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The velvet cage of reform: neoliberal discourses in Qatari education policy

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This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how neoliberal rationalities are constructed and disseminated through Qatari education policy discourse. Drawing on a corpus of policy documents published between 2005 and 2025, the analysis identifies dominant themes of marketization, accountability, and global benchmarking. These discourses frame education primarily as an instrument of economic development, downplaying issues related to equity, inclusion, and alternative epistemologies. Evidence points to a hybrid policy logic: Qatari reforms simultaneously align with global neoliberal trends while selectively integrating national cultural references to secure public legitimacy. Anchored in the strategic goals of Qatar National Vision 2030, these reforms prioritize internationalization, performance-based governance, and labor market labor market responsiveness. However, the extent to which such reforms are shaped by neoliberal rationalities remains under-examined. This study critically interrogates how language constructs reform narratives, positions stakeholders, and legitimizes market-oriented governance. Findings reveal the dominance of technocratic discourses that privilege efficiency, standardization, and performativity, at the expense of educational justice and democratic participation. The analysis also exposes discursive tensions between global competitiveness and national identity, raising questions about the localization of transnational policy scripts in Qatar and the broader Gulf context. By foregrounding the ideological work of discourse, this study contributes to critical policy sociology and the global education reform literature, illuminating how neoliberalism operates not only through policy content but through the linguistic and epistemic structures that sustain it.

KEYWORDS

neoliberalism, education policy, education reform, critical discourse analysis, Qatar

Introduction

In the past few decades neoliberal policies in education have been widely implemented and have experienced significant growth globally (De Saxe et al., 2020; Dolan, 2021). These policies, which are based on market principles, competition, quantitative metrics, and performance measures, have resulted in distinct changes in educational systems across various countries. Qatar, a petrostate located in the Persian Gulf, is one of the countries exemplifying this trend. As a result of the discovery of oil and later natural gas in the 1940s and 1970s, Qatar's population grew exponentially, leading to social, political, and environmental changes in the country. This context of rapid socioeconomic transformation has also shaped Qatar's international relationships (Al-Thani, 2024). Indeed, Qatar's recent economic prosperity, largely attributed to its natural resources, has prompted its former imperial power to seek a partnership with the oil-rich nation.

In Qatar, education reform has become central to the nation's long-term development strategy, indicating a broader regional trend of striving for global competitiveness and the transition to a knowledge-based economy, as is outlined in the country's National Vision 2030 (QNV 2030). Over the past two decades, Qatar has launched ambitious educational reforms, such as the creation of Education City, the introduction of international curricula, and the implementation of large-scale performance assessments, all aimed at recalibrating its education system in accordance with global standards. These reforms are reflected in national policy documents like the QNV 2030 and the Education and Training Sector Strategy 2017–2022, which prioritize excellence, efficiency, and the development of human capital (Hazaimah et al., 2023).

Before the reform initiatives of the early 2000s, Qatar's education system was guided by developmentalist and welfare-state rationalities. Education was framed as a public right and state responsibility, with the Ministry of Education exercising centralized authority over curricula, teacher assignments, and school governance (MoEHE, 2017). Qatar's reform trajectory must also be situated within the broader social, cultural, and political values that underpin the modern Qatari state. Central to this framework is the preservation of Islamic principles such as community solidarity, social justice, and care for the marginalized, alongside the promotion of Arabic language and heritage as markers of national identity. These values are embedded in Qatar's self-conception as both a custodian of Islamic tradition and an assertive geopolitical actor seeking recognition on the global stage. Within this matrix, education is positioned not merely as a developmental tool but as a site where competing imperatives converge: the aspiration to project cultural authenticity and communal responsibility, and the strategic drive to align with global neoliberal benchmarks of efficiency, competitiveness, and innovation. This duality generates enduring tensions in policy discourse, as reform efforts attempt to reconcile the social obligations of an Islamic welfare state with the exigencies of a market-oriented, globally integrated economy.

These reforms reflect the broader neoliberal turn in education, centered on marketization, accountability, and benchmarking. In Qatar, equity-oriented rhetoric is woven into reform discourse to legitimize market-oriented governance, illustrating how global neoliberal logics are localized in distinctive ways, as seen in policy texts such as the *Education and Training Sector Strategy 2017–2022*. Here, reforms unfold at the intersection of globalization, economic restructuring, and cultural preservation, where state-led modernization initiatives advance alongside strong national identity narratives. The reform landscape therefore embodies hybridity: while economic efficiency and market logics dominate policy mechanisms, they are framed through symbolic appeals to equity and cultural heritage, producing a reform narrative that both reflects broader global neoliberal tendencies and remains embedded in Qatar's distinctive sociocultural and political context.

