



Deconstructing the 'magnetic' properties of neoliberal politics of education in Bahrain.

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Title: Deconstructing the 'magnetic' properties of neoliberal politics of education in Bahrain.

Abstract:

This article makes contributions to questions of why international transfers of programmes do not lead to the outcomes that nations engaging in them expect to gain. Using Bahrain as an example, it is argued that tensions arising from policy borrowing are rooted in the complexities of the political incoherence between the new teaching policies, the kingdom's economic vision and educational aspirations of many locals that have been shaped by old political and employment settlements within the nation state. The research shows that educating for global development is not a 'magnet' that equally attracts everyone.

Key words: politics of education, policy borrowing, neoliberal globalisation, political settlements, education for economic gain

Neoliberal Link between Education, Economic Opportunities and Policy Borrowing

National education systems around the world have been increasingly influenced by neoliberal globalisation (Bridges 2014; Brown and Stevick 2014). The new relationships between education and increased economic opportunities have been growing in popularity among governments, particularly in developing countries, who have become increasingly influenced by the neoliberal rhetoric promising to reduce distances and inequalities between nations through lowering barriers to international movement of talent, economic trade, better labour market opportunities and global growth (Gamage 2015). Within this context, there has been a lot of focus on the economy to drive educational change, based on the neoliberal ideas that the economic growth, being the main provider of labour market opportunities, should 'dictate' what type of graduates it wants to have (Gamage 2015). Within the UK, for example, this has been observed through the political agendas of successive governments since 1997 when the New Labour announced its focus on 'standards not structures' to give everybody equal opportunities to participate in the labour market, but also to produce graduates that will be able to contribute to the economic growth of the country (Hills, Sefton and Stewart 2009). More recently, the UK's prime minister highlighted that 'for the future of our economy, and our society, we need a first-class education for every child' (Cabinet Office 2011).

How a first-class education, however, can be achieved has been a problematic area of debate, sitting (*un-*) comfortably with the strategy of policy borrowing. Driven by the neoliberal discourse that decisions about education should not be made solely by the nation-states, as their local focus may stunt global economic competition (Lingard and Rawolle 2011), countries around the world have engaged in internationalisation of their education systems through transforming models of education that have been successful elsewhere (e.g. Li and Baldauf 2011). This 'improvement strategy' and the neoliberal link between education and economy, however, have come under a lot of scrutiny for failing to recognise that the 'economic activity

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3 always takes place and is embedded in a culturally constructed context' (Luke and Luke 2000,
4 287).

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6 This paper deconstructs how the neoliberal globalisation of the national education system has
7 been received in the specific cultural context of Bahrain, by drawing on interpretive research
8 into policy borrowing whose aim was to explore the attractiveness of the neoliberal links
9 between education and economic development. It focuses particularly on policy borrowing for
10 English language education as an example of the government's strategy for educational
11 improvement underpinned by this link. A perspective is taken that this strategy is informed by
12 the neoliberal rhetoric supporting a greater involvement of foreign agencies in decision- making
13 about education and a move from a nation state involvement. The relationship between
14 education and economic growth is challenged in this paper and it is argued that fostering the
15 economic growth of Bahrain through international policy borrowing is an ideal that threads
16 through the government's strategy but not the aspirations of many students and their families.
17 This argument is supported by the themes from the research exploring Bahrain's dependency on
18 foreign 'rulers' for governance and direction in education. Interview data are cited suggesting
19 that the new education vision proposed by foreign contractors becomes the vision of the
20 government but not the people for whom it is intended and that the idea of 'going global' is
21 unattractive for the students and their families. Differences in thinking about education between
22 the government and the public are then explored under the sections that follow. These sections
23 highlight that if educational vision does not match career aspirations of the locals, separation in
24 supporting the new education reform between the government and the rest of the state occurs.
25 The analysis points to the flaws in thinking about policy borrowing as a means for better
26 education and economic gain in Bahrain, critiquing the 'magnetic' properties of this relationship
27 in attracting equal commitment from all members of the public and the education sector.
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34 While it has been shown that successful policy borrowing from some 'reference societies' - that
35 is countries who have trialed new models of education is possible - for example Communicative
36 Language teaching in China (Liao 2004) or the rise of Singapore as a model for fast development
37 through education (Aydarova, 2013), policy transfers in countries such as the UK or Australia
38 have been criticised for the lack of fitness for purpose and merely supporting the governments'
39 beliefs about education. For instance, Winstanley (2012) argues that the Conservative-Liberal
40 Democrat agenda of expanding Free Schools based on the Swedish model illustrates exactly that,
41 where the concerns about the authenticity, efficacy, costs and impact on inequality of this model
42 in the UK context have been waived because 'Free Schools worked in Sweden'. Another example
43 includes rebuilding of the Iraqi education system after the 2003 war, where the idea of
44 harnessing American policies for the economic revival of the country and incompatibility with
45 religious beliefs by banning references to Islam in school materials show how little
46 understanding neoliberal 'rulers' have of the contextual importance of the economic and
47 educational activity (Wang 2005). This paper will argue that a similar situation is taking place in
48 Bahrain where the government pushes to reform education through foreign policy borrowing to
49 affirm the assumed benefits of their own economic vision.
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55 At the same time, for example in Russia, the hegemonies of neoliberalism have been resisted
56 with positive effects on students' motivation to learn in school and an increased educational
57 attainment (Hufton and Elliot 2000). In particular, Russia has rejected the implementation of
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3 education practices through transnational export and instead decided to focus on ensuring the
4 closeness of state-school relations through fostering long-term relationships between the
5 national curriculum, pedagogy, grading system and the social and economic development of the
6 nation-state. Similarly, in Germany, policy borrowing until recently has not been the priority of
7 the government as the educational-economic developments within the country did not require it
8 (Hilgendorf 2005). It is thought that the main reason why Germany engaged in greater
9 internationalisation of their programmes nowadays is linked to their aspirations to become the
10 centre of the European cooperation and the main power within the EU structure. This inevitably
11 meant an increased movement of international students, professionals and researchers within
12 the country (Hilgendorf 2005) and the Germany's objective to become what Brown and Lauder
13 (2006) refer to as 'magnet economy'.

