

Research Article



Teacher Education Programs in the Arabian Gulf Through the Eyes of Novice Teachers: A Systematic Review with Narrative Synthesis

برامج إعداد المعلمين في الخليج العربي من منظور المعلمين المبتدئين: مراجعة منهجية مع تحليل سردي

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Abstract

Understanding novice teachers' perceptions of their teacher education programs (TEPs) remains an under-researched area in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This paper implements a systematic review with a narrative synthesis following Popay et al. (2006) guidelines to answer two questions: (a) What are the reported views of beginning teachers in the GCC region regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their TEPs? and (b) What are the reported suggestions of beginning teachers in the GCC region for enhancing TEP implementation? Four studies conducted between 2010 and 2022 were included in this review from three GCC countries. The findings revealed several themes regarding the first review question, such as (a) impactful practicum courses, (b) theory–practice gap, and (c) non-culturally responsive curricula. The themes around the second question were (a) enhancing course quality, (b) bridging the school–program gap, and (c) building on work-related skills. The findings show that the perceived weaknesses of TEPs by beginning teachers outweigh the perceived strengths of some TEPs in the Arabian Gulf. Drawing upon the findings of this systematic review, broader literature, and my professional experiences, I propose a model of essential components for effective TEP implementation based on the theory of change (ToC).

الملخص

لا يزال فهم تصورات المعلمين المبتدئين لبرامج إعداد المعلمين مجالاً لا يلقى البحث الكافي في دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي الست. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تقديم مراجعة منهجية مع تحليل سردي وفقاً لإرشادات بوباي وآخرون (٢٠٠٦) للإجابة على سؤالين: (أ) ماهي الآراء المبلغ عنها من المعلمين المبتدئين في منطقة مجلس التعاون الخليجي حول نقاط القوة والضعف في برامج إعدادهم؟ و (ب) ماهي الاقتراحات المبلغ عنها من المعلمين المبتدئين في مجلس التعاون الخليجي لتعزيز تنفيذ برامج إعداد المعلمين؟ أدرجت في هذا البحث أربع دراسات أجريت بين عامي ٢٠١٠ و ٢٠٢٢ من ثلاث دول خليجية. كشفت النتائج عن عدة نقاط تتعلق بالسؤال الأول، مثل (أ) الدور المؤثر للتدريب العملي خلال برامج إعداد المعلمين، (ب) الفجوة بين المعرفة النظرية والعملية، (ج) مناهج غير مستجيبة ثقافياً. أما النتائج حول السؤال الثاني فكانت (أ) تعزيز جودة المساقات الدراسية، (ب) سد الفجوة بين برامج إعداد المعلمين والنظام المدرسي، (ج) بناء المهارات اللازمة للعمل. تظهر النتائج أن نقاط الضعف في برامج إعداد المعلمين كما يتصورها المعلمين المبتدئين تفوق نقاط القوة في بعض هذه البرامج في الخليج العربي. استناداً إلى نتائج هذه المراجعة المنهجية، ومراجعة الأدبيات، وخبراتي المهنية، أقترح نموذجاً للمكونات الأساسية للتطبيق الفعال لبرامج إعداد المعلمين بناء على نظرية التغيير.

Keywords: teacher education program; novice teachers; systematic review; narrative synthesis

الكلمات المفتاحية: برامج إعداد المعلمين، المعلمين المبتدئين، المراجعة المنهجية، التحليل السردى



1. Introduction

The initial years of teaching are considered crucial for beginning teachers as they tread their paths through the teaching profession. The transition from learning to teach in teacher education programs (TEPs) to teaching in school settings is a challenging undertaking, as it might lead to a reality shock (Farrell, 2003) and develop a sense of inadequacy (Tennant et al., 2021). Therefore, a significant number of teachers leave the profession within their first five teaching years (Perryman & Calvert, 2020), which might support Halford's view of teaching as the profession that eats its young (1998, as cited in Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). Several factors lead to such a dilemma in the teacher workforce; however, TEPs are vital in mitigating or exacerbating the issue. They are critical in preparing novice teachers by equipping them with the required teaching competencies to excel in their careers. Thus, it is imperative to pose the question that continues to perplex teacher educators and researchers, as voiced by Darling-Hammond et al. (2005): "How can we create teacher education programmes that are effective in enabling teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will allow them to succeed?" (p. 390). TEPs have attracted praise and criticism when scrutinizing their effectiveness in preparing prospective teachers, resulting in inconclusive answers to the raised question.

A substantial body of teacher education literature attempts to identify features, elements, components, or characteristics significant for the effectiveness of TEPs in graduating competent teachers. Kosnik and Beck (2009) listed the following seven elements to be prioritized in TEPs: (a) program planning, (b) pupil assessment, (c) classroom organization and community, (d) inclusive education, (e) subject content and pedagogy, (f) professional identity, and (g) a vision for teaching. It is worth noting how these priorities were reached through a three-year study in Canada and how they were identified as challenges based on interviews and observations with early career teachers. In another context, in the United States, Dean et al. (2005) illuminated outstanding TEPs awarded by the Department of Education through the National Awards Program for Effective Teacher Preparation. The four winning programs shared five impactful elements: (a) licensure requirements, (b) standards, (c) accreditation, (d) P-12 partnerships, and (e) continuous improvement. Similarly, Zeichner and Conklin (2008) investigated different case studies of exemplary preparation programs in the US and synthesized their effective components according to four levels: (a) social and institutional, (b) people, (c) programs characteristics, and (d) the substance of a TEP. Darling-Hammond (2006) highlighted the following characteristics of effective TEPs: (a) coherence between courses, assignments, and practicum, (b) extensive and extended supervised field experiences, and (c) collaboration with P-12 partners.

