respect to resources, like teaching and learning materials, technology, stationary, programs, and curricula, half of the participants consider them not to be sufficiently provided. While, more than half (55.55%) believe that the facilities at their schools are sufficiently available and equipped for the implementation of SI projects. An almost equal number of participants (54.16%) agree that there is sufficient assistance and support provided at their schools for the implementation of SI projects but a significant number (56.94%) do not agree that there is continuous follow-up of SI project implementation at their schools and that such implementation is ensured regardless of the supervisor. Additionally, even though there are more than fewer participants who find the assistance and support provided at their schools as sufficient, there is a good number (30.56%) who do not. Additionally, there is a good number (29.17%) who do not see the specialists from the SI teams acting as critical friends; although a bigger number (44.45%) does. What is visible here also is that there is a noticeable group of participants (25%) who are undecided regarding whether follow-up and sustainability of SI project implementation are ensured at their schools and a similar group (26.39%) who are undecided about the role being played by the SI teams. This, again, may be due to the fact that these participants may have not been in their schools for a long time to be able to judge on such matters. Having a significant number of participants perceiving the follow-up on SI implementation as lacking continuity and as being dependent on the supervisor indicates that even with the availability of resources, facilities, and assistance, successful implementation of SI projects is not ensured in a stable manner; since, when the supervisor changes, a change also takes place in the quality and level of follow-up, depending on the new supervisor's beliefs, feelings, and intentions, and this change is not always for the better.

6.2. Open-ended items of the questionnaire

The analysis of the open-ended questionnaire items yielded the following challenges and suggestions reported by the participants and organized in Table 3 (*in order of the most frequently mentioned to the least frequently mentioned*):

It is noticeable from the two long lists above that the challenges and suggestions more or less correspond to each other. The big picture they draw reveals that there seems to be only a superficial implementation of SI projects rather than a genuine one. This can be attributed in part to a number of factors like: (1) unavailability of resources specific for SI implementation, namely proper facilities, finances, and human resources; (2) insufficient leadership support; (3) unavailability, lack of competence, and inapproachability of SI team members as well as insufficient support from them; (4) lack of teachers' involvement in the SI decision-making process and lack of incentives and rewards to motivate them; and (5) heavy workload with excessive classroom responsibilities, topped with too many SI requirements from paperwork to meetings to handling more than one project at one time. Although SI implementation seems to be only superficial, there were only three participants of the opinion that SI projects should be eliminated altogether. This can be viewed as a positive sign, since it implies that the majority of the teachers is not yet ready to totally give up on SI project

Table 3. Participants' responses to open-ended items of the questionnaire

Challenges	Suggestions
SI projects burden the teachers with additional tasks and so they become overworked and there is just not enough time to get things done (mentioned 17 times)	Reduce the workload of teachers so that they can focus more on SI projects (mentioned 14 times)
The SI trainers lack the required skills and competencies (16)	Focus on only one or two SI projects per year rather than many (11)
SI projects' instructions lack clarity and consistency (14)	Conduct periodical SI training workshops for school teachers and leaders (11)
Materials and resources (especially, technology and finances) needed for SI projects are insufficiently available (14)	Select competent and qualified SI team members and provide them with the necessary professional development and training, so they come to school visits better prepared to assist the school staff with SI projects (11)
Inconsistency exists between SI project requirements and curriculum requirements and/or school environment and practices (14)	Involve the teachers in the decision-making process related to SI planning (9)
SI team members play the role of inspectors rather than acting as supporters or critical friends (13)	Provide rewards and incentives for the teachers who participate in the implementation of SI projects (8)
SI trainers are insufficiently available (11)	Establish in each school a special office with one or two specialists, whose main objective is providing support related to SI project implementation (6)
There is a kind of shallow implementation of SI projects, where the main focus is only on appearances and how things look rather than on the main aim of improving student outcomes (9)	Select skilled and experienced teachers to work on SI implementation rather than choosing teachers randomly (6)
The student-teacher ratio in the classrooms is very high and this makes the implementation of SI projects very difficult (7)	It should be made clear to the SI teams that the aim of SI is to improve students' achievement and to support the teachers in the process rather than to evaluate the school leadership and teachers with no provision of any guidance or support (6)
There is too much paperwork involved in the SI process (7)	There needs to be better matching between the SI projects and the needs of the students and the reality of the school and its practices (6)
A significant number of SI projects are being implemented simultaneously instead of gradually one by one (6)	Finances as well as human resources should be provided specifically for SI project implementation (6)
There is a lot of psychological pressure and stress on the teachers (6)	Reduce the number of students per class (5)
Having academically weak students and special needs students in classes, who require extra care and attention, does not allow teachers to focus much on SI projects (6)	Provide a clear and transparent mechanism for the follow-up of SI project implementation (4)
School leadership support is insufficient; a lot of the principals are more concerned about pleasing the SI teams rather than helping and supporting their school teachers (5)	Reduce the amount of paperwork involved in the SI process as well as the number of meetings (4)
There are too many meetings involved in SI projects (4)	Hire teacher assistants to help the classroom teachers with their duties, which will make the teachers more available for working on SI projects (3)
Teachers lack motivation toward SI projects because they are not involved in the decision-making processes related to them (4)	Eliminate SI projects altogether, since schools work on SI in the presence of the SI teams and do not in their absence; there is just no continuity (3)
There is a lack of teacher rewards and incentives (3)	SI success stories should be shared in order to raise motivation levels of those now involved in SI implementation (2)
The lack of motivation of students does not allow teachers to try harder in implementing SI projects (3)	There should be in schools more focus on reality and on reporting the facts as they are, rather than on trying to please the SI teams (2)
Follow-up and feedback from the SI team members is weak and insufficient (2)	Time should be given to test the impact of an SI project in a school before the introduction of a new one (1)
There is a lack of proper facilities in the schools (2)	Schools should provide remedial activities and enrichment sessions to assist with the academically weak students, so that teachers can focus more on SI implementation (1)
MoE policies and bureaucracy act as an obstacle to any SI project (2)	Clear and unified SI instructions should be provided (1)
The MoE is unable to truly make SI projects attractive to teachers (1)	School leaders should have more confidence in the capabilities of the teachers and should give them more room to be creative and innovative in their implementation of the SI projects (1)
SI requirements are too rigid and kill teachers' creativity, which also negatively affects their motivation (1)	Public awareness campaigns about SI projects should be conducted, to try to gain cooperation from the students' parents and the community (1)
	SI team members should include among them core subject specialists (1)