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17 'Magnet economies', according to Brown and Lauder (2006) attract greater numbers of high-
18 skilled workers, international talent and global investors. They are a concept underlying the
19 neoliberal rhetoric and policy borrowing as globalists claim that policy borrowing can lead to the
20 creation of 'postnational' education and global literacy, which then enable people, especially
21 from developing or non-Western countries, to be part of these prosperous magnet economies
22 (Chana 2010). It is generally thought that people from these countries need up-skilling and
23 internationally standardised knowledge that will allow them to compete in the global context of
24 magnet economies. This results in decisions about education, traditionally made by the nation
25 states, to be overtaken by joined-decision making inclusive of foreign investors and international
26 agencies (Winstanley 2012). Consequently, developments within countries become educating for
27 'export' and relying on foreign expertise for governance and management of education (Chana
28 2010). These developments are usually also attached to the economic visions of countries
29 undergoing transformations from trade to knowledge-based economies as a means of increasing
30 their attractiveness to the local people (Sniegocki 2008).

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36 Using the example of Bahrain as a country currently undergoing a transition to a knowledge-
37 based economy and strategically resourcing foreign agencies to help align education with the
38 kingdom's economic vision, this paper contests the idea of the 'magnet' economy as an
39 opportunity that is equally attractive to everyone. This will be done by evaluating English
40 language teaching policy borrowing in Bahrain. While Brown and Lauder (2006) have already
41 challenged the myth of the 'magnet economy' in terms of tightening the relationship between
42 education and economic opportunities, this paper additionally argues that having an economic
43 vision that relies on this relationship is not a magnet in itself. The paper deconstructs how
44 English teachers as the main agents responsible for the implementation of the country's
45 economic vision (Brown and Stevick 2014) position themselves in the education system that is
46 borrowed, leading up to a discussion and explanations of reasons why not everybody within the
47 education system in Bahrain is willing to work towards global literacy, postnational education
48 and the kingdom's global competition. Through analysing data from interviews with teachers
49 and a government representative, the paper links these reasons to the occupational structures
50 that have been formed in Bahrain through political ties with other countries and the attitudes
51 towards English language proficiency these opportunities have created.
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Context of Bahrain

The socio-linguistic background of Bahrain shaped by the British protection between 1869-1971, as well as the geographical location of the island have created a special place for the English language in the country. Due to its strategic geographical location in the Gulf enabling international trade and the early economic developments, Bahrain has welcomed international entrepreneurs to invest into and utilise its natural resources. The extraction of Oil in 1931, with the help of the American Eastern Gulf Oil Company, and the formation of the aluminium smelter in 1969 necessitated close relationships between Bahrain and the West, creating the need for Bahrainis to learn the English language (Sinclair 1977). In 1970, for example, the demand for the English language in Bahrain's industry was stressed at a seminar of employers and government by a representative of 'Aluminium Bahrain' who said that a good command of English was necessary to progress to supervisory positions in the company. Better employment opportunities in the company were also given to those trainees that had graduated from schools where the language of instruction was English (Sinclair 1977).

The issues surrounding schools and the English language have its own intricacies in Bahrain. Due to the strong historical presence of Britain in Bahrain, trade with the West and the establishment of an American military base, Bahrain has had to accommodate the schooling needs of expatriates. This has led to the establishment of international schools such as St Christopher's School in 1961, the British School of Bahrain in 1995, or the Bahrain School for the US military personnel's children in 1968 which run either British or American curricula. Ironically, expatriates in most of these schools had nowadays come to represent a minority, and middle class Bahrainis have increasingly populated international schools. More international schools have since been established, following international curricula alongside locally-designed programmes and offering education in both English and Arabic. The International Schools Consultancy group reported in 2015 that Bahrain has 51 international schools with bilingual curricula (ISC 2015), which stands for about a quarter of all national schools in the kingdom.

