

The Invisible Catalysts Unit in the Educational Hierarchy System in Kuwait: A Need to Improve Supervisory Unit

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Abstract: This study was carried out to determine the current status of the supervision unit in the Kuwaiti education system from the perspective of its staff. To gather the pertinent data, the supervisors at the Ministry of Education (MoE) were interviewed and invited to join focus groups in order to discuss the obstacles and challenges they face, and obtain their suggestions for improvement. Subsequent data analysis revealed important issues related to the complexity of their job description, duties, and responsibilities, making it challenging to address the needs in the educational field. Their main recommendations pertained to a better breakdown of their job responsibilities to enhance their performance. Therefore, this study sheds light on the current situation in the supervisory unit with regards to the institutional, individual, and legal enabling environments for education in Kuwait, indicating that the complex administrative hierarchy hinders supervisors from fully supporting the system.

Keywords: Supervisor, Education leadership, Reform

Citation: Alhashem, F. (2022). The Invisible Catalysts Unit in the Educational Hierarchy System in Kuwait: A Need to Improve Supervisory Unit. In A. Ben Attou, M. L. Ciddi, & M. Unal (Eds.), *Proceedings of ICSES 2022-- International Conference on Studies in Education and Social Sciences* (pp.168-176), Antalya, Türkiye. ISTES Organization.

Introduction

The Ministry of Education (MoE) is the leading governmental body supervising the education system in Kuwait. Its current responsibilities involve supervising, developing the educational services, and enhancing the quality of learning in schools (National Report of Kuwait, 2019). Kuwait's education system is highly centralized, as the MoE has complete power over all resources and decisions (Alsaleh, 2019). The MoE manages and regulates every aspect of the educational process, including training, curriculum, assessment, districts, and their schools. The MoE management structure consists of the minister, undersecretary of education, and seven sector directors. Each sector has a sub-department that facilitates certain tasks and duties, as shown in Figure 1. Thus, if any of the system's hubs cease operations for any reason, the entire system and its outlying components are severely affected (Alsaleh, 2019). Because one central agency carries out all the required tasks, all processes are obviously much slower than would be in a decentralized system (Male & Alhouthi, 2015).

As this centralized structure of MoE relies heavily on supervisors, they inevitably need to fulfill too many roles and duties in different Ministry sectors (Alsaleh et al., 2017). For instance, the job description of senior supervisors indicates that they are in charge of teacher performance, curriculum, and assessment. Their duties also involve developing plans for the implementation, supervising, and working on curriculum development, updating teachers' performance assessment methods, mentoring and guiding teachers in their academic development, and approving tests and assessment tools. The job description of the head of supervisors in the district is similarly comprehensive and includes participating in the proposed general policy of education, planning to improve the educational process, providing expertise to the department heads in each academic educational field at schools, determining the professional development and training needs of teachers, providing guidance for curriculum development, analyzing exam results, and preparing relevant reports (Oliva & Pawlas, 2004). However, many supervisory unit roles involve overlapping duties. According to Alsaleh et al. (2017), this often results in the same tasks being performed by several individuals, while other aspects are overlooked, such as aligning teacher training with teachers' needs. Therefore, as a part of this study, the perspectives of supervisors related to their position and profession in the current MoE settings are examined in order to answer the following questions:

- What is the current role of supervisor at the MoE?
- What are obstacles and challenges supervisors face and which changes they deem beneficial?