Although these studies were conducted in various Western contexts, the findings indicate a shared recognition of critical elements for successful TEPs. This systematic review focuses on TEPs in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, where there is a paucity of studies, creating a significant gap in the literature and room for further investigation. However, none of the aforementioned studies claimed a single optimal way to construct and organize efficient TEPs, which, according to Zeichner and Conklin (2008) and Darling-Hammond (2006), does not exist. Instead, these studies acknowledged the diversity and complexity of TEPs and delved deeper beyond the structural features to highlight the essential elements

to be considered when developing TEPs. Zeichner and Conklin (2008) stated: “The most important task that lies ahead is to ensure that elements of excellence in teacher education are present in all of these various pathways into teaching” (p. 285). This statement inspired me to propose a theory of change (ToC) presented later, that combines essentials for enhancing TEP implementation based on review studies, literature, and professional experiences. A ToC is a model that can inform systematic reviews by proposing a visual description of an intervention’s activities, resources, short-term goals, and long-term goals (Weiss 1998, as cited in Popay et al., 2006).

The positive relationship between teachers’ effectiveness and students’ academic achievements is well established in the teacher education literature. As Pearson (2016) highlighted, enhancing the preparation of teachers can tackle many prevalent issues in our schools. Thus, developing quality TEPs to prepare skillful, competent, and effective teachers is a pressing concern in many countries worldwide. The GCC countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, are no different, especially with education at the core of their futuristic plans. The GCC was founded on May 25, 1981 and includes six member countries that are geographically contiguous and share similar historical backgrounds (Galeeva, 2018; Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, 2023). The GCC aims to develop similar regulations and foster coordination and integration in all fields among the six states that are tied with deep cultural and social bonds (Al Hassan, 2015; Galeeva, 2018; Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, 2023). For instance, the GCC countries have common educational structures and aims, such as implementing qualitative enhancements in their educational systems (Gallagher & Dillon, 2022).

TEPs in the GCC region rely heavily on paradigms, curricula, and policies developed in Western contexts, which can be rooted in accreditation-driven pressure. Colleges of Education seek international accreditation, such as the Council for the Accreditation of the Educator Preparation (CAEP), to demonstrate TEP quality and gain recognition that attracts candidates (Romanowski, 2022). CAEP is a leading American accrediting body influencing HEIs in the Arabian Gulf countries, such as Zayed University in the UAE, Qatar University, and Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, which offer TEPs accredited by CAEP (Eldridge & Dada, 2016). Programs adhering to US-centric standards prioritizing Western understandings of teacher education are essential for maintaining CAEP accreditation (Eldridge & Dada, 2016; Romanowski, 2022). Different voices (e.g., Al Barwani & Bailey, 2016; Eldridge & Dada, 2016; Romanowski & Alkatib, 2020) have shed light on the contextual differences in CAEP accreditation with the Arabian Gulf. For example, Al Barwani and Bailey (2016) clarified that Western-centric accreditation frameworks, including CAEP, tend to devalue distinct cultural, religious, and governmental factors and personal values that are impactful in day-to-day work in GCC universities. Thus, the CAEP accreditation process has been viewed by Romanowski (2022) as a tool of neocolonialism as it propagates a standardized version of the teacher education curriculum and pedagogies based on US higher education realities. Such reliance on Western-centric accreditation frameworks may restrict GCC’s TEPs’ ability to evolve autonomously and develop TEP models that are truly responsive to their unique sociocultural contexts. CAEP is not the only accreditation body impacting education colleges in the Arabian Gulf, with some institutions opting for alternative

international accreditation or borrowing Western curricula untouched by local contexts (Al'Abri et al., 2019; Al-Muftkah & AlKhateeb, 2020).

Another source of pressure on HEIs in the GCC region, including TEPs, is from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) such as the World Bank, IMF, OECD, and UNESCO. IGOs push neoliberal policies on national education systems, limiting the autonomy of individual countries in determining their own education priorities, approaches, policies, and practices (Samier, 2020). One example is international assessments such as PISA and TIMSS used by the World Bank to draw comparisons between countries, reinforcing educational neocolonialism by accepting Western knowledge as a reference point to which non-Western students should aspire (Anwaruddin, 2014). In many countries, students' performance on international assessments is used to judge education and teacher quality. For instance, recent PISA test results showed that GCC students continue to underperform compared with the global average, which was tied to poor teacher preparation (Wiseman et al., 2017, as cited in Gallagher & Dillon, 2022). The influence of IGOs entails negative consequences for different regions, including the Arabian Gulf, such as language loss, changes in values and norms, and shifts in social institutional structures (Samier, 2020).