However, whether the reasons for middle class Bahrainis to enroll in international schools are driven by the opportunities for international careers remains debatable. The policy of 'Bahrainisation', for instance – that is nationalisation of the labour market through transfer of employment from migrant workers to national staff, and the established positions of some families who effectively run the country, do not create a need for a foreign degree nor to speak English, as the official language is still Arabic (Donn and Al Manthri 2010). Clearly, these connections and national policies offer opportunities that supplant the benefits of joining a 'magnet economy' abroad. On the other hand, due to historical and business ties with the West, it is thought that 'Britishness' in countries such as Bahrain may automatically equate success, superiority and global prestige, and for middle class citizens speaking fluent English, whilst often also compromising the native language skills, or to have graduated from an international school becomes a case of private aspirations (DiConsinglio 2009). This has certainly been observed among some middle class affluent Bahraini, who have mastered higher English skills whilst compromising literacy levels in Arabic. In that sense, it could be said that Bahrain has fallen into the neoliberal trap, especially in terms of standardisation stemming from the West and, to an extent, undermining and leaching out profound national characteristics (Ariely 2012). This situation also shows that the government's ideal of the 'magnet economy' and education for

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3 export might be at risk, as these rich Bahrainis are likely not sign up for foreign education to get
4 a better job, as many of them do not pursue international careers and stay on after graduation
5 to run family businesses. The great stake holding role these businesses are likely to play in the
6 future of higher education in Bahrain has also contributed to the strategy for universities that,
7 despite urging all universities to deliver their programmes in English, is characterized by
8 ambivalence and hedging of bets in terms of governance, curriculum and standards to balance
9 the local and the global (Author 2016) . In this context, the need to deliver higher education
10 programmes in English, for instance, may be seen as reflecting dual aims of reducing the need
11 for students to go abroad and generate economic return locally (Author 2016), undermining at
12 the same time the neoliberal ideal of education for export.
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16 The strategy for the third education sector – that of national schools, which is in the centre of
17 this research, seems to be less ambivalent, at least in neoliberal terms. It is ‘focussed on
18 equipping Bahrain with the highly-skilled and flexible human capital it needs to compete
19 effectively in today’s dynamic global markets’ (Gulf Digital News, 7 April 2015), and supported by
20 expertise from Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. This strategy is a national project of the
21 National Education Reform Initiatives (NERI) which aims to enable students to obtain
22 professional qualifications to a degree level and emphasizes practical skills and English language
23 development applicable to the labour market. It is also a strong pillar in the Economic Vision for
24 Bahrain 2030 which places NERI as an important chain in the economic development of the
25 Kingdom (Bahrain Economic Development Board 2008). English language education is therefore
26 compulsory in national schools and modeled on the success of Singapore.
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30 Despite the reported benefits of NERI that are now ‘beginning to bear fruit in delivering better
31 education for all Bahrainis’ (Shaikh Hisham bin Abdulaziz Al Khalifa cited in Gulf Digital News
32 2015), literature on policy borrowing in the Gulf presents a sense of skepticism surrounding such
33 radical developments, mainly because the new economic and educational visions in the region
34 have not been accompanied by similar changes in domestic values and social developments
35 (Bahgat 1999; Aydarova 2013). Speaking of the status of the English language in Bahrain twenty
36 years ago, Abdulmajeed (1995) asserted that many Bahrainis were reluctant to accept English as
37 an official language to prevent ‘westernisation’ of national institutions and that it was viewed as
38 an attack on the Islamic society. This attitude was also reflected in the approach towards English
39 education among a specific group of expatriate families who were brought to Bahrain on
40 government employment contracts to work in military and police sectors. They claimed that
41 English was not necessary for their children who were preparing to work in government sectors
42 and therefore did not need English either for work or communication purposes (Abdulmajeed
43 1995). These families are of interest to this research as their children populate a substantial
44 proportion of students in national schools.
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50 The jobs in the government sector have been occupied by members of those expatriate families
51 for generations. They had moved to Bahrain due to political agreements between the Kingdom
52 and other Islamic countries and with time had become naturalised citizens of Bahrain. They
53 have, therefore, unlike the middle class groups, who have established themselves in various
54 areas of the economy, always been associated with those jobs, which historically became
55 ‘reserved’ for them. Over the years, they have come to symbolise their membership in a
56 community, which has become known, *inter alia*, for their pragmatic attitudes towards school
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3 and education. These communities also tend to live in specific villages, populating national
4 schools in the area.
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6 Such intricacies of the communities in national schools in Bahrain form a very dynamic
7 framework for this research and their attitudes, particularly towards English education, are
8 explored in this research. The research has been influenced by the views that national attitudes
9 such as the ones created through old political and employment settlements in Bahrain must spur
10 negotiations between the new global and old domestic ideas about education (Phillips and Ochs
11 2003; Aydarova 2013). It was shown above that the specific characteristics of the bilingual
12 schools and the people who attend them play a role in how relevant the ideas surrounding the
13 'magnet economy' and education for economic gain are. Here it is assumed that the specifics of
14 national schools will play even a greater role in the reception and success of NERI. The creation
15 of 'national' labour market opportunities such as the ones in Bahrain is often said to be an
16 impediment to neoliberal globalisation as workers within such national settlements are thought
17 to be rewarded for their familial connections rather than skills and productivity (Reich 1991,
