

## Exploring Core Competencies in Omani Schools: Principals' Perceptions and Their Role in Enhancing School Performance

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the perceptions of school principals in Oman regarding the concept of core competencies, explore the methods and mechanisms used to identify core competencies within Omani schools, and determine the extent to which core competencies are utilized to improve the performance of Omani schools. It also analyzes the challenges faced in utilizing core competencies in the educational field, focusing on the factors influencing the investment of these competencies in Omani schools. The study employs a qualitative design to explore the views of school principals and their assistants regarding the importance of core competencies and their role in improving school performance. A purposive sample of 45 participants from seven Omani governorates was selected to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, addressing topics related to the importance of core competencies, methods of development, and associated challenges. Content analysis was conducted using MaxQDA software to analyze the data inductively, which helped identify key themes and challenges affecting the utilization of competencies. The study reached several important findings, including the lack of an official definition for the concept of core competencies within the Omani education system, the reliance on informal methods to identify core competencies, and that school principals try to link core competencies to achieve school plan goals by utilizing them in professional development, workshops, and educational activities. The results revealed several key challenges hindering the full utilization of core competencies in the educational field, including organizational challenges, weak infrastructure, social barriers, technical challenges, and financial, administrative, and personal constraints. Based on the study's findings, a set of recommendations can be proposed to develop strategies that enhance the investment of core competencies in supporting educational and administrative performance in schools.

Keywords: core competencies, improving school performance, education in Oman, human resources in education

## Introduction

The concept of core competencies in educational institutions has seen significant development in recent years and has gained increasing attention in recent research, especially considering advanced educational models influenced by technological progress and the knowledge-based economy. Despite differing viewpoints among researchers on this concept across various sectors, whether industrial, commercial, or educational, there is a broad consensus that core competencies represent an added value that enhances the ability of institutions to grow, sustain, and achieve excellence.

The concept of core competencies emerged in the field of management through the research of Prahalad and Hamel (2009), who defined it from an organizational perspective, focusing on the organization's ability to engage in collective learning, coordinate resources, skills, and technologies to provide the best added value and enhance competitive advantage. In the same context, Johnson and Scholes (2002) defined it as a set of interrelated activities and processes that enable the organization to effectively allocate its resources, helping it achieve a unique competitive advantage that is difficult for competitors to replicate, and allowing it to meet the needs of beneficiaries more efficiently than similar organizations.

On the other hand, Kim et al. (2017) described it as a blend of knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, teamwork, and organizational capabilities that contribute to high performance, giving the organization a sustainable competitive advantage. Kibugi et al. (2023) focused on the role of core competencies in knowledge and skill exchange between different organizational units, enhancing the organization's efficiency and its ability to achieve its strategic goals.

The literature on strategic management and human resource management reveals a divergence in defining the concept of core competencies. Strategic management specialists view core competencies as the organization's ability to effectively utilize its resources to achieve competitive advantage (Johnson & Scholes, 2002; Kim et al., 2017; Meredith & Shafer, 1999). Meanwhile, human resource management specialists associate it with the unique capabilities, personal traits of employees, and behaviors related to superior job performance (Cardy & Selvarajan, 2006; Kibugi et al., 2023), assuming that human resources and intellectual capital are the most important elements in creating core competencies (Kibugi et al., 2023).

Chen and Chang (2011) discussed the relationship between organizational and human competencies and how they interact to achieve the organization's competitive advantage. They identified three key pathways in this dynamic. The first pathway involves the interaction and integration between the organization's core and individual human competencies, highlighting how these elements strengthen organizational performance. The second pathway emphasizes the role of organizational contexts, such as vision, mission, policies, shared values, and organizational culture, in enhancing the interaction, integration, and adaptation between organizational and individual human competencies. The third pathway illustrates how core competencies, when aligned with human competencies, serve as a critical source of the organization's competitive advantage. The concept of core competencies can be summarized as the unique strengths, capabilities, and resources possessed by an organization, which provide the foundation for building and developing its added value. These competencies include tangible resources (such as organizational, material, financial, and human resources) and

intangible resources (such as employee knowledge, informal networks, organizational culture, reputation, and intellectual property rights).

The degree of focus on these resources varies depending on the organization's activities and operations (Li et al., 2018). The perspective based on core competencies assumes a focus on valuable, rare, and immovable resources to grant the organization a sustainable competitive advantage (Kabue & Kilika, 2016). Essentially, Prahalad and Hamel (2009) identified three key criteria for core competencies in organizations: they are difficult for competitors to imitate, they can be widely reused to maximize the benefit within the organization, and they can provide added value that results in further benefits for beneficiaries.