Research on TEPs in the Gulf region is still nascent, with several untapped areas, such as TEP evaluation by stakeholders and practitioners. There is a paucity of studies investigating TEP's effectiveness through the lens of its graduates, leaving a notable gap in understanding their perspectives. Howey and Zimpher (1989, cited in Zeichner & Conklin, 2008) emphasized that high-quality TEPs have systems that evaluate programs' effectiveness through their graduates' feedback. In addition, some studies (e.g., Doran, 2020; Hassan et al., 2010) valued collecting data from novice teachers regarding their TEPs as it can inform programs evaluation. Hence, this systematic review aims to comprehensively explore the existing evidence on starting teachers' perceptions regarding TEP strengths and weaknesses in the Arabian Gulf countries. In addition, it examines the recommendations that novice teachers believe could bring desired changes to TEP implementation in the GCC region. This study is the first systematic review focusing on such a matter in the context of the Arabian Gulf countries and can address the existing knowledge gap.

2. Methods

This paper follows a systematic review with a narrative synthesis to answer two review inquiries: (a) What are the reported views of beginning teachers in the GCC region regarding their TEP strengths and weaknesses? and (b) What are the reported suggestions of beginning teachers in the GCC region for enhancing TEP implementation? The reporting of this systematic review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) 2020 statement. Adherence to the 27-item PRISMA checklist can increase transparency, accuracy, clarity, and quality of reporting systematic reviews. Additionally, it is beneficial for researchers to assemble their systematic reviews efficiently, as well as allowing users to evaluate the trustworthiness and applicability of the review (Page et al., 2021; Sohrabi et al., 2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement has been designed chiefly for systematic reviews

that evaluate health interventions; however, it can also be used in reporting systematic reviews of non-health interventions, including social and educational ones (Page et al., 2021). This systematic review was conducted in a structured manner, as advocated by Newman and Gough (2020), who reported a consensus in the literature regarding systematic review processes. They outlined the following nine stages: (a) developing research questions, (b) designing conceptual frameworks, (c) constructing selection criteria, (d) developing search strategies, (e) selection of studies, (f) coding studies, (g) appraising the quality of studies, (h) synthesis, and (i) reporting findings.

2.1. Eligibility criteria

All eligible studies had to meet all of the following criteria: (a) conducted in a GCC country, (b) investigated how beginning teachers perceive their TEPs, (c) targeted teachers with five or fewer years of teaching experience, (d) qualitative or mixed methods designs, and (e) published in English or Arabic. There were no restrictions on the publication date, TEP type, or length. However, at the full-text review stage, studies were excluded because their focus was on populations different from those of beginning teachers, such as preservice teachers. In addition, mixed studies were excluded where the qualitative data tools did not directly explore the perceptions of beginning teachers, as reported in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

2.2. Information sources and search strategy

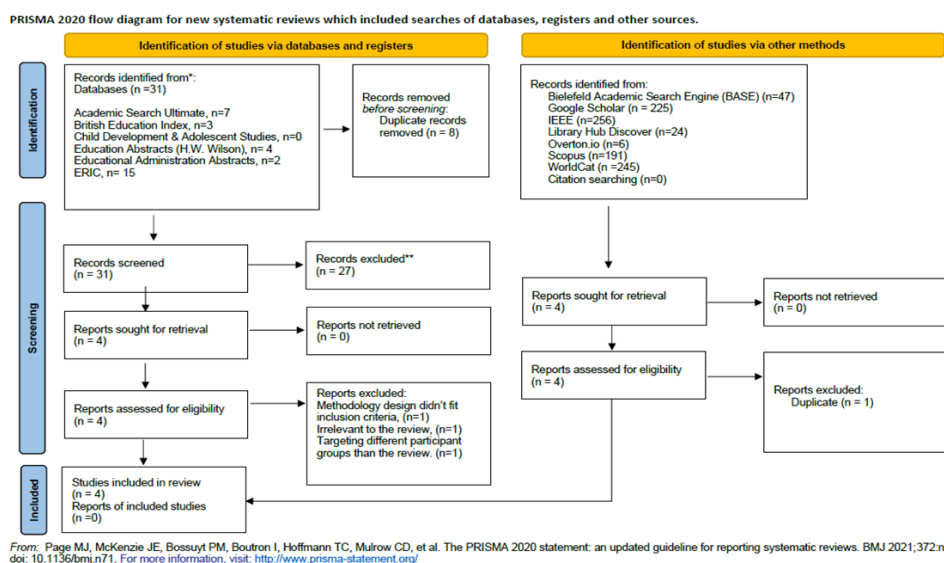
The starting point for finding relevant studies was conducting electronic searches of bibliographic databases on February 15, 2023 without limitation by a particular timeframe or publication language. A comprehensive search was performed using the following EBSCO-host databases: Academic Search Ultimate, Child Development & Adolescent Studies, British

Education Index, Education Abstracts, Educational Administration Abstracts, and ERIC. The search strings were built using keywords that cover the main elements of the research questions and Boolean operators, mainly “OR” and “AND” combined search terms. This process of defining search strings was iterative and required several steps before finalizing these strings. All online databases were searched using the following terms: (united AND Arab AND emirates) OR UAE OR (GCC AND countries) OR Qatar OR Kuwait OR Oman OR Bahrain OR (Saudi AND Arabia) OR “Arabian Gulf”) AND (“new teachers” OR “beginning teachers” OR “novice teacher” OR “starting teachers” OR “first year teacher” OR “in-service teacher”) AND (TI experience OR perspective OR view OR perception OR attitude OR feelings OR views OR viewpoint OR opinions) AND (efficacy OR effectiveness OR impact OR benefits OR outcomes OR success) AND (“initial teacher education” OR “teacher education” OR “teacher training” OR “teacher education programme” OR “preservice teacher education” OR “university teacher education” or “teacher preparation”).