18 cited in Braun and Lauder 2006). Braun and Lauder (2006, 27) on the other hand claim that in a
19 globalised world, there are no longer 'British, German or American jobs, only British, German or
20 American workers who confront the ultimate judgment of the global market place'. In Bahrain,
21 the situation seems to be reversed, where specific jobs still belong to particular tribal and
22 national groups, which then has implications for their attitudes towards education in the schools
23 they attend.
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29 The government in Bahrain, however, has long recognised the need for change in the labour
30 market situation, highlighting that more jobs have been created over the past few years by
31 redistributing oil revenues and offering citizens jobs in the public sector, leading to stagnation
32 (Bahrain Economic Development Board 2008). In 2008, it created the Economic Vision 2030
33 which aspires to shift from an economy built on oil wealth and national political contracts
34 between countries to a globally competitive economy based on investment in human capital,
35 through education and greater private sector opportunities. At present, the government claims
36 that Bahrainis are not the preferred choice for employers since the education system does not
37 yet provide young people with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed, locally in the private
38 sector and globally in the market defined above as the 'magnet' economy (Bahrain Economic
39 Development Board, 2008). Hence, the increased investment in foreign expertise and policy
40 borrowing for governance and management of education (Bahgat 1999).
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45 Burbules and Torress (2000) argue that the perceived need for such foreign investment in nation
46 states, however, has its problems and represents an outcome of the effects of neoliberal
47 globalisation on economic restructuring. Burbules and Torress (2000) claim that by borrowing
48 policy, governments avoid responsibility for promoting social justice. This is achieved through
49 homogenisation of education and promotion of global literacy as a means to transform
50 education systems that can then produce globally competent graduates. While previously in
51 Bahrain this responsibility could be said to be that of the government, due to employment
52 contracts with partnership countries and politically settled positions in the military and police
53 forces, now the duty has fallen onto the shoulders of the teachers who are responsible for
54 encouraging pupils to learn for 'export' (Secretariat General of the Higher Education Council
55 2012). This research reveals how those teachers position themselves within the context of this
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3 new responsibility and provides interesting insights into the choices that they make in an
4 education system that is borrowed. These insights are used in this paper to contest the idea that
5 the new teaching situation draws teachers like a magnet to working towards the economic gain
6 of Bahrain and it is suggested that more research work into why they make these choices be
7 conducted, as such work is beyond the scope of this paper.
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10 The new language teaching policy in Bahrain was borrowed from Communicative Language
11 Teaching (CLT) that has emerged as a dominant foreign language teaching methodology around
12 the world (Richards and Rodgers 1986). Following its success in the UK as a new approach to
13 developing communication skills in a foreign language in British secondary schools, CLT has been
14 thought to have the same effects, particularly in Asian countries where the traditional teacher-
15 centred learning culture can be said to be essentially preventing the development of such skills
16 (Curdt-Christiansen and Silver 2012). Asian countries, therefore, such as Singapore, have become
17 'reference societies' for Bahrain and, as a result, many Singaporean experts were resourced by
18 the government to develop programmes in English language education (Author, forthcoming).
19 CLT, however, is an approach to teaching English that emphasises interactions between learners
20 and teachers in order to communicate (Richards and Rodgers 1986). It is a popular approach in
21 the context of neoliberal integration of national economies, due to its focus on global literacy
22 through communication skills as opposed to accuracy (Curdt-Christiansen and Silver 2012). It
23 could be said, however, that CLT is in stark contrast with the inculcation methods historically
24 developed in Bahrain from the traditional views on education as a means for gaining
25 competency through mastering knowledge (Shirawi 1989). English language teachers and a
26 government representative from the department of English language teaching were therefore
27 interviewed in this research to explore the reception of this new reform in Bahraini states
28 schools and the attractiveness of the neoliberal links between education and the kingdom's
29 economic development.
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35 The themes below were developed from a qualitative interview with a government
36 representative responsible for the implementation of the new CLT policy (referred to here as a
37 *Curriculum Specialist*) and focus groups with teachers in 10 schools (5 boys and 5 girls). The
38 schools were randomly selected from 5 counties into which Bahrain is divided and overall, 60
39 teachers participated in this research. The schools were coded randomly using letters A-J, hence
40 the codes below, for example, *Teacher 1I* or *Teacher 4F*, representing different teachers from
41 different schools. All teachers were native speakers of Arabic from Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan,
42 with degrees in English language teaching. Their teaching experience varied from 1 to more than
43 12 years and the age range was between 21 and 60 years old. All interviews were conducted in
44 English.
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49 Four themes of '*Bahrain's dependency on foreign "rulers" for governance and direction, 'The*
50 *meaningful local or the (un-) attractive global*', '*Education for public gain. Gain for who?*' and '*A*
51 *"matter of need" vs. development for "export"*' emerged in the research. They are based on data
52 that help to answer the question why international transfers of programmes do not lead to the
53 outcomes that nations engaging in them expect to gain. These data imply that tensions arising
54 from policy borrowing are rooted in the complexities of the political incoherence between the
55 new teaching policies, the kingdom's economic vision and educational aspirations of many
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3 locals, highlighting at the same time that educating for global development is not a 'magnet' that
4 equally attracts everyone. The themes are explored below.
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8 **Bahrain's dependency on foreign 'rulers' for governance and direction**