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how neoliberal ideologies are embedded in Qatar's education policy discourse. It examines how language shapes, legitimizes, and circulates specific visions of education focusing on how policy language defines educational issues, justifies reform agendas, and positions students, teachers, institutions, and policymakers within a market-driven paradigm centered around productivity, competition, and measurable outcomes. By analyzing these discourses, the study reveals how

concepts such as “quality,” “accountability,” and “innovation” are deployed to adapt local policy to global neoliberal principles that emphasize human capital development, performativity, and the economization of education (Sardoč, 2021; Madsen, 2022). The study also investigates how Qatar's education policies reflect global governance mechanisms while adapting to the sociopolitical context of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In doing so, it seeks to uncover the ideological foundations of policy discourse and its role in advancing a neoliberal reform agenda in Qatar's education sector.

This research contributes to the literature on policy translation and the globalization of education reform, particularly within non-Western contexts such as the GCC. It challenges the assumption that global education models can be universally applied, instead highlighting the discursive tensions between global neoliberal ideologies and national aspirations. The findings of this study will offer important insights into how global education discourses are adapted to the Qatari context, how reform efforts are presented as credible and necessary, and what these shifts imply for fairness, teacher roles, and the core goals of education. By examining these interactions, the study highlights the challenges involved in education reform in the Gulf region and provides a critical view of how neoliberal ideas take shape within a non-Western educational setting. Preliminary analysis reveals that, despite repeated references to Islamic values and Arabic heritage in strategic documents, operational definitions of quality remain tied to STEM proficiency targets, global rankings, and international accreditation systems. This structural emphasis suggests that cultural commitments are often symbolic rather than substantive in shaping educational practice.

Literature review

Scholars describe have documented a “post-welfare era,” where the imperatives of productivity and efficiency supersede the civic, cultural, and democratic purposes historically associated with public education. For instance, Dadvand (2024) situates the global transformation of education within the structural erosion of its public and democratic mandate, linking it to the retrenchment of welfare-state commitments and the ascendancy of neoliberal policy frameworks. Similarly, Goudarzi et al. (2022) emphasize how equity-oriented rhetoric can normalize market logics market logics, while Goodley and Perryman (2022) and McCarthy et al. (2025) highlight the growing dominance of standardized assessments and accountability mechanisms that reconfigure institutional priorities. Collectively, this reorientation signifies a deeper redefinition of education's social contract, one that sidelines broader goals of social justice, inclusivity, and cultural enrichment (Kayyali, 2024). This shift reflects a broader neoliberal reconfiguration of the role of the state, marked by a steady erosion of its responsibility to promote social equity and uphold education as a fundamental right (Bosio and Olszen, 2023). Education is now largely conceptualized as a vehicle for human capital development, oriented toward meeting labor market demands and advancing national economic agendas, rather than being sustained as a public good (Wolhuter and Niemczyk, 2023). Critics have drawn attention to the marginalization of the civic and social purposes of education under this policy model (Baltodano, 2023). In response, there is a growing call to reassert its role in fostering democratic values, critical thinking, and social cohesion,

challenging the dominance of neoliberal discourse in educational policy and practice.

Building on this global critique, it is important to examine how schools operate as sites of public governance and as spaces where political ideologies, economic imperatives, and social norms converge and take institutional form. In Qatar, education reform has been situated within broader national visions of modernization and development, presenting education as both a catalyst and emblem of progress. This study explores how neoliberal logics are embedded within the discursive construction of education policy in Qatar, particularly through the language used in official reports and strategic frameworks. These texts legitimize reform agendas by reconciling market-oriented principles with national development goals. By interrogating the language of reform, this study seeks to uncover how global neoliberal discourses are not merely adopted but are selectively localized, recontextualized, and often obscured by a rhetoric of excellence, equity, and innovation.

Governments exercise power not simply through traditional and/or sovereign means but also via covert and less overt strategies that cultivate “self-governing subjects” (Foucault, 1991). This reorientation marks a departure from hierarchical modes of control toward dispersed forms of governance, where individuals and institutions are incentivized to internalize and enact dominant norms without direct coercion (Foucault, 1977). Drawing on Foucauldian notions of governmentality, this realignment reflects a broader transformation in the logic of power: control is no longer exercised solely from above but is diffused through regulatory mechanisms that render compliance appear as self-directed action (Dean, 2010). Education systems, in particular, have become central sites for reinforcing these rationalities, where actors, teachers, students, and administrators, are expected to conform to reform discourses while believing they are exercising autonomy.

