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Research paper

Beyond the walls of the school: Risk factors and children and youth in the Gulf

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ABSTRACT

UNESCO has reported that progress on the Education For All movement has been slow in the Arab world, including the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The low levels of achievement on national and international assessment tests in these states support this judgment. In this conceptual paper, we explore risk factors that can impact the education and educational outcomes of children and youth, reviewing the existing literature and considering its applicability to the Gulf. We argue that risk factors exist in the Gulf that affect short- and long-term outcomes and create barriers to success. Three such factors identified include societal change, familial factors, and gender.

Keywords: risk factors, children at-risk, youth at-risk, education in the Gulf, gender, societal change

[http://dx.doi.org/
10.5339/nmejre.2014.1](http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/nmejre.2014.1)

Submitted: 16 July 2013
Accepted: 23 October 2013
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INTRODUCTION

Despite all the education reform efforts being implemented in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), improved educational outcomes are still lagging. Reports from Education for All (EFA), a global movement led by UNESCO to ensure access to quality education for all children and youth by 2015, indicates that progress in the Arab countries has been slower than in other parts of the world and that responding to the educational needs of the children and youth in this region remains a challenge.¹

Low levels of achievement on national and international assessment tests are indicative of the difficulties that the countries' educational systems are facing. For example, Gulf students' achievement was at or below the lowest level in the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) science ranking. Less than 1 per cent of students attained the highest proficiency levels, compared with 15 per cent or more in several Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Over 40 per cent of fourth graders read at or below the lowest level on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). In the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 32 per cent to 81 per cent of eighth graders did not reach the lowest benchmark in mathematics and 20 to 52 per cent failed to do so in science.² Thus, children in the Gulf lag behind their peers in other regions in a number of academic areas.

Accordingly, questions and concerns have been raised about the reasons for such struggling education systems. Why is this the case in the Gulf, an affluent region with economic prosperity in which resources are allocated to the publicly stated goal of improved education?

In many parts of the world, efforts by educational policy makers, school leaders, and researchers to prevent and minimize school failure rely on a consideration of risk factors. Risk factors are intra-individual characteristics of children and youth—such as gender and disabilities, or environmental—and societal conditions—for instance, poverty, cultural or linguistic minority status, and geographic location—that are theoretically and often statistically related to levels of academic and social outcomes in school. Risk factors can set individuals and groups apart from the rest of a society.¹ Recognizing and understanding risk factors can help to explain and unravel some of the causes that underlie the difficulties that education systems face when governments aspire to improve the education systems and their societies as a whole.

Such a view of the significant role of risk factors has primarily been supported by research in the West and, particularly in literature from the United States and Europe. This belief however, is not unique to just those parts of the world. For instance, efforts to achieve the EFA goals regionally have extensively reported on various countries' risk factors with respect to education and their effects on disadvantaged groups of children and youth,¹ factors which either leave them completely outside the walls of schools so that they are left with no schooling or provide them with inadequate educational services.

The topic of at-risk children has rarely been considered in the Middle East and North Africa as it is a new term that has been used only in recent studies in the Arab world.³ Most Arab countries, such as Egypt, Yemen, and Sudan, report on poverty and socioeconomic status as the main risk factors in education for children and youth.^{1,4,5} When it comes to the Gulf, one might argue that these risk factors are irrelevant to a region that is characterized as affluent and homogenous. Indeed, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, in their national reports on progress towards the EFA goals prepared for the UNESCO-sponsored International Conference on Education in Geneva, Switzerland,^{6,7} supported these arguments for the inapplicability of the concept of risk factors to the Gulf.² Do the concepts of at-risk children and risk factors identified in the literature from the West fit the Gulf context?

We propose that the risk factors that are found in the West and the ones that are the focus of international eradication efforts led by the United Nations do exist in the Gulf. The nature and degree of risk factors can differ, however, from those reported in the literature from the United States and Europe due to differences in contextual factors and culture, as both undoubtedly influence the shape of these risk factors and their effects. The premise of the article is that greater consideration of risk factors might not only enlighten the understanding of low levels of educational outcomes in the Gulf but, also that greater consideration of risk factors by educationists in the Gulf might expand and enlighten the literature on risk factors globally.