Table 4. Negative aspects of HOTS implementation based on evaluator's feedback
The objective of the activity is not clearly stated (mentioned 10 times)
No criteria/measures available to assess the success/failure of a certain activity or that a certain skill has been acquired (8)
The activity chosen requires memorization and recall skills rather than thinking skills (7)
The level of the activity does not match students' thinking/cognitive level (7)
Steps needed for implementing the activity are not clear (7)
Not specifying a time duration for the activity (7)
The activity chosen is not very relevant to the lesson being taught. Sure it is related to the higher-order thinking skill but not to the content (5)
Wrong activity selected for the higher-order thinking skill (e.g. choosing 2 things that cannot be compared to make a decision between them) (4)
Wrong implementation of the activity (2)
The time allotted for the activity is too long (1)
Limited content provided (1)
Not using an example/sample of the activity as an explanation for the students of what is required (1)
The questions asked are all closed-ended questions and do not encourage thinking (1)

implementation; on the contrary, most of their suggestions indicate a desire for changing things in a way that would make this implementation easier, smoother, and more efficient. Good examples of such suggestions are those calling for more qualified SI teams; better training of teachers and leaders; clearer and more consistent SI instructions; some teacher involvement in decision-making; better selection of teachers who are assigned to work on SI projects; and more room for innovation and creativity.

6.3. Feedback sheets

The results of the feedback sheets (used to evaluate the nine in-service teachers who had already attempted to implement the HOTS project in their classrooms) pertained mainly to negative aspects of implementation, with almost nothing mentioned with respect to positive aspects. These results are organized in Table 4 (*in order of the most frequently mentioned to the least frequently mentioned*).

It is evident from the evaluators' comments listed in Table 4 that there seems to have been more focus on what the teachers were not doing or were doing wrong rather than on what they were doing right, which in a way is not very fair to the teachers, especially since this was still a totally new experience for them. In any case, the results point to too many problems and difficulties in implementation and if one looks closely, these problems have to do mostly with the selection and planning of the right HOTS activities, with what seems to be an inability to infuse HOTS in a lesson without simultaneously shifting focus away from the main content of the lesson. These problems are represented mainly in: unclear activity objectives and procedures; lack of success criteria; mismatch between the activity level and students' cognitive level; mismatch between the type of activity and the content of the lesson; wrong time duration allocated for the activity; unsuitability of activity for the targeted higher-order thinking skill; and insufficient lesson content presented. All this seems to indicate teachers' need for greater guidance and more effective training on HOTS implementation; this, therefore, is highly consistent with the results yielded from both the closed-ended and open-ended items of the questionnaire, where a good number of participants expressed that SI training provided is insufficient and that they are in need of more and better training.