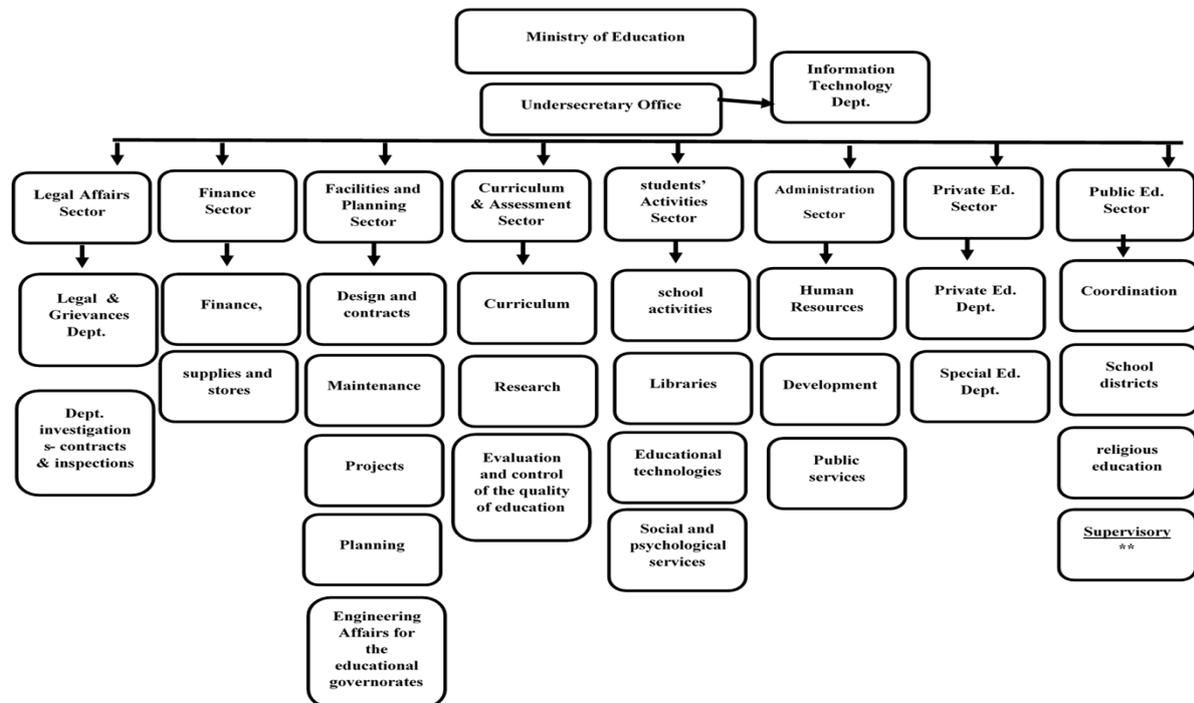
Literature Review

In order to situate the present study in an appropriate context, a literature review was conducted focusing on the decentralized and centralized education systems adopted in other countries. Traditionally, supervisors conducted school inspections and monitored the quality of teachers (Kayıkçıl et al., 2017), but their role later expanded to include guidance and mentoring (Cogan, 1973; Goldhammer, 1969). In clinical settings, such supervision was found to enrich the learning and teaching processes (Kayıkçıl et al., 2017), as peer coaching is an effective teaching strategy (James & Massiah, 2019). In the U.S., educational supervisors often have multiple responsibilities, but primarily focus on curriculum and teacher development (Abiogu, 2014). Therefore, they are responsible for making sure that the content of teacher education programs prepares them for their future profession. In addition to overseeing the work of beginner teachers, supervisors also support the subject-matter supervision conducted by a school department chair. Other professional personnel involved in supervisory roles include cluster coordinators, lead teachers, mentors, peer coaches and peer supervisors, curriculum specialists, project directors, trainers, program evaluators, and district office administrators. Unfortunately, these professionals often carry out their supervisory work without having any professional preparation for it, finding what seems to work for them by trial and error (Rustiad, 2015). With the involvement of state departments of education in monitoring school improvement efforts, supervisory responsibilities are increasingly covering the tasks at the higher end of this list. Consequently, these responsibilities put supervisors in much more complex, collaborative, and developmental relationships with teachers, as their role is no longer restricted to strictly inspectorial responsibilities of a model based on different educational goals of building educational

infrastructure and basic accessibility to education.

In Singapore, the management of schools is highly centralized. Within the Ministry of Education, there are three Deputy Director-Generals each heading departments responsible for curriculum, schools, and professional development. The Curriculum Department handles the following aspects: Syllabus Design & Review, Teaching Approaches and Assessment Modes, Special Programs, Resources and Training for the implementation of the above, Library Services, Language Centers, and lastly, Consultancy Services to provide specialist advice to schools, other Divisions, Ministries and private publishers on matters related to the curriculum (Ng et al., 2015).

The schools are grouped into districts and each is managed by a Superintendent. The Superintendents are responsible for guiding and supervising the school leadership teams to ensure that schools are effectively run. This includes networking, sharing and collaboration among the district schools to improve the knowledge and skills of the leadership teams and the performance of each school. Superintendents also play a key role in personnel and financial management by supporting staff with training and identifying those for career advancement, and managing the allocation of funds based on the districts' particular needs to reach national goals (Ng et al., 2015)



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Although the management structure and distribution of decision-making power of the education system in Singapore differs from that adopted in other high-performing nations, the commonality is found in the characterization of the approach.

Figure 1. MoE Approved Hierarchy (2020).