Additionally, decolonized searches were performed from February 18 to February 24, 2023 to retrieve studies and resources that were not published in well-established journals, thereby avoiding publication

Figure 1

The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the review studies..



bias. Grey literature was explored by searching the following sources: Overton.io, the Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE), WorldCat, Library Hub Discover, IEEE, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Google Site. Search strategies varied in these databases to align with their indexing terms and functions. For example, the Google search was conducted using the site search operator, where the top-level domain for each of the six targeted countries was entered in front of the search keywords in Google. The search keywords were entered in English and the region's native language, Arabic, to improve the search results. According to Sandy (2015), the power of domains as filters shows considerable promise when used to capture quality scientific information from certain web areas. A snowball search was also conducted by manually searching the reference lists of all relevant papers to identify any possible additional papers.

2.3. Selection process

Selecting the review studies was a three-stage process. During the first stage, records were identified from electronic searches and decolonized searches by the researcher under the guidance of an experienced university librarian. A total of 31 records were obtained from electronic databases, while 994 citations were identified through decolonized searches. In the second stage, the citations' titles and abstracts were screened to identify relevant studies, and irrelevant studies were excluded. Of note, this stage was performed first in February and then repeated in March 2023 to avoid possible selection errors, as a single researcher conducted this review. After duplicate removal and screening of titles and abstracts, seven studies were retrieved for full-text document review, and only four were eligible for inclusion in the review. Three studies were excluded for different reasons. Alhaddad's (2014) study was excluded from the review because the methodology design did not fit the inclusion criteria, where the qualitative part was a document analysis of institutions' mission statements. Tennant et al.'s (2021) study was excluded because

it was irrelevant to the review, whereas Kirk's (2009) study was excluded because it targeted different participant groups, namely, student teachers. In the last stage of this process, the researcher retrieved the full-text of all potentially eligible studies, individually reviewed them, and finalized the manuscript. The figure below is the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram, which illustrates the search results and the selection process at different stages.

2.4. Data collection process

This systematic review included one qualitative study (Al-Harhi et al., 2022) and three mixed studies (Dickson et al., 2013; Hassan et al., 2010; Qadhi et al., 2020). As this is a qualitative systematic review, the focus was on qualitative components only in the mixed studies. A standardized data extraction form was created to capture all relevant data from the included studies, which comprised the following elements: (a) study characteristics, (b) participant characteristics, and (c) research questions. The study characteristics included the first author, year of publication, study design, data tools, population, sample size, and TEP design. Regarding participants' characteristics, beginning teachers' data were abstracted only because some studies (e.g., Al-Harhi et al., 2022) included other participants, such as school principals. Qualitative data that answered the review research questions were extracted, and the data extraction process was performed by the researcher only.

2.5. Synthesis methods

A narrative synthesis was implemented as it suits the review studies, where three out of four studies followed mixed-research methods. As Popay et al. (2006) elaborated, narrative synthesis is an approach to systematic review with a textual nature that synthesizes findings from multiple studies. Popay et al. (2006) guidelines shaped the narrative synthesis process in this research, which suggested undertaking four elements iteratively. These elements are: (a) developing a theoretical model describing the intervention, (b) developing a preliminary synthesis of the findings of the included studies, (c) exploring data relationships, and (d) assessing the robustness of the synthesis. Popay et al. (2006) provided guidance to two types of narrative synthesis, one regarding studies on the effects of interventions and the second for those looking into the implementation of interventions. This systematic review focuses on TEP implementation in the GCC region from novice teachers' perspectives; thus, the second type, implementation reviews, was followed.

As the synthesis did not follow a linear process, the starting point was developing a preliminary synthesis of the review studies, and this element aims to provide initial descriptions of the results of these studies. Two techniques were used: (a) tabulation to present descriptive data and (b) thematic analysis to present analytical data. Both techniques systematically facilitated data extraction processes from the review studies by including the same information in all studies. As Popay et al. (2006) recommended, for reviews focusing on implementation, it is necessary to extract detailed data regarding the intervention's

design, context, and factors or processes influencing the implementation with consideration to addressing the review question(s). However, only two review studies provided details about TEP design and structure. Thus, at this synthesis stage, which included reading and re-reading the selected studies, detailed data about the contexts, strengths and weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement were collected. Table 1 presents an overview of the characteristics of the included studies.