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10 This theme illustrates Bahrain's commitment to and reliance on foreign expertise for governance
11 and direction in developing the English language education. The excerpts from an interview with
12 the government representative reveal instances of policy borrowing in areas of curriculum
13 development, pedagogy and training. The use of the pronoun 'they' [with added emphasis from
14 the author] additionally highlights the shifting of power from the nation-state to the panel of
15 experts who have been internationally resourced to develop programmes in English for Bahrain.
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19 The team that have worked here before us and who have prepared the syllabus document
20 and *they* have like the pillars of the curriculum, *they* have a vision of what we want our
21 students to achieve by the end of the third year. If you look at this, you can see the
22 process, our curriculum rationale, the framework and the pillars, so here *they* have based
23 them on the theories of multiple intelligences, critical thinking, social constructivism, and
24 based on this, *they* go to the next stage in which *they* find textbooks where those
25 approaches are implemented. Then *they* selected 'Opportunities' [book series] because
26 *they* saw elements of those pillars. (...) (*Curriculum Specialist*)
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29 The description above of how 'they' changed 'our curriculum' appears to signify what Gamage
30 (2015) refers to as 'hegemonic slant of globalisation' (p. 7) that influences the perceptions of
31 education in the direction desired by those who have been resourced to manage it. A further
32 example of this can be found in the following words of the curriculum specialist who
33 demonstrates shifting of values from national views to what the foreign provider sees 'fit'.
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36 Social constructivism is also very important because you cannot learn a language in
37 isolation, when students learn we have to build in them those skills needed, socially, and
38 build the knowledge they have on previous knowledge, so that's why they went to other
39 aspects. (*Curriculum Specialist*)
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42 The interviewee further explains that this does not match the traditional ways of viewing
43 education in Bahrain but:
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45 We are trying to move the teachers from this type of thinking, that learning is only to do
46 with the things in the book. Most teachers restrict themselves to the content of the
47 book and they feel pressurised and they have to cover all these units and modules, no.
48 We try to tell them try to focus on the skill based teaching rather than content based
49 teaching. We are trying to get the teachers away from this type of thinking, when it
50 comes to this type of thinking, especially when it comes to very inexperienced teachers,
51 this is very difficult for them, they think teaching is covering everything from the book.
52 (*Curriculum Specialist*)
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56 And from time to time we have like a workshop for teachers, especially for the newly
57 implemented books, they have a contract with the publishers, they come and they teach
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3 them how to teach the book and how to implement the strategies and the best methods
4 when it comes to teaching business English, for example. (...) They had like a very big
5 seminar where teachers attended and they tried to pass this *new vision* [emphasis
6 added]. (*Curriculum Specialist*)
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9 We had like a two year professional development programme when we were begging
10 teachers to join, it was coordinated by the university of [name of a UK university],
11 actually, we asked them, we called, please join. (*Curriculum Specialist*)
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13 That the '*new vision*' proposed by foreign contractors often also becomes the vision of the
14 governments is a common by-product of neoliberal globalisation (Petras 1999). Governments
15 who strive to design education for economic gain are thought to often engage in the process of
16 cultivation of global literacy and homogenised education through policy borrowing, justifying
17 their actions for modernising the traditional views on education in the need for economic
18 competition (e.g. Chana 2010; Gamage 2015). This then turns into the assumption that
19 economic gain and competitive advantage become everyone's priority (Chana 2010). However,
20 the view in this paper is that the fact that teachers in Bahrain had to be 'begged' to join the new
21 professional development opportunities is a form of active resistance to the government's
22 attempts to globalise English education in Bahrain. Through conducting extensive interviews
23 with teachers, the reasons for this resistance were uncovered and insights were gained into why
24 teachers decided not to participate in these programmes. The findings pointed to deeper
25 philosophical complexities of policy borrowing that stretch beyond claims of teacher stagnation
26 and its negative impact on global educational competition (Karasik 2015). A short analysis of
27 selected conversations is presented below, leading up to a further deconstruction of the myth of
28 the 'magnetic' properties of policy borrowing in Bahrain forwarded in this paper (Brown and
29 Lauder 2006).
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35 **The meaningful local or the (un-) attractive global?**