Retrieved from <https://moe.edu.kw/about/Pages/Ministry%20Hierarchy/ges.aspx>

The goals, reform projects, and vision are based on qualitative student outcomes rather than the quantitative findings of school inspections model (Ng et al., 2015). In the two systems introduced above, supervisors are defined and embedded in the body of their own structure and hierarchy. Therefore, supervisory unit is crucial in every education system and has an authority or rank when dealing with teachers.

Method

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study, as its aim was to understand the challenges facing the supervisors in the education system in Kuwait. Specifically, to gain broad and in-depth insights into the specific issues that need to be addressed in order to improve learning outcomes and enhance the educational system's overall performance, individual interviews and focus group discussions were held. In addition, when conducting the needs assessment, sources providing both objective (decrees, plans, and job description) and subjective (the expressed needs of individuals) information were consulted, along with the normative needs as defined by experts (specialty boards, accrediting and professional organizations). These findings were segregated into individual needs (those that relate to the supervisory role) and organizational needs (those that are tied to organizational goals and requirements).

Focus groups were held to gather qualitative data required for developing a needs assessment strategy. In total, they were attended by 67 supervisors for 18 academic subjects, 40 supervisors, 23 first supervisors, and four senior supervisors, who met in small groups. All participants were involved in structured and informal discussions on the major issues related to their job duties, the obstacles and challenges they face, and the changes they would like to see in the supervisory unit structure at the MoE. Personal interviews were also conducted to explore the vision of each of the interviewees and compare their perspectives, explore the ways to ensure that this vision is executable, assess the discrepancy between the status quo and the vision, as well as identify current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

The gathered qualitative data was subjected to scheme-based analysis, utilizing an open coding procedure based on the grounded theory research design. This approach involved several stages of analysis, resulting in overarching themes and categories reflecting the nature of the challenges and facilitating evidence-based interpretations of the findings. The aforementioned approach was complemented by the discourse analysis of major ministerial decrees, reports, and official documents.

Results

The findings yielded by analyzing interview and focus group data revealed that, in Kuwait, the supervisor plays a vital role in the process of achieving the national educational goals. The supervisors monitor the quality of the educational system, as well as the performance of the educators, the effectiveness of the curriculum (including contents, and teaching methods and techniques). Further, the supervisors provide the vision and development

plan for employees at the school level.

As previously noted, senior supervisors are also required to develop plans for the implementation, supervision, and work on curriculum development, monitor teachers' performance, mentor teachers in different academic fields, guide teachers in their daily work, review teacher reports, and study their recommendations. Similarly, heads of supervisors for specific districts are required to participate in the development of general policy for different fields of study in order to improve the educational process, provide expertise to the department heads in each academic educational field at schools, conduct professional development for teachers and assess their training needs, provide development for the curriculum, and analyze and report on the exam results (Alhashem, et al. ,2022).

In general, the perquisites and requirements for managers and supervisors are the same, as shown in Figure 2. From the information gathered as a part of this investigation, neither role requires completion of specific training or attendance of professional development seminars. In practice, most managers and supervisors in the MoE work their way up through the system to become a department head in their particular area of study and then continue on to apply for administrative or technical positions. This can include becoming an assistant principal or school principal based upon the system of upgrading credentials set forth by the MoE in Kuwait. For each position upgrade or promotion, there are certain requirements that must be met, such as years of experience, evidence of successfully passing requisite examinations, good performance on a personal interview, and completion of recommended MoE workshops and trainings. Because the structure of the education system is centralized, the supervisors' job description includes too many roles and duties.

In Kuwait, supervisor plays a vital role in the educational process on the basis of the set educational goals, and is thus responsible for monitoring the quality the educational system, which includes the performance of educators, and the effectiveness of the curriculum (including contents, and teaching methods and techniques). Further, supervisor provides a vision and a plan towards the development for teachers in the school. The senior supervisors usually cover three main domains: teacher performance, curriculum, and assessment. Their technical role also requires them to develop plans for the implementation, supervise and work on curriculum development, update teachers' performance methods, mentor and guide teachers in their academic field, and approve tests and assessment tools. Pre-service training is provided in coordination with the faculties of teacher preparation according to an established plan. Candidates are accepted in the practical education program that is shared between the university and the Ministry of Education, and cooperation is underway with the private universities in Kuwait for the academic accreditation of learning courses so that students can graduate from these universities.