The next stage in the narrative synthesis explored the relationships between findings within and across the four included studies, moving beyond listing and tabulating results. According to Popay et al. (2006), the relationships of interest should highlight two main types: (a) those between study characteristics and their reported findings and (b) those among the findings of different studies. In this process, the themes from the preliminary synthesis were revised, modified, and refined by implementing two tools: concept mapping and reciprocal translation. As Mulrow et al. (1988, as cited in Popay et al., 2006) described, concept mapping involves connecting multiple pieces of evidence extracted from review studies to elaborate critical concepts and visually represent relationships. Noblit and Hare (1988) described the translation process as treating the studies as analogies, which facilitates the exploration of key concepts across review studies. Another key stage in synthesis was assessing the robustness of the synthesis using two techniques recommended by Popay et al. (2006). First, the best evidence synthesis (BES) approach was implemented by addressing the methodological quality and relevance of included studies using inclusion criteria and extracting data in a standard format from each study. Using the BES technique, decisions regarding study quality were made at an early stage of the review process, establishing a robust evidence foundation. The second technique involved critically reflecting on the synthesis process by providing a summary discussion section that addresses methodology limitations, sources of bias, and discrepancies, as recommended by Busse et al. (2002, as cited in Popay et al., 2006). The last stage in this narrative synthesis was the development of a theoretical model regarding effective TEP components, which Popay et al. (2006) referred to as the ToC. The ToC mainly focused on how an intervention works, why, and for whom, and is presented later in the Discussion section.

3. Results

The results of the narrative synthesis yielded a number of themes that were presented based on the two research questions. In response to the first research question, data regarding the GCC's beginning teachers' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their TEPs were explored to identify relationships, which is a fundamental element according to Popay et al. (2006) guidelines. Two themes revolved around the GCC's TEP strengths as reported by novice teachers: (a) a strong foundation in pedagogical knowledge (PK) and (b) impactful practicum courses. On the other hand, six themes around GCC's TEP weaknesses arose from the review studies: (a) theory–practice gap, (b) course quality challenges, (c) limited technological knowledge, (d) student diversity preparation gap, (e) poor work-related skills preparation, and (f) non-culturally responsive curricula. To answer the second research question about beginning teachers' recommendations for improving TEPs in the GCC countries, three

Table 1*Characteristics of the review studies.*

Author/ Country	Study's design	Data tools	Population/ sample size	Participants /teaching experiences	TEP's design	Key findings relevant to this review
Al-Harathi et al. (2022) Oman	Qualitative	Observations and semi-structured interviews.	Different stakeholders. 16 teachers, 16 supervisors, 16 school principals.	16 teachers. 5 years or less.	NS*	Strong pedagogical skills. Limited preparation in instructional technology usage and application. Some theoretical courses are irrelevant.
Qadhi et al. (2020) Qatar	Mixed methods	Questionnaire-based survey and semi-structured interviews.	Novice teachers. 95 survey respondents and 10 interviews.	10 teachers. Less than 4 years.	A four-year period of study to obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree. It includes 10-week-long internships in schools in the fourth year.	Knowledge of learning theories that form a conceptual understanding of teaching and learning. A gap between theories in the program and teaching practices in schools. Knowledge gaps regarding assessment.
Dickson et al. (2013) UAE	Mixed methods	Survey questionnaire and interviews	Novice teachers. 30 survey respondents and 13 interviews.	13 teachers. 1 year or less.	4 years Bachelor of Education. Courses on content and pedagogy of science, mathematics, and English subjects. Educational studies courses such as learning theories and classroom practices. Four practicum experiences throughout the program: 2-, 3-, 4-, and 10-week placements in primary schools.	Well-prepared in classroom organization, planning practical lessons, and knowledge of learning theories. Most learning theories are based on Western theories and ideologies. Low confidence in the area of differentiation and dealing with students with special needs. Suggestions for focusing on strategies for dealing with students' parents, team members, and conflict-resolution skills.
Hassan et al. (2010) UAE	Mixed methods	A survey with three parts: Parts 1-2: Likert scale Part 3: Open-ended questions.	Novice teachers. 84 teachers	84 teachers. 1–3 years	NS*	Strong content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Mismatching between textbooks and student teachers' levels and context. Suggestions for more focus on knowledge of how to integrate technology into the teaching subject area.

*NS=Not stated

themes emerged: (a) enhancing course quality, (b) bridging the school-program gap, and (c) building on work-related skills.

The first review question is: What are the reported views of beginning teachers in the GCC region regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their TEPs? The following section presents the themes that arose from the synthesis findings.

3.1. Solid foundation in some pedagogical knowledge (PK) components

The four review studies reported that beginning teachers felt well-prepared in some PK components, which, to novice teachers in Hassan et al. (2010) study, made them successful teachers. Beginning teachers named different PK elements in which they were confident, such as lesson planning (Al-Harthy et al., 2022; Dickson et al., 2013), classroom management and organization (Al-Harthy et al., 2022; Dickson et al., 2013; Qadhi et al., 2020), and teaching methods (Al-Harthy et al., 2022; Qadhi et al., 2020). One element of PK that revealed significant differences among novice teachers is assessment knowledge. Beginning teachers in the Al-Harthy et al. (2022) study perceived their assessment knowledge as a strength, whereas in the Qadhi et al. (2020) study, teachers highlighted knowledge gaps in assessment, which, according to other starting teachers (Hassan et al., 2010) study, required enhancement. Behavior management is another PK component that beginning teachers in two review studies (Dickson et al., 2013; Hassan et al., 2010) felt less confident about and shared the need for more preparation in such a vital area. It is important to highlight that some review studies, namely Al-Harthy et al. (2022), addressed beginning teachers' views regarding preparation in another knowledge type, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which they perceived as a TEP's strength. This perception is a development when looking at the suggestion from beginning teachers a decade earlier (Hassan et al., 2010), who emphasized the need for more preparation in content knowledge.