In the context of schools, core competencies can be pivotal in enhancing educational outcomes, reputation, school effectiveness, and academic performance of students. The results of a study by Omweri (2024) revealed that core competencies, institutional culture, and effective use of resources significantly contribute to improving academic performance within schools. Bantoc and Yazon (2023) presented similar findings, where their research showed that core behavioral competencies act as important predictors of teacher performance, reinforcing the idea that strengthening these competencies can lead to better educational outcomes. Meanwhile, a study by Li et al. (2024) demonstrated a strong relationship between teachers' digital competencies and their performance. Similarly, Drago et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review of related literature, showing that dynamic competencies and strategic behavior affect organizational performance and that core competencies are not static; they must be continuously developed and adapted to maintain a competitive advantage in a dynamic environment. Agha et al. (2012) emphasized that core competencies are crucial for formulating effective competitive strategies for organizations, and that shared vision, collaboration, and empowerment (as dimensions of core competencies) significantly affect competitive advantage and organizational performance. The results of a study by Sumantri et al. (2023) indicated that dynamic capabilities positively affect competitive advantage, innovation performance, and creative capabilities. Sudrajat's (2014) study showed that leadership, competence, and human capital have a direct impact on competitive advantage, as well as an indirect impact through knowledge, technology, and innovation. Similarly, the results of studies by Dewi et al. (2023) and Kibugi et al. (2023) confirmed a significant positive impact of leadership capabilities and core competencies on organizational performance.

In the Omani context, the Government of the Sultanate of Oman believes in the vital role of education in implementing national policies and directions and achieving the aspirations of the Omani society. To this end, the National Education Strategy (2040) emphasizes, in one of its pillars, that the country's economic and social growth depends on the ability of the education system to build a culture of creativity, innovation, leadership, seizing opportunities, and utilizing core competencies (Education Council, 2018). The Omani education system is centralized, yet the recent School Education Law affirms a new qualitative phase, in which schools play a pivotal role in improving their self-performance (Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, 2023). This is based on the School Performance Development System, which aims to build the capacities of schools and empower them to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development, as well as the external evaluation of schools by an independent body (Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education). It focuses on five key

areas: leadership, management, and governance, school climate, quality of teaching and assessment, academic achievement, and students' personal growth (Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education, 2024). Therefore, the schools' attention to core competencies represents real opportunities for continuous improvement in their performance effectiveness and achieving a highly competitive reputation.

## Study problem

Educational institutions have witnessed significant progress in adopting core competencies as one of the key pillars for enhancing educational performance and achieving institutional excellence. However, there are still several challenges hindering the effective application of these competencies in the educational field, which could negatively affect the quality of education and teachers' effectiveness in their leadership and instructional roles. Studies indicate that several factors influence investment in core competencies, such as organizational challenges, weak infrastructure, social barriers, technological challenges, financial, administrative, and personal constraints. These factors may limit teachers' ability to apply these competencies effectively, leading to obstacles in professional development and the achievement of desired educational goals.

This study aims to analyze the challenges facing the application of core competencies in the educational field, understand the impact of these challenges on teachers' performance and the efficiency of the educational process, and propose solutions and strategies to enhance the utilization of these competencies in developing the educational environment. The study addresses the following question:

What are the main challenges in utilizing core competencies in the educational field and benefiting from them from the perspective of the study sample?

## Study objectives

This study aims to:

- Analyze the challenges facing the application of core competencies in educational institutions and explore their impact on the quality of education and teacher performance.
- Identify the organizational, administrative, technological, social, and financial factors that hinder the effective use of core competencies in the educational field.

## Significance of the study

The importance of this study lies in:

- Contributing to the development of educational research by providing a clear perspective on the challenges facing the implementation of core competencies in the educational field.
- Supporting policymakers and educational planners with scientifically-based information on the obstacles hindering the investment in core competencies, enabling them to formulate more effective policies to support the educational process.

- Improving educational and administrative practices by highlighting the factors influencing core competencies and suggesting solutions that help create a more efficient and innovative learning environment.
- Enhancing teachers' professional development by identifying the factors that affect the application of core competencies, which will assist in designing training programs that meet their needs and enable them to maximize the benefits of their skills.
- Contributing to the development of the school environment by providing strategies that support better utilization of core competencies, leading to sustainable educational quality.

## Study methodology

The study adopted a qualitative design to explore the views of school principals and their assistants on core competencies and their role in improving school performance. This approach provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and the impact of the educational context on their perspectives.