Supervisors also work with the Development Department of the MoE which conducts specialized training courses in cooperation with technical guidance and other bodies. Formal responsibility for the provision of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers in Kuwait rests with the technical/subject supervisors. There are 18 general supervisors each of whom is responsible for one of the 18 subjects comprising the national

curriculum. Hence, each year, they produce 18 plans for teacher training, which is delivered either through one-week courses in one of the training centers or through one-day workshops in district centers or in schools.

Challenges

As can be deduced from their job descriptions noted above, supervisors in Kuwait require urgent job transformation which extends beyond revision of their job descriptions by the Human Resources Department at the Ministry and the CSC. Given that supervisors play a fundamental role in equipping the education sector with the knowledge, skills, and training teachers require to function efficiently in schools, they need to be better supported in fulfilling these duties, as noted by one of the study participants:

The bureaucratic administrative system lacks vision, and requires improvements in planning and communication, as well as daily administration, individualized planning, and information sharing. As supervisors, we improvise and try to solve issues that are not related to our unclear job description. I wish one day the Civil Service Commission will solve our issues.

Lack of clarity on the extent to which the current educational enhancement projects are responsive to the future vision of the state was also repeatedly mentioned, as noted by one of the participants: “As a supervisor, I am responsible for writing up curriculum via committees but I lack the sustainability because I work in the general education sector but I also have to help in writing up tests in assessment department, write up curriculum at the curriculum department, and train teachers, this is too much.”

Some participants reported that, due to the scarcity of qualified cadre with educational background, many administrators are not aware of educational leaders’ duties. Others stated that some supervisors are incapable of managing educational projects due to the lack of training during the promotion period. However, they also struggle to keep abreast with the global developments in education because of the amount of work they have to complete. Several participants also pointed to the need to develop creative thinking skills as well as digital literacy.

On the other hand, some supervisors were of view that the main issue arises from the combination of automatic promotion based on years of service and the inability of the public sector to dismiss civil service employees for poor performance, as this strategy has created weak incentives for teachers even though salaries are high. The system apparently also suffers from political interference in teacher promotions and transfers, which is a common problem in countries that have not put in place explicit meritocratic policies and institutional processes for their implementation, as shown in Figure 2. As a result, the system is characterized by a large excess of teachers with low skill levels and few incentives to work hard, pursue in-service teacher development programs, and improve their performance.