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37 The quotes below reflect general concerns about the authenticity of policy borrowing and the
38 neoliberal assumptions that education systems are now becoming increasingly 'interconnected'
39 through one learning culture (Winstantley 2012). The comments from the teachers in this study
40 seem to suggest that the idea of shifting towards 'postnational' education (Lingard and Rawolle
41 2011) underpinned by attraction of and willingness to learn about the cultures of others seems
42 to have been conceived by the government who, in pursuing their economic visions, seeks to
43 affirm their ideologies. The teachers in this research commented that the policy is not authentic,
44 that its development should be kept at the local level and that students find it hard to engage
45 with 'global' concepts that they do not understand.
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49 Books should normally [be] prepared by the people who live in the country and are part of
50 the community. People who know what is going on in the schools and in the Bahraini
51 houses. The students give you the impression that they don't know what you're talking
52 about (*Teacher 1I*)
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55 Some topics, like about homes, they are very interested in, how to describe their home,
56 because they can relate to it in real life. But with English 302 [a course based on materials
57 used internationally], which is completely the opposite (*Teacher 1G*)
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3 These comments reaffirm earlier discussions about the lack of authenticity and 'relevance to
4 context' as negative factors affecting policy borrowing (e.g. Winstanley 2012). They also
5 challenge the assumed 'attractiveness' of being able to learn about other cultures, encouraging
6 the view that the economic vision that informs the government's 'postnational' thinking about
7 education is not equally attractive to students and teachers. This perspective may further be
8 used to challenge the myth that enhancing the economy is everyone's priority and that the
9 ability to compete internationally, by developing high-skills in English, is the magnet that attracts
10 students and teachers. The findings below demonstrate why not.

13 **Education for public gain. Gain for who?**

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15 Some factors stunting the government's wish for everyone in the education sector in Bahrain to
16 become equally committed to delivering education for economic gain might be related to the
17 fact that, nationally, only education producing high exam results is valued by students and their
18 parents. This seems to significantly influence pedagogy. When asked about what determines the
19 way the teachers teach, all English tutors responded similarly to Teacher 1C quoted below:
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23 It's teaching for the exam and I hate this motto. Why is it? Because the students are
24 learning only for the exam. Some of them might study for other reasons, but still, the
25 main, the general aim of our education is for the exam (...) So I think the exam determines
26 the way I teach. I teach grammar or speaking, and I give them extra activities but it's not
27 working because it's not in the exam (*Teacher 1C*).
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30 Culturally in Bahrain, 'teaching for the exam' is preferred as it produces tangible results showing
31 competency. This results in some sort of general ignorance towards any other forms of
32 education that do not support exam preparation, which affects the government's vision for all to
33 be involved in education facilitating the country's economic competition (Author 2015).
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36 This is something that is very sad. In the writing courses they usually give models of
37 writing, so teachers stick to the model, students stick to the model, and we are not
38 allowed to give them anything different. When it comes to the final exam, if you want to
39 come up with ideas that are more creative and when the students can express themselves
40 clearly, the newspapers will write that this is irrelevant and prevents the students'
41 progress. So there are a lot of complaints about teachers. If you want to give them just a
42 little bit of free writing, this will be a problem. And the paradox is that when they
43 explained the objectives of the curriculum it was aimed at creating creativity and free
44 expression. This is only in theory; in practice it is completely different. (*Teacher 4F*).
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48 They have model answers and they learn by heart. But to be frank, it's not only the
49 teacher, it's not the teacher's choice to do that. In the past, the ministry used to give us
50 the topic that will be on the exam and we used to give them a piece of writing and they
51 learnt it by heart. And the teacher who doesn't do this will be blamed by the students and
52 the parents. (*Teacher 1E*).
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55 What the 'ministry' used to do in the past seems to have changed with Bahrain's new economic
56 vision and its link to education. Affected by neoliberal globalisation, Bahrain has aimed to shift
57 the focus of education from content to skills development to produce graduates of international
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standards (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2008). This intention, however, did not seem to appeal equally to everyone, which in the course of the interviews appeared to be very problematic for policy borrowing in Bahrain. Globally, this resonates with problems that arise when teachers, who are said to be the main agents facilitating neoliberal shifts in education (Brown and Doyle 2014), reject the need for change. Nationally in Bahrain, it becomes additionally problematised due to cultural values that influence teacher evaluations of their own classroom behaviour (Jonathan et al 2009; Author 2015).

A small quantitative study preceding this research revealed that English language teachers in Bahrain might overrate what they do in the classroom to demonstrate commitment to their new role as 'agents for change' that was given to them by the Economic Vision 2030. The study concluded that high ratings are likely to be related to the national work ethic which emphasises intentions, rather than actual actions, and which holds effort and commitment to the country's economic development in the highest regard (Ali 1998). The findings from self-evaluation surveys showing that teachers emphasise methods encouraging critical thinking, free language use and communicative tasks are therefore thought to be the result of such national ethic (Author 2015). They also provide an interesting contrast to what is revealed here. It is suggested that the government's neoliberal vision and the national work ethic create an environment in which the teachers feel they need to commit themselves to the new education reform. This also points to the incoherence of this vision with the public's inherent values regarding education and the aspirations parents may have for their children. The teacher below, speaking from the perspective of a parent and representing the views of many participants, embodied this incoherence as, despite having indicated high support for the new English teaching methods in the quantitative survey, revealed here that s/he still passes old education values onto their own children.