3.2. Impactful practicum courses

Another TEP aspect regarded as significant by GCC's beginning teachers was field experience. In two studies (Al-Harthy et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2010), teachers held positive views regarding practicums in school settings as they believe it can facilitate the transition into the teaching profession. Starting teachers in another study (Dickson et al., 2013) indicated that teaching practice experiences helped them build their behavior management skills and knowledge the most. Although field experiences were considered a strength area in the investigated preparation programs, there is still room for improvement according to the beginning teachers in two studies (Al-Harthy et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2010). They suggested the following: (a) increasing preservice teachers' teaching load, (b) providing a safe environment in schools for trainee teachers, and (c) enhancing professional support by involving experienced mentors from the Ministry of Education.

3.3. Theory-practice gap

Although beginning teachers in two review studies (Dickson et al., 2013; Qadhi et al., 2020) indicated that their TEPs equipped them with rich theoretical knowledge about teaching and learning, a theory–practice gap was reported. Novice teachers in the Qadhi et al.'s (2020) study indicated some gaps between learning theories and teaching practices in schools, which was aligned with the Al-Harthi et al. (2022) study, where teachers described some theoretical courses as irrelevant when starting their teaching careers.

3.4. Course quality challenges

Across the four review studies, GCC's beginning teachers identified different factors that negatively impact TEP's course quality. For instance, in the Hassan et al. (2010) study, teachers reported experiencing a lack of valuable materials and resources and dealing with inexperienced instructors in some courses. Some starting teachers (Dickson et al., 2013) showed dissatisfaction regarding conducting a research project during their internship as they described it as a distraction that influenced their teaching. Other starting teachers (Al-Harthi et al., 2022) pointed out the issue of limited and repetitive elective courses that TEP candidates were required to complete as part of their degree requirements. Additionally, the teachers in this study (Al-Harthi et al., 2022) stated that the content of their TEP courses was more advanced than the schools' curricula, which they considered a weakness. It is essential to mention that these teachers were enrolled in a TEP designed to prepare cycle-two teachers; however, after graduation, they were placed in teaching positions in cycle one, which might justify their negative experiences. This finding was not a rare incident, as a similar experience was shared by starting teachers in the Dickson et al. (2013) study who felt ill-prepared to teach kindergarten students as their TEP prepared them to teach in cycle one. Although beginning teachers consider it a flaw in their TEPs, it is fair to bring those in charge of recruiting teachers, under the spotlight as they cause such a dilemma.

3.5. Limited technological knowledge

The data from the review studies indicated that beginning teachers considered technological knowledge preparation a weakness of TEP. For instance, starting teachers in the Al-Harthi et al. (2022) study described their preparation in instructional technology usage and application as limited, which is consistent with what beginning teachers in the earlier study (Hassan et al., 2010) put much emphasis on the need for more focus on knowledge of integrating technology into teaching subject area.

3.6. The student diversity preparation gap

The data indicated that most novice teachers expressed a knowledge gap in addressing student diversity in classrooms, mainly in dealing with students with different learning levels and integrating students with special needs. This gap was linked to the superficial focus on differentiation techniques within some

GCC's TEPs, as reported by Qadhi et al. (2020), which resulted in low confidence among teachers in the differentiation area and dealing with students with special needs, as in Dickson et al. (2013). Other beginning teachers did not share this view (Hassan et al., 2010), who mentioned being well-prepared to teach students with special needs and confident in dealing with students with different learning levels. However, there was a suggestion from the beginning teachers in the same study for more opportunities within their TEP to learn about identifying diverse students, which might seem contradictory unless considering the study sample size ($n = 84$).

3.7. Poor work-related skills preparation

A recurring theme in the review studies was poor preparation for work-related skills. For example, beginning teachers in two review studies (Hassan et al., 2010; Qadhi et al., 2020) felt that their courses gave shallow attention to developing essential skills in dealing with parents and colleagues and in how to respond to problems in real-life situations, which resulted in insecurity in handling such situations. Thus, it was not surprising when starting teachers in Dickson et al. (2013), Hassan et al. (2010), and Qadhi et al. (2020) studies suggested that TEPs should focus on developing communication, teamwork, and conflict-resolution skills. Additionally, the data revealed that most investigated TEPs miss continuous learning in response to work-related challenges and have a limited impact on graduates' professional development.

3.8. Non-culturally responsive curricula

A critical issue shared by the novice teachers regarding the investigated TEPs was the irrelevant content in some courses to GCC's culture and context. Of note, this issue was found only in two review studies (Dickson et al., 2013; Hassan et al., 2010) and was pointed out by a small number of participant teachers. For example, a beginning teacher highlighted that all learning theories in the TEP courses were based on Western contexts and ideologies, whereas another indicated that course materials and resources were irrelevant to their local context. However, such views must be considered as it is a lasting issue in some GCC countries where there is a reliance on importing Western curricula not only into TEPs or other majors and programs in HEIs but also in P-12 settings.

The second research question is: What are the reported suggestions of beginning teachers in the GCC region for enhancing TEP implementation? This section presents the main themes.