A comparative analysis of at-risk children and youth, covering the model in the West, its applicability to countries in the Gulf, and ways in which the construct of risk factors might expand because of contextual factors in the Gulf, follows.

THE WESTERN MODEL OF RISK

Our overview of Western literature on risk factors focuses on factors that can lead to risk, groups of individuals that are often at-risk, and some possible outcomes of risk.

Risk factors

Risk factors are described as “biological or psychosocial hazards that increase the likelihood of a negative developmental outcome in a group of people”(p. 3).⁸ They can be biological or environmental factors that create adverse conditions for the healthy development of children and youth.^{9,10}

Risk factors can be found within (a) an individual (e.g., low intelligence or disability), (b) a family (e.g., poverty, divorce, or parenting styles), (c) school (e.g., poor teaching quality and a lack of resources), and (d) the community (e.g., a neighborhood with high crime rates). One approach classifies sources of risk into three categories: biological, familial, and environmental factors.

Biological factors of risk can include prenatal or perinatal stressors (e.g., poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare, and perinatal drug exposure), premature birth, low birth weight, and medical conditions that require prolonged hospital stays.¹¹ These are associated with adverse conditions and difficulties such as low intelligence, disability, and developmental delays. The effects of these factors on a child’s physical, cognitive, or emotional abilities limits his or her capacity to meet environmental demands, and especially those in school, thus reducing the chance of being successful, independent, and self-reliant in later life.

Family status and dynamics refer to poverty or low income and negative social interactions within a family that can have a significant impact on a child’s development. Children from low income families that lack resources are less likely to succeed educationally, and have more adjustment problems than their middle class counterparts. Family interactions, such as parenting style, child abuse, divorce, and the absence of one parent or both, affect children’s socio-emotional development.¹⁰ Other risk factor variables within the family can include maternal mental illness, parent substance abuse, disadvantaged minority status, large family size, and the lack or low level of one or both parents’ education.¹¹

Environmental factors refer to adverse experiences of children and youth in school, their neighborhood, or the community that can negatively influence healthy development if they have characteristics that increase the children’s risks. For example, detrimental variables in school include an unsafe school environment, unqualified teachers, inadequate materials and supplies, and frequent changes in staff or staff absenteeism; ones in the neighborhood include high crime and violence; and those in the community include limited resources and low social and political commitment to children and their education.¹⁰

At-risk groups

Children at-risk of failing school and behavior problems possess single or multiple risk factors that interfere with their educational success and affect their overall performance and wellbeing.¹² Data from the United States and Europe have shown that, in those contexts, across all populations, minority children constitute the majority of at-risk children.^{13,14} Minority children are those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds that differ from those of a country’s majority. In the United States, the two largest minority groups are African Americans and Hispanic, and in Europe, children from immigrant backgrounds and those of low socioeconomic status are considered the largest at-risk groups.¹³ The number of at-risk children is high and increasing in the United States; for instance, 54 per cent of minority school-age children have single or multiple risk factors.¹⁵ In addition, an average of various data estimates places 42 per cent of minority children in poverty in contrast to about 21 per cent of all American children.¹⁴

Predicted outcomes

Risk factors can have detrimental effects on individuals as well as society as a whole. When a student fails to meet the academic requirements in school, negative school and post-school outcomes can result. These include academic difficulties, low levels of academic achievement, low scores on standardized tests, and low grade level retention. At-risk children and youth are marginalized individuals and groups whom society or the environment places outside the education system or in

inadequate school conditions. These children not only accumulate fewer years of education but also receive inadequate educational services.¹

Students from at-risk groups are also overrepresented in special education. Risk factors can cause students to struggle and have difficulties in learning in ways that might be interpreted as disabilities. Poverty, minority, and language barriers have been found to increase referrals for special education and to increase the probability of children being placed in specific disability categories.¹⁶ At-risk children and youth may also be more likely to engage in high-risk activities, such as drug and alcohol abuse and delinquency, than their typical peers; they are also more likely to drop out of school.¹⁷ These negative outcomes continue into adulthood because at-risk children and youth are more likely to be unemployed or, if employed, earn substantially less than high school graduates, resulting in a lower socioeconomic status.¹⁵

THE APPLICABILITY OF THE WESTERN MODEL OF RISK TO THE GULF

The three categories of risk factors reviewed above are, of course, present in the Gulf countries, but the acknowledgement of their existence and the way that countries deal with them differ in degree from state to state. However, none of the countries have examined risk factors as explicitly and comprehensively as has been done in the United States and Europe. Tashtooosh³ pointed out that the term “at-risk children” is new in the Arab world and has only been recently used in its scholarly literature. Also, the literature from the Arab world in the area of at-risk children focuses mainly on the social support and the welfare system in helping these children, but not on education and educational outcomes.^{4,5,18} Still, some limited attention has been drawn at times to factors that can adversely affect schooling and its outcomes. Here are three examples.