I did this with my own sons, how? Because they know that that's the only way of getting a full mark. Whatever he writes out of his head, he will make mistakes, but to avoid this, I said I will write you a model and you memorize it, for the sake of the exam, not for the sake of learning. This is a mechanical way of teaching, this is only for one purpose, just to get high marks and to pass the exam with great results. *(Teacher 1L)*

This support for the traditional views on education is considered by the foreign 'rulers' to be in need of modern 'development' as it is valued only by the state but needs to be developed in broader terms of public good and international recognition (Chana 2010). The situation in Bahrain is specifically interesting in that, as noted above, the government seems to be separated from the rest of the state in their support for the foreign rules by introducing modernising teacher training programmes that do not sit comfortably with the traditional understandings of 'student good'. As revealed in the quote below from a newly qualified teacher, the new international approaches to teacher education do not sit comfortably with the traditional 'direct' ways of teaching, which creates questions about whose good is considered in policy borrowing in Bahrain.

So when I gave them things in envelopes [refers to a warm-up language game, often used in CLT approaches], as a form of activity, they [students] said this is nonsense, because

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3 that wasn't the direct way. So, in the end I followed what other teachers were doing here.
4 Even as a warm up activity, they said, skip this and go directly to the point (*Teacher 2E*)
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6 While these types of situations are often interpreted from the neoliberal perspective as stunting
7 the prospects of educational and economic competition globally, as they are oversimplified,
8 particularly in the Gulf, by references to teacher apathy, stagnation and lack of commitment to
9 public good (e.g. Al- Ahmed 1994; Karasik 2015), the analysis in this paper revealed that the
10 separation between the government and the 'rest of the state' occurs for reasons other than
11 teacher unwillingness to adopt new methods of teaching or lack of interest in economic gain.
12 The reasons for tensions in policy borrowing in Bahrain seem to be related predominantly to the
13 lack of interest in the country's economic vision for it does not match the immediate needs of
14 the students and the parents, which consequently affects the value system of the teachers.
15 Some evidence of that is presented in the sections below, leading up to final conclusions
16 regarding the neoliberal magnet of education for economic gain.
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20 21 **A 'matter of need' vs. development for 'export'**

22 When rationalising the change in the English language teaching policy, the government
23 representative that was interviewed in this research stated the following:
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26 (...) communication is very important and they [policy developers] want to make sure that
27 by the time those students graduate, they have their basic English needed for daily
28 communication. If they decide to pursue their education, the language they have will take
29 them to post-secondary (*Curriculum Specialist*)
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32 In the following parts of the interview, however, the representative admitted that students and
33 parents find it difficult to understand the value of these reforms because:
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35 The cultural background, the family background, I mean, where they come from, affects.
36 But if you go to areas like villages, there the communication in general, outside the school
37 in English is not that important. That's why, when they come to school, school is the only
38 place where they practise English (...) Even their need, it's a matter of need, if I need
39 something and I will go and I will open my mind to get that thing. Before, they thought
40 that it wasn't that much of the need and because of that it is the crucial aspect that I told
41 you. Also, what I told you, when they leave the school they don't have the place where
42 they can practise. (*Curriculum Specialist*)
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46 Throughout the course of all interviews, it became apparent that the significance of '*the matter*
47 *of need*' and opening one's mind to '*get that thing*' if something is needed was a major factor
48 causing tensions between the global and the local within the context of policy borrowing for
49 English in Bahrain. This paper argues that '*the matter of need*' raised in all interviews
50 represented a great sense of detachment from the government's economic vision and it was said
51 to be felt by the majority of state schools students. One teacher noted that:
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54 Teacher 2D: The Ministry are copying from other countries, the methods, but they are not
55 suitable for those students. It's suitable for Singaporean students. Those students, they
56 want to learn, they have a desire to learn, but these, they don't have it. It's different.
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3 It was concluded in teacher interviews, especially in the schools for boys, that students have no
4 desire to learn and that *'it's different'* in Bahrain because students' future aspirations and
5 outlooks on career prospects are very locally and internally focused. This focus seems to be the
6 result of the nature of the economy and the job market that, despite the intended
7 transformations to a global knowledge-based state, still offers many employment opportunities
8 in military and police sectors for which English skills are not required.
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11 Here in the region, we have one big problem, students are not motivated because they go
12 for the military jobs. They are not motivated to become a doctor or an engineer, and so
13 on. Their motivation for learning is low because of this. The government makes it very
14 easy for the students here in the Gulf to take military jobs, in military institutions, so why
15 should they bother? (*Teacher 3L*)
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18 As noted above, the majority of students attending state schools have migrated to Bahrain,
19 following family members who were brought to serve in Bahrain's forces on government
20 contracts. This resulted in whole tribes and families occupying certain positions, with children
21 being sent to local schools in order to obtain secondary qualifications to be able to serve in the
22 same positions and replace their family members in the future. This signifies a 'inwards' process
23 of development – that is, returning to cultural ties, familial influences and collective loyalty in
24 tribal communities (Petras 1999), as opposed to looking 'outwards' to the world by adopting
25 ideas of learning for 'export' and pursuing global career prospects (Sniegocki 2008). This also
26 seems to have negative effects on students' motivation to learn English.
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30 Here it's completely different because you are dealing with students who have no
31 motivation whatsoever. I tried to use the same techniques with them here [refers to the
32 techniques proposed by the CLT], but they [students] stated very quickly that I shouldn't
33 give myself a headache and I should rest. They said they are looking for two things: to be a
34 police officer or to be in the military. 'We have no aspirations to be anything else so why
35 should we bother.' (*Teacher 1I*)
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38 It became very apparent in all interviews that the majority of students in state schools in
39 Bahrain, especially boys, interact, live and plan their career prospects within opportunities
40 offered by their closest communities. Comments of wishing to pursue military careers challenge
41 the neoliberal attraction of growth for export and global participation that is wishfully assumed
42 to allure everyone (Brown and Lauder 2006). It is argued in this paper that because of these
43 'locally' focused plans, teachers also position themselves in the ways indicated above, rejecting
44 the neoliberal views on education for skills development and showing preference for the local
45 need to facilitate good exam preparation. While the impact of parents' and students' wishes on
46 teacher behaviour has been quite significantly documented in policy development literature (e.g.
47 Hallinger and Leithwood 1996), other aspects of local influences that play a role in policy
48 borrowing are also noted here. These aspects centre around historical self-sufficiencies and
49 nature of economies prior to the neoliberal invasion as a factor affecting the 'magnetic'
50 properties of the link between education and global economic development.
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55 **Concluding Remarks**