3.9. Enhancing course quality

Novice teachers in this systematic review provided some recommendations that can enhance course quality. For example, participant teachers in Al-Harthi et al. (2022) and Dickson et al. (2013) studies suggested updating some TEP courses to become more authentic and relevant and shifting the focus on depth over breadth. Other starting teachers (Dickson et al., 2013; Hassan et al., 2010) recommended more preparation in content knowledge, assessment skills, and classroom management strategies.

3.10. Bridging the school – program gap

One recommendation by GCC's beginning teachers found in two studies (Al-Harthi et al., 2022; Qadhi et al., 2020) was to bridge the gap between schools and TEPs by connecting course content to the realities of schools. Novice teachers mentioned how such differences influence their experiences, especially at the start of their teaching journeys. Starting teachers believe that their transition from TEP to classrooms can be smoother when aligning TEPs with the realities and needs of schools.

3.11. Building work-related skills

A recurring recommendation in three review studies (Al-Harthi et al., 2022; Dickson et al., 2013; Qadhi et al., 2020) was developing some work-related skills that beginning teachers felt their preparation programs had neglected, which was a challenge. These skills included problem-solving, communication with student guardians, teamwork, and conflict-resolution. Novice teachers in this review suggested embedding these skills within TEPs courses to ensure prospective teachers are given sufficient opportunities to build skills that can support them in their future teaching positions.

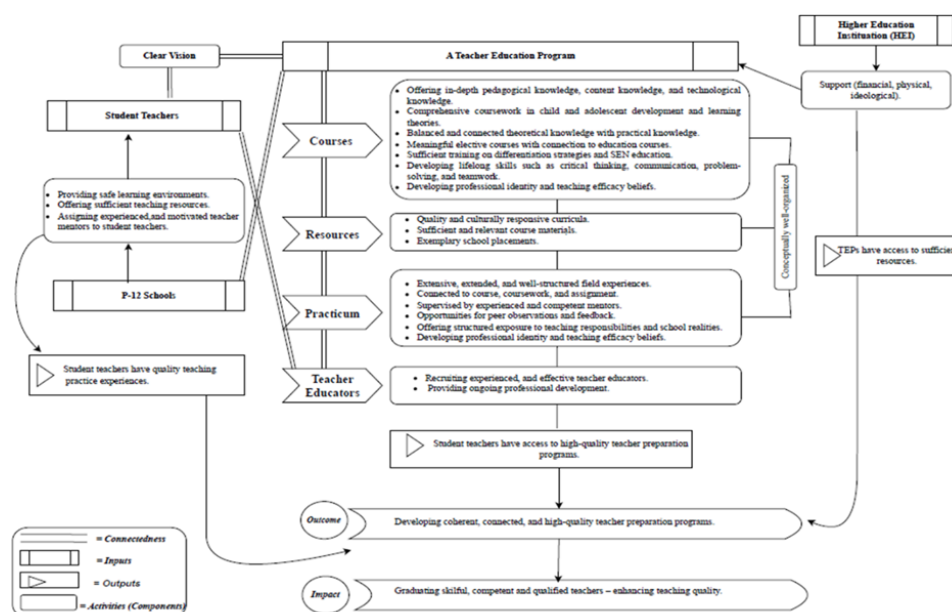
4. Discussion

This review examined current evidence regarding beginning teachers' perceptions of their TEPs in the Arabian Gulf countries. The first review question aimed to identify TEP strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of novice teachers, while the second review question focused on their recommendations to improve TEPs in the GCC region. The four review studies separately concluded that beginning teachers' overall views regarding their TEPs were positive. However, the narrative synthesis of the collected data in this systematic review showed that perceived TEP weaknesses outweigh perceived strengths by beginning teachers, which challenged the conclusion reached by the individual review studies. The findings indicated two main strengths: (a) a solid foundation in PK and (b) impactful practicum courses. Of note, some novice teachers voiced gaps in behavior management and assessment knowledge within these two strengths. The findings showed six weaknesses in the investigated TEPs, such as the theory–practice gap, non-culturally responsive curricula, and student diversity preparation gap, to name three. Therefore, the starting teachers in this review provided recommendations to avoid these weaknesses, such as enhancing course quality, bridging the program–school gap, and building on work-related skills.

A line of literature has explored effective components in TEPs from multiple aspects and in different contexts; however, these publications stand alone, and to the best of my knowledge, they have not been combined to offer a possible reference to advance teacher education implementation. Therefore, drawing upon the findings of this systematic review, broader literature, and professional experiences, a model of essential components for effective TEP implementation based on the ToC is proposed. The ToC is a sequence of causal steps and can be shared as a graphical/visual illustration that shows how a program

Figure 2

Theory of change: Effective teacher education programs components..



works by specifying pathways, assumptions, and relationships between program components (Romão et al., 2023; Tranfield et al., 2003). I perceive the model in Figure 2 as a living document that can be updated on the basis of future empirical evidence. The proposed ToC model does not involve structural features because of the belief in the complexity and diversity of TEPs; instead, it presents essential elements that can guide the design and evaluation of TEPs.