7. Discussion

This study examined the experiences of teachers in the Bahraini public school system with respect to SI projects being implemented in their school contexts, and explored their suggestions for

possibly making such an implementation smoother and more successful. The results and their analyses identified a number of factors that could possibly lead to a weak commitment and buy-in toward SI projects on the part of a significant number of teachers. Among these factors are the following: weak conviction in SI projects and failure to perceive them as important; lack of belief in SI projects' capability of improving student outcomes; failure to perceive SI project implementation as a shared responsibility among all teachers; prevalence of a feeling of burden and frustration due to SI implementation, especially with a high student-teacher ratio in classes and with several SI projects introduced simultaneously; ambiguity and inconsistency of SI guidelines and instructions; insufficient and inefficient training provided; sporadic follow-up on SI projects leading to instability in their implementation; and incompatibility between SI projects and school curricula, conditions, and practices.

Based on the study's literature review and conceptual framework, all of the factors mentioned above could easily lead teachers to develop a negative attitude toward SI projects and to ignore them altogether or to at least redefine them (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011; Marzano, 2003; Mujis & Harris, 2003; Noregs Forskningsrad, 2004; Ramberg, 2014). This of course could act as a major obstacle in the face of any SI initiative, just like also any superficial implementation of SI projects could. From the long lists of challenges and suggestions compiled from the teachers' responses, this is exactly the type of implementation that seems to be happening at the moment with respect to SI projects in the public schools of Bahrain. It is mainly an implementation that lacks authenticity and genuineness in most parts and this can be attributed to: unavailability of resources specific for SI implementation, namely proper facilities, finances, and human resources; insufficient leadership support; unavailability, lack of competence, and inapproachability of SI team members as well as insufficient support from them; lack of teachers' involvement in the SI decision-making process and lack of incentives and rewards to motivate them; and heavy workload with excessive classroom responsibilities, topped with too many SI requirements from paperwork to meetings to handling more than one project at one time. The analysis presented in this study of the case of HOTS implementation, as a part of the *T4L II* project, happens to demonstrate this superficiality and lack of authentic application.

On a more positive note, despite what seems to be weak commitment and buy-in on the part of the teachers in the Bahraini system, and even with what seems to be only a superficial implementation of SI projects, the fact that (1) a considerable number of participants admitted to seeing positive changes in their schools as a result of the introduction of SI projects, and (2) a number of them expressed excitement toward improvement, is something extremely positive because it could possibly lead to stronger conviction in such projects and help in gaining stronger teachers' buy-in. This is true even with the existence of a variation in emotional reactions among the teacher participants, fluctuating between lack of excitement and feeling burdened to excitement and lack of frustration with SI projects; for, such a variation is quite natural and expected. Since, as research studies have proven, no change can be introduced without ending up with proponents and opponents; for, no change is truly objective or value-free (Burnes & Jackson, 2011; By & Macleod, 2009). What is also a positive sign is the fact that only a negligible number of teachers were actually of the opinion that SI projects should be eliminated altogether and, thus, giving the implication that the majority is not yet ready to totally give up on SI implementation. This was reinforced by the quality of suggestions made by the teachers, which in general indicated a desire for changing things in a way that would make SI implementation easier, smoother, and more efficient.

Being able to perceive positive changes (*cognitive perception*), feeling excited about improvement (*affective state*), and making practical and constructive suggestions (*behavior*) constitute, if anything, a somewhat positive attitude on the part of some teachers toward the SI projects. By consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, as explained in the conceptual framework by Rosenberg's and Hoveland's *CAB* tripartite view (1960), such an attitude can influence where a person goes. This attitude is therefore important; since, its quality can empower a teacher to either make or break SI efforts, meaning it can either lead to strong buy-in and sustained commitment to

SI or to absolute indifference toward—if not total rejection of—change initiatives. Of course, such an attitude is highly impacted, as well, by external factors and conditions in the school environment, which have been already highlighted in the literature review, like: school leadership, clear communication of goals, PD opportunities, support and appreciation, time availability, provision of resources, quality of relationships, and collaboration. What this means therefore is that to ensure a positive attitude on the part of the teachers, it is necessary to guarantee that such external factors are favorable. For this reason, it is highly recommended for educational key players and policy-makers in Bahrain to seriously take into consideration, and work actively on realizing, teachers' suggestions for facilitation of SI implementation, since all their suggestions call for enhancement of such external factors. Doing this could help in paving the way forward for SI, effectiveness, and eventually school reform. Good examples of teacher suggestions, as seen in the results section of this study, call for more qualified SI teams; better training of teachers and leaders; clearer and more consistent SI instructions; some teacher involvement in decision-making; better selection of teachers who are assigned to work on SI projects; and more room for innovation and creativity.