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3 Economies that compete for global recognition strive to transform the quality of national
4 education systems through policy borrowing (Bridges 2014). The need for transformation often
5 becomes so strong that the neoliberal value systems become internalised and absorbed in
6 cultures for which they were not originally intended, with various degrees of success (Chana
7 2010). The findings in this research indicated that the value system of international quality
8 English language education has also become indigenised in the government's thinking about
9 policy development in Bahrain. However, this indigenisation seems to have only taken place at
10 the government level. There is evidence here that the tensions arising from policy borrowing
11 stretch more deeply into the complexities of the political incoherence of the new policy and the
12 economic vision supported by it within the nation state, and are not simply a matter of too many
13 cultural dissimilarities between the existing systems of the home country and those of the
14 'lender' (Yu 2001; Curdt-Christiansen and Silver 2012).

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19 The paper notes an interesting change in cultural values, caused by the government's
20 determination to pursue their vision of economic development. The comments from the
21 government representative demonstrated clearly that the neoliberal ideas about good language
22 education were 'absorbed' into their thinking about education and permeated the old value
23 system. Here, the government representative demonstrated breaking away from their own
24 cultural ways of thinking about education, which the analysis in this paper showed to be the
25 intended outcome of the hegemonic neoliberal forces driving education reform in Bahrain,
26 underpinned by the rhetoric of public good and global development (Gamage 2015). This new
27 value system did not appear, however, to have permeated the perspectives on education of the
28 students and the teachers in this research, whose comments gave a sense of stronger links with
29 communal influences and preferences for opportunities created for them within the nation
30 state.
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35 The findings therefore challenge the view that neoliberal globalisation is desired by everyone
36 within a nation state. Whilst this research demonstrated that, similarly to other governments
37 around the world, Bahrain pursues neoliberal visions to increase its position on global markets
38 (Sniegocki 2008), the view that national political settlements between governments do no longer
39 bring any rewards in the era of neoliberal globalisation was significantly challenged (Reich, cited
40 in Brown and Lauder, 2006). The teacher comments in this research clearly indicated that many
41 career rewards come from these settlements, suggesting that neoliberal policy borrowing in
42 Bahrain is not beneficial for anyone as, first of all, the government finds it difficult to implement
43 the CLT due to resistance from students and teachers, and, secondly, because the general public
44 feel that greater benefits can be found within the nation state.
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49 These findings further suggest that the 'public good' rhetoric, often underpinning economic
50 visions in countries such as Bahrain, who wish to compete on international arenas through
51 transformations to knowledge-based nations (Giroux and Giroux 2006), is not at all
52 advantageous for the 'public' for whom it is intended. This paper suggests that the lack of
53 connection with this rhetoric created a general sense of detachment of the public from the
54 national economic vision in Bahrain and undermined the attractiveness of education for
55 economic gain. The data showed that linking education to the economy should be 'a matter of
56 need' and that neoliberal ideas of learning for 'export' and global career prospects have little
57 value if this need is not met.
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The paper therefore argues that having an economic vision for global development and trying to create an education system through policy borrowing does not automatically make it a magnet that attracts everyone. The analysis has shown that this vision fails to take account of the important place of old political and employment settlements within the nation state for the career aspirations of many locals. It also fails to understand how individuals position themselves in the education system that has been borrowed from foreign experts, and here the choices made by the teachers in this research to support rote learning and passing exams are particularly noteworthy as an area in need of future research work. When countries borrow policies to create links with economic development, students need to be convinced that they will be educated for life (Hufton and Elliot, 2000). This research has shown very clearly that students however cannot be educated for life if the education they receive cannot be used in life.

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