The findings revealed that novice teachers in this systematic review ($n = 123$) experienced different levels of preparation in three of the knowledge domains mentioned in Shulman's (1986) conceptual framework: (a) PK, (b) content knowledge, and (c) learner characteristics knowledge. Beginning teachers from the GCC region were generally satisfied with the PK preparation in their TEPs, except for two components – assessment and behavior management – which is a ubiquitous concern when examining the wider literature. Content knowledge is another domain highlighted in this review, in which some novice teachers found their preparation strong while others felt the need for more profound preparation. In the last knowledge domain in Shulman's framework, learner characteristics knowledge, the GCC's starting teachers shared that their TEPs did not provide adequate knowledge and skills to deal with students' differences, mainly students with special needs. This result from the GCC's context is in line with studies conducted in other areas globally, such as the United States (Shank & Santiago, 2022), Estonia (Mikser et al., 2021), and Turkey (Eret-Orhan et al., 2018), as their findings showed that novice teachers were challenged in addressing students' differences and felt underprepared in such an essential area. The review findings shed light on another knowledge domain, not part of Shulman's framework, namely technological knowledge. According to the beginning teachers, their TEPs could have prepared them better to integrate technological tools into teaching subject areas, which required future enhancements.

In the ToC model, offering the four knowledge domains in-depth is integral to ensuring effective teacher preparation programs.

The review findings indicated that some novice teachers in the GCC countries consider aspects of their teacher preparation programs irrelevant to their cultural and social contexts. For instance, beginning teachers criticized their TEP curricula, content, and resources for heavily relying on Western ideologies and theories. Such a finding unequivocally demonstrates the profound influence of neocolonialism in shaping teacher preparation programs in the Arabian Gulf countries. As discussed earlier in this paper, such influence is mainly driven by the GCC's education colleges' ambition for international accreditation or pressure from IGOs, which, according to Romanowski (2022) and Anwaruddin (2014), are neo-colonial tools that come with serious consequences. An implication of Western integration in the GCC's TEPs is that it threatens not only the local culture but also the "indigenous intellect and epistemic formations" (Romanowski, 2022, p. 201). In such educational systems, opportunities to develop local paradigms, theories, and practices are weakened by a dependency on importing and consuming knowledge rather than developing knowledge. Therefore, there is a compelling necessity to decolonize TEPs in the Arabian Gulf countries from external influence by developing culturally and socially responsive ones. Decolonizing TEPs recognizes local knowledge, language, and values after decades of neglect and can challenge Western-centric narratives and understandings of teacher education. The proposed ToC in this systematic review considers offering culturally responsive curricula and relevant resources as key components for effective teacher preparation programs.

An important finding from this systematic review is the poor connectedness among some TEP components, which was reflected in the GCC's beginning teachers' views by pointing out a theory–practice gap, school-program gap, irrelevant elective courses, and others. The issue of poor connectedness among TEP components is not limited to the GCC region; however, it is prevalent in other areas and is a common concern among teacher education researchers. For instance, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) examined various TEPs in the United States and identified conceptual and structural fragmentation due to lack of connectivity in TEPs as a common theme in teacher education studies. The significance of connecting TEP elements is documented in the literature, as mentioned earlier in this paper (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008), where connectivity between courses, practicum, theories, and other components is a fundamental characteristic of effective TEPs. When TEP elements are not connected efficiently, the program's quality and ability to prepare qualified teachers are reduced. Therefore, in the proposed ToC, connectedness is a central feature for effective teacher preparation programs, and it should appear across and beyond TEP components. For example, not only do courses, resources, and practicums need to be interwoven but also meaningful connections between teacher educators and student teachers, as well as between TEPs and P-12 schools.

This is the first systematic review to examine novice teachers' perceptions of their TEPs in GCC countries, which are not free of limitations. Although the review used a rigorous methodology, I must acknowledge the methodological limitations. All included studies were conducted in three GCC countries, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE, as no eligible studies were found in the other three GCC countries, Bahrain,

Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia; therefore, it cannot be assumed that conclusions drawn from this review can be generalized. The review findings are drawn from a small sample of beginning teachers ($n = 123$) from four education colleges in three Arabian Gulf countries; thus, I acknowledge the need for a larger sample to validate these findings. In addition, this systematic review is conducted solely by one researcher, which might introduce some bias and subjectivity mainly to the study selection process and data analysis due to the lack of multiple reviewers to cross-validate decisions in each stage. However, measures were taken to minimize possible bias and enhance objectivity by applying a transparent approach and maintaining detailed study selection and data analysis documentation.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this systematic review and narrative synthesis provide insights into novice teachers' perceptions regarding their teacher preparation programs in the GCC countries, where perceived weaknesses outweigh perceived strengths, indicating the need for improvements. Some recommendations were presented as highlighted by beginning teachers to enhance the implementation of TEPs in the Arabian Gulf. This study emphasizes the consideration of various components when designing, implementing, and evaluating TEPs, not only in GCC countries but anywhere in the world. The proposed ToC introduces these components that can ensure the provision of effective teacher preparation programs. These findings have significant implications for policy, practice, and research in the teacher education arena. Policymakers, institutions, and practitioners must consider the presence of such weaknesses by conducting comprehensive evaluations of TEPs involving all stakeholders, including TEP graduates. In addition, they can build robust assurance mechanisms that align with the components addressed in the proposed ToC model, which can further enhance the quality of TEPs. Future research can examine and scrutinize the proposed ToC of effective teacher education program components not only in the Arabian Gulf region but everywhere else. There is a need for further research that examines novice teachers' views of their TEPs in the GCC and targets more significant samples.

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Competing Interests

The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

Author Biography

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