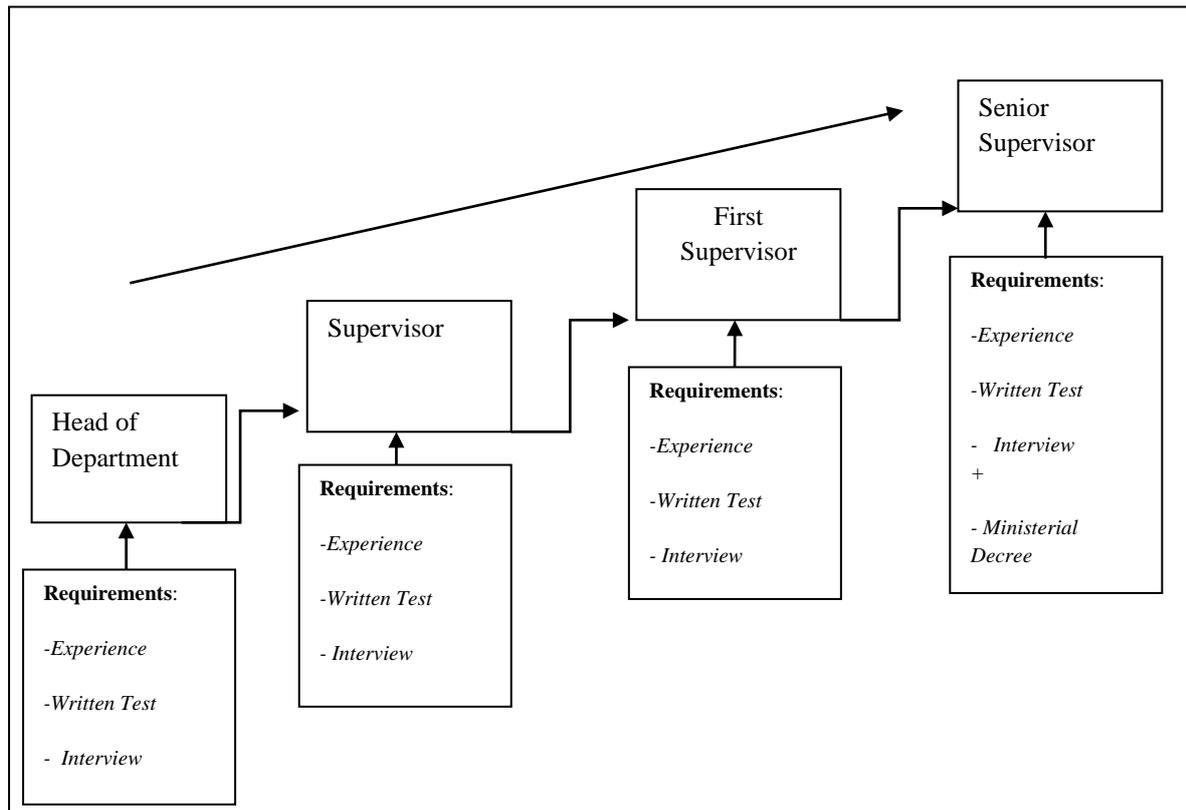


Figure 2. The Supervisory Promotion Model

Discussion

Establishing a well-functioning school system and raising the overall level of education requires perseverance and hard work, and often involves political contests as well. The system can never be completely finalized, of course, but will continue to take new forms and adapt to the rapidly changing societal needs. As the supervisory unit is crucial in this process, it cannot be left behind. Thus, supervisors' job descriptions and the breakdown their duties need to be revised in order to allow them to achieve their maximum potential. It is hoped that this study will pave the way for addressing the current situation of the supervisory unit in the Kuwaiti education system with regards to the institutional, individual, and legal enabling environments. The supervisory unit contains three main elements—support and training, supervision and inspection, and delivery of educational services (Rustiad, 2015).

However, in Kuwait, supervisors have too many responsibilities and cannot effectively mentor teachers due to their large number. Moreover, supervisors would benefit from training in leadership and mentoring, as well as communication skills. However, their collaboration with other MoE departments (Curriculum and Assessment, and Development departments in particular) should also improve. Therefore, Civil Service Commission and the MOE must redesign the supervisory unit, aiming to divert some of the work into subunits within each department. One of the essential characteristics common to the most progressive education systems with the

world is that the educational policy planning and management rejects its centralist and highly hierarchical structure in order to connect all education system arms in a horizontal structure that facilitates participatory strategic planning, communication, and sharing of information. For example, a school principal or supervisor is more likely to become an effective decision-maker if they adopt planning criteria and tools that consider their abilities, plans, and the diversity of contexts and students.

In sum, this study has highlighted the need to develop models in the field of supervision in education, concerning the future of supervision and development. As the analyses have shown, the Kuwaiti supervision system has many overlaps, and too many duties are assigned to individual supervisors. More research, however, needs to be done in the area of the conceptual approach to management. If we can state that the current system is described as an inspection-based model, then we can safely state that this model has achieved its goals of building the educational infrastructure in Kuwait. Perhaps now it is time to consider using a different model in order to more effectively reach Kuwait's national goals for education. In addition, supervisors need to understand that teachers need more support rather than to be judged for their performance. Similarly, supervisors are involved in teacher training, which tends to be subject-related, and its content is determined by the relevant supervisor with little or no consultation with teachers. Therefore, greater teacher involvement is needed, given that even mode of delivery tends to be formal and lecture-oriented, with limited opportunities for teacher participation.

Recommendations

- Based on the findings reported here, it is recommended that educational stakeholders, policy makers, and practitioners develop a participatory plan to translate customized educational philosophies and theories to practice, as no nation can fulfill its national development goals without best-fit educational theories (Abiogu, 2014). All stakeholders should be also be aware that positive ideas can make the nation stronger and more prosperous, while negative ideas can destroy its legacies which have been built over many generations. Nothing deters the development of a nation more than mistaken beliefs and citizens cannot attain success without hard work (Rustiad, 2015). To this end, educational stakeholders and policy makers require tools, means, and forum to develop a proactive educational vision and strategic plans, to realize nation's aspirations, and to convince the citizens of the state that human development can only be achieved by expanding knowledge, skills, and productivity. At present, the rigid Civil Service Commission (CSC) regulations and structures do not support this new paradigm.
- Decentralizing the supervision sector may not result in better performance; however, restructuring the sector based on more in-depth studies that reflect the needs of the Kuwaiti culture, society, and school system is urgently needed. The communication and integration with other departments will result in less duplication in duties, roles, and responsibilities for supervisors.

- There is no doubt that, in the vital efforts to develop the role of supervisors, the Ministry should form several committees to conduct studies and field research for better improvement and development.

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