The national reports prepared by Gulf countries to assess their progress towards the EFA goals for the UNESCO-sponsored International Conference on Education in Geneva, Switzerland in 2008, mentioned risk factors and disadvantaged groups only briefly, and usually focused on just one or two risk factors. Bahrain, for instance, described issues involving low income and needy families.¹⁹ Kuwait reported on disability and students with problem behaviors, specifically delinquency.²⁰ Although Saudi Arabia indicated that geographical remoteness served as a barrier to providing education, it along with Qatar stressed the homogeneity of their countries’ populations^{6,7} and, therefore, did not voice much concern about risk factors or disadvantaged groups. Oman, however, included poverty, minority, and gender disparity as risk factors.²¹ The casual way that these factors, except for visible disabilities such as those that are physical or mental in origin, were addressed in the national reports seems to indicate a lack of awareness of the significant impact risk factors can have on a country’s educational outcomes and for contributing to the gap in achievement between a nation’s advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

Al-Merekhi and Al-Buainain,²² within their statistical overview of people with disabilities in the State of Qatar, provide a public health perspective on risk factors related to disability prevalence that have subsequent implications for education. Some of the factors that are more distinct to this region than those reviewed from the West above included:

- Genetic conditions and consanguineous marriages
- Child-bearing at an early age
- Not recognizing and seeking treatment for childrens’ health conditions that later lead to permanent disabilities
- Not recognizing certain kinds of learning and behavior problems as high incidence disabilities
- High rates of home accidents and traffic accidents, and
- Concealing facts about and even the presence of disabilities as personal matters.

Al Thani,²³ in an overview of the status of disabilities in Arab states, describes the context of the region and the challenges it provides for this disadvantaged group to progress and receive its human right to education. Although examining disabilities only, her points are applicable to all disadvantaged groups in this region. The challenges that disability groups face are an unwillingness on the part of government officials to recognize disability as an issue that demands social and governmental attention. An indication of this is the lack of accurate and reliable data on disability prevalence as, without such information, there can be little in the way of appropriate policy, programming, or service responses to the problems. She calls it “being in denial”, as it is easier to deny the existence of a condition than to have to deal with it. We believe that the kind of recognition that countries like the

United States and those in Europe provided to risk factors for many years would serve the educational efforts of Gulf countries well.

EXPANDING THE LITERATURE ON RISK FACTORS

A greater consideration of risk factors by educationists in the Gulf should not, in our opinion, solely replicate Western efforts. Rather, there are aspects of life and culture in the Gulf that do leave some students beyond school walls or result in an inadequate education being received. The examination of these contextual factors and differences and their subsequent inclusion in the literature on educational risk will expand and enhance the research base to the benefit of students in other parts of the world. Three such factors are societal change, familial factors, and the familiar factor of gender considered differently.

Societal change

The Gulf is as a cohesive region, its countries sharing, with some variability not always evident to outsiders, characteristics of economic prosperity and conservative societies. In addition, rapid change due to economic, political, industrial, and technological forces has been characteristic of the region.

Such change for example, has meant that the Gulf has been (a) buying into globalization and international standards efforts; (b) borrowing educational policies and their implementations from the West; (c) sending individuals overseas, particularly to the West to pursue further education; and (d) establishing partnerships with universities and educational companies, such as the RAND-led school reform in Qatar and the Madares Al Ghad (Schools of the Future) in the United Arab Emirates.²⁴ Such changes, though, produce challenges, a major one being that these change efforts are being implemented in traditional societies, creating resistance and conflict between these modern borrowed ideas and the traditional societies in which they are implanted.