8. Conclusions and limitations

With this recommendation, this modest research investigation has managed to fulfill its primary objectives of examining teachers' experiences with SI projects in the Bahraini public schools and exploring their challenges and suggestions for smoother SI implementation. Clearly, one of the strengths of this study is found in its implication that despite a somewhat superficial implementation of SI projects in the public schools of Bahrain and despite weak commitment and buy-in from some teachers, no general agreement on giving up on SI implementation is at all evident. On the contrary, suggestions are made, which indicate a desire for changing things in a way that would make such implementation easier, smoother, and more efficient. There is therefore hope for successful SI project implementation in Bahrain and this hope can increase with actual action taken on such recommendations from the side of concerned key players and policy-makers. These recommendations are significant because of their potential to guide the way and contribute to improvement of schools in Bahrain and to schools elsewhere that may be in parallel contexts and surrounded by similar conditions. In addition to the study's implications and recommendations, one of its main strengths lies in its uniqueness, as was mentioned earlier, for filling an existing research gap on Bahrain.

That being said, however, this study could not but have been limited, since its participants were limited in number in comparison to the total number of teachers in the public schools of Bahrain. Had the sample of teacher participants studied been larger or more diverse, different findings may have been obtained. In addition, there is also no guarantee that the participants were totally honest in their responses. Finally, since educational research is value-laden, this study could not but have been biased or subjective in some way. Still, what lends some credibility to this study's research findings is the fact that more than one source of data collection was used (i.e. *the teachers' survey and the feedback sheets*) and there was a high degree of consistency between the results of the two sources. Credibility was also ensured when the researcher returned to the participants for their verification of the data interpretations and the involved teachers recognized and agreed to the findings.

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Appendix A

Survey items

Instructions for part one: Use the following Likert scale to complete the following items:

	Item no.	Item	1	2	3	4	5
Perceptions and feelings toward school improvement projects	1	The school improvement projects introduced by the Ministry of Education are all important and purposeful					
	2	Only some school improvement projects are important and purposeful					
	3	Unfortunately some of the school improvement projects are not important and can be considered as a waste of time					
	4	In order to improve in performance and increase in effectiveness, Bahraini public schools are in need of the school improvement projects introduced by the Ministry of Education					
	5	Bahraini public schools is capable of improving its performance and increasing its effectiveness to the expected level with or without the school improvement projects introduced by the Ministry of Education					
	6	I notice positive changes in my school since the introduction of school improvement projects in 2008					
	7	School improvement projects are capable of improving student achievement					
	8	School improvement projects are capable of increasing teacher competencies					
	9	School improvement projects are capable of increasing leadership competencies					
	10	School improvement projects are capable of leading to improvements in the school environment					
	11	I feel excited when I hear of a new school improvement project being introduced into my school and seek to educate myself about it					
	12	I feel burdened and somewhat frustrated when I hear of a new school improvement project being introduced into my school					
	13	I feel indifferent toward any new school improvement project introduced into my school					
Implementation of school improvement projects number	14	All teachers should ensure the implementation of school improvement projects in their classrooms					
	15	Training of teachers on ways of implementing school improvement projects is sufficiently provided					
	16	I need more training on the implementation of school improvement projects					
	17	I consider myself competent in the implementation of the school improvement projects that have been introduced in my school so far					
	18	I need more time to feel comfortable with planning and implementing school improvement projects in my classes					
	19	The resources necessary for implementing school improvement projects (e.g. teaching and learning materials, technology, stationary, programs and curricula, etc.) are sufficiently provided at my school					
	20	Facilities at my school are sufficiently available and equipped for the implementation of school improvement projects					
	21	Assistance and support for the implementation of school improvement projects are sufficiently provided at my school					
	22	Continuous follow-up of school improvement project implementation and its sustainability is ensured at my school regardless of the supervisor					
	23	The instructions and guidelines I receive on how to implement school improvement projects are clear					
	24	The instructions and guidelines I receive on how to implement school improvement projects are delivered by one source and they are coherent and consistent					
	25	Specialists from the school improvement teams usually act as critical friends who provide support and assistance					

Notes: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Instructions for part two: Kindly write the answers of the following open questions in their corresponding spaces:

Are there any obstacles/challenges that you face in your implementation of school improvement projects? If yes, what are they?	What suggestions can you make for facilitating the implementation of school improvement projects in Bahrain?
Answer:	Answer:

Appendix B

Evaluator's feedback sheet

Teacher		
Subject		
Grade level		
Activity title		
Activity description		
Evaluator's comments & notes	Positive aspects:	Negative aspects

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