### *Study sample*

The sample was selected using a purposive sampling method, comprising 45 participants from seven different governorates in Oman, ensuring a diversity of perspectives. The sample included school principals and their assistants, due to their expertise and ability to provide in-depth insights on the topic.

### *Data collection*

Semi-structured face-to-face or online interviews (via Google Meet and Zoom) were used as the primary data collection tool. The interviews included open-ended questions about core competencies, ways to develop them, and the challenges associated with them. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, and responses were recorded with the participants' consent.

### *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis via MaxQDA software. The data were coded according to the main themes using inductive analysis. The process involved careful review of the texts, developing a coding system, and extracting key patterns to answer the study's questions. The analysis identified key themes related to core competencies in schools in Oman and the challenges hindering their implementation, which will be presented in the next section of the study.

## Study results and discussion

The interview results revealed a range of challenges hindering the effective utilization and employment of core competencies in the educational field. Among the most prominent challenges were:

### *Organizational challenges*

Participants indicated that workload pressure and lack of time are significant obstacles to teachers' professional development and planning. Additionally, high student-teacher ratios limit the benefits of those with competencies. Moreover, increasing daily tasks hinders knowledge exchange and development sessions, reducing opportunities to improve the educational process. Fullan's (2007) study supports this effect, indicating that organizational challenges, such as an ineffective administrative structure, may hinder innovation and development in education.

### *Weak infrastructure*

Some participants viewed outdated school buildings and a lack of technological updates as a major challenge in refining skills and employing core competencies in education. They pointed to the need for a modern educational environment that supports innovation and development. Kozol's (1991) study supports this finding, emphasizing that weak infrastructure negatively affects teachers' ability to apply core competencies, which in turn impacts the quality of education.

### *Social challenges*

Interviews revealed that collaboration and communication among teachers are challenging when social difficulties prevent the exchange of experiences and enhance teamwork. Darling-Hammond's (2000) study confirmed that social pressures can impact educational performance, noting that unsupportive social conditions limit the effective use of competencies.

### *Technical challenges*

Participants noted that poor networks and digital infrastructure in schools are major barriers to the development of competencies. Additionally, the lack of some teachers' skills in effectively using technology limits opportunities to improve the educational process. This is supported by Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich's (2010) study, which confirmed that a lack of technical skills among teachers is a primary obstacle to using technology to support education.

### *Financial challenges*

Many participants highlighted that inadequate funding and limited resources for training and development restrict opportunities to enhance competencies. Additionally, insufficient external support from companies and donors presents another challenge to implementing effective training programs. The OECD (2016) study confirms that financial constraints directly affect education quality, as a lack of resources limits professional training and development opportunities.

### *Administrative challenges*

The results indicated that some school administrations do not provide adequate support for competency development, and there are no clear strategies for managing

change, which creates difficulties in developing a motivating educational environment. Constant changes in regulations and laws without a clear evaluation of past experiences hinder the stability of the educational process.

### *Personal challenges*

The results showed that some individuals face personal challenges, such as fear of taking on additional responsibilities or unwillingness to share knowledge, leading to resistance to change and the adoption of new developmental methods. Psychological and health pressures also play a role in limiting teachers' ability to innovate and engage effectively. In this regard, Hargreaves' (2000) study examined the impact of personal pressures on teachers' professional performance, indicating that personal instability may hinder the effective utilization of core competencies.

These findings confirm that organizational, social, technical, financial, and administrative challenges significantly impact the effective use of core competencies in the educational field. It is essential to develop effective strategies to overcome these challenges and foster a supportive environment for teacher development and improved educational quality.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights that while core competencies play a pivotal role in school performance and leadership, their formal recognition and structured documentation remain limited within the Omani educational context. Addressing the challenges identified, such as personal hesitations, workload pressures, and administrative inconsistencies, requires a concerted effort from school leaders and policymakers. By raising awareness, fostering a supportive culture, and implementing targeted training and documentation strategies, schools can harness the full potential of their staff's competencies. These steps are essential to promote continuous improvement and sustainability in educational leadership and overall school performance.

Some recommendations can be proposed here:

- Continuous training and competency development: Developing training programs that support the core competencies that serve the school's objectives can enhance teachers' efficiency and help them achieve goals more effectively.
- Periodic evaluation of competencies and their alignment with goals: Conducting periodic assessments of the existing competencies and comparing them with the goals can help identify gaps and address them through recruitment or training.
- Use of an electronic competency documentation system: The administration can create a digital platform to record and document the competencies identified among staff members, making it easier to reference when planning tasks and assigning roles.

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