Resilient individuals who can adapt to such forces of change will be able to survive and thrive in the new environment. In contrast, families and individuals who resist and cannot adapt to these changes—who may, for example, adhere to more traditional values—may be more at risk of facing difficulties in school as a result of their maladjustment and their inability to respond to the demands of the change. To illustrate, schools are adopting Western curricula, which come from developed countries with values of modern societies (e.g., parents' involvement in their children's education, less authoritarian parenting styles, and the promotion of independence in children and youth). Yet, some Gulf households, especially those in rural areas, are still very traditional and function in ways that are the opposite of this. Such differences create conflicts and cultural mismatches between the child's home culture and the school environment with the demands, features, and values that schools require in order for the child to succeed.

Familial factors

Divorce and child abuse are risk factors for children and youth internationally. These situations have a damaging impact on children's emotional and mental development, negatively affect their education, and sometimes lead to behavioral disorders, depression, low school performance, drug addiction, and even criminal behavior. There is the possibility that such adverse effects will increase in the Gulf as divorce rates have risen dramatically in recent years and continue to rise, with Kuwait and Qatar having the highest rates.²⁵ Sixty per cent of children of divorced parents suffer from psychological problems and display aggressive behavior in Kuwait; similar findings have been reported in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.²⁵

The number of reported cases of domestic violence incidents against children has also increased. Two challenges connected with this issue in the Gulf that affect its nature as a risk factor are that (a) the formal reporting of such incidents is culturally unacceptable, because it can be a source of shame and stigma in small societies, and (b) there is a lack of comprehensive domestic violence protection systems, because domestic violence is currently not classified as an offence under criminal law in some parts of the Gulf region.²⁶

Gender

Undoubtedly, gender in general in the Middle East and the Gulf does matter, and can be considered a risk factor. However, two types of gender disparity exist in the Gulf that impact children and youth and

their education. The first type is the traditional concept of gender disparity in which girls may be the ones in a family who do not receive an education or who receive an inadequate education. This is particularly true in parts of Oman and Saudi Arabia, large countries in which some people live in remote areas that do not have access to education or with inadequate quality of education and in which girls are not sent long distances to school. The region as a whole, though, has made progress toward establishing gender parity in primary and secondary education under the EFA goals.¹

The other type of gender disparity that exists actually favors girls in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Data from these Gulf countries indicate that boys underperform girls in international and national assessments. Boys are failing, are retained in classes more often than girls, and have high dropout rates. According to Ridge,²⁴ the dropout rate for boys at the secondary level is reported to be twice that of girls in Qatar. Similarly in the United Arab Emirates, girls outperform boys in all subjects and their dropout rate is 3 per cent compared to 20 per cent of boys. Ridge²⁴ pointed out that while policy makers highlight the success that has been achieved in minimizing the gender disparity for girls, the issue of low performance of boys and their poor quality schools has not received attention from policy makers. This represents a different kind of achievement gap than is typically reported in the at-risk literature.

CONCLUSION

The set of factors that put children and youth of the Gulf States at-risk for educational failure present a daunting array of challenges for the governments, educators, and families of these countries. They must grapple in their own ways with those factors that have been well-researched in the West, such as pre-, peri-, and postnatal stressors and experiences, the difficulties that parents and families face as they raise their children, and the shortcomings of schools and society. They must also address others, not unique to them alone in the world, but ones that do have some very specific manifestations because of the culture and context of the Gulf, e.g., public safety, genetics, the exclusion of girls, low performance of boys, rising divorce rates, hidden domestic violence, and the struggle between traditional culture and modernity.

We believe that an argument could be made that one of the most significant risk factors facing the Gulf countries is the relative invisibility of such risk factors in both public debate about the reasons for the low performance of schools and students—the denial of the conditions as Al Thani²³ has characterized for disability—and also at the core of educational reforms. A realization and acceptance of the facts that (a) risk factors are, in one way or another, universal across societies and (b) dealing with them will better serve the Gulf states and its educators in their efforts to achieve the educational goals they seek, deserve, and need.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

Both authors conceptualized the initial idea for the study.

CK acquired the initial data of the country reports.

MKA expanded the initial conceptualization, provided additional material, and wrote the first draft of the article.

CK added additional content to the draft and revised the manuscript.

BOTH authors have read and approve of this final version.

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