Scholars contend that an expanding array of academic and institutional activities is now governed by predetermined, standardized procedures and practices designed to generate measurable outcomes. This shift toward administrative control has become firmly embedded in the structural organization and social understandings of education systems worldwide, altering the ways in which knowledge is created, pedagogies are designed, and success is evaluated (Wilkins and Gobby, 2022). The increasing emphasis on efficiency and outputs has led to a technocratic culture in education, privileging data-driven decision-making, performance benchmarks, and institutional rankings. Educational institutions are thus expected to emulate private sector models, creating business-like environments shaped by competition, performance monitoring, and market-like systems (Tholen, 2022). This transition reflects a neoliberal logic that emphasizes cost-effectiveness, market reasoning, and continuous performance assessment, at the expense of holistic or socially grounded educational aims (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

As De Saxe et al. (2020) emphasize, policies promoting privatization, instrumentalist (technical) approaches to teaching, and narrow definitions of “equity” and “social justice” reduce the profession of teaching to routine tasks that are disconnected from broader educational and social contexts. In the Qatari corpus, these patterns appear not only in broad reform narratives but in specific policy mechanisms such as competency-based licensing and AI integration targets, which narrow pedagogical scope while symbolically retaining references to Arabic and Islamic values. Under the guise of reform, such policies reframe complex educational processes into standardized

routines, resulting in the marginalization of teacher agency, critical inquiry, and culturally responsive practices. Their analysis highlights the need to scrutinize the discursive constructions (i.e., language and representations) within policy structures, which mask ideological agendas behind a veneer of progressive rhetoric or inclusive narratives (Wilce, 2022). Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for examining how educational realities are transformed, as well as for acknowledging the role of educators in challenging dominant practices and envisioning alternative approaches rooted in justice, care, and collective responsibility.

Neoliberalism and education policy

Neoliberalism is widely understood as a governing rationality that extends market-oriented competition, deregulation, and individual responsibility into domains traditionally organized through collective provision and state-led governance (Brown, 2015; Byrne, 2017). In education, this has typically meant reconfiguring schooling around human capital returns, auditability, and market-style competition, with curricula standardized and institutions held accountable through quantifiable performance metrics (Verger et al., 2016; Sahlberg, 2021). This trend resonates with Olssen and Peters’ (2005) argument that neoliberalism repositions higher education as a key driver of knowledge capitalism, subordinating broader civic aims to market imperatives.

Within the Gulf, neoliberalism has not simply replaced older policy paradigms but has been layered onto state-led modernization projects. In Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, global benchmarks, and international accreditation are integrated with national narratives of cultural preservation and heritage (McKellar, 2020; Sellami et al., 2022). This results in hybrid policy environments in which neoliberal governance instruments coexist with strong central oversight and symbolic appeals to Arabic language and Islamic values. Such arrangements exemplify what Ibrahim and Barnawi (2022) call “glocalized governance,” where international scripts are selectively recalibrated to reinforce national identity and political legitimacy. Mihr (2022) similarly conceptualizes this as ‘glocal governance,’ highlighting how global policy models are domesticated within national contexts to balance external legitimacy and internal political imperatives.

In Qatar specifically, initiatives like the Education and Training Sector Strategy 2017–2022 and the broader Qatar National Vision 2030 embed global templates of accountability and performance measurement within state-controlled structures. Here, neoliberal policy logics are not only adopted but domesticated within a broader project of economic diversification and nation-building. This hybridization complicates simple models of policy transfer, illustrating how global neoliberal reforms acquire distinctive forms in non-Western settings shaped by unique political economies and cultural frameworks.

Neoliberal discourses in education policy

Education policy discourse plays a key role in constructing, legitimizing, and circulating reform rationalities. As Fairclough (1995) argues, policy texts do not merely describe existing conditions but

actively shape social reality by defining problems and favoring certain solutions over others. In the neoliberal context, three dominant discursive currents have gained prominence. First, education is increasingly conceptualized through the language of marketization and efficiency, positioning it as a commodified good subject to competition and choice (Ball, 2012; Verger et al., 2016). Second, there is an intensified focus on accountability and performance metrics, with tools such as PISA and TIMSS used to evaluate educational quality. These assessments prioritize standardization and numerical outputs over local relevance and context-sensitive measures (Loeb and Byun, 2022; Sellar, 2018). Third, the discourse of entrepreneurialism and self-optimization portrays teachers and students as autonomous, self-regulating agents responsible for managing their own success. This representation conceals structural inequalities by relocating the burden of achievement onto individuals, reinforcing a discourse of competition, adaptability, and self-discipline (Davies and Bansel, 2007; Sellar and Lingard, 2017).

In Qatar, these discursive strands are evident in policy narratives entrenched within national strategies such as QNV 2030 and successive education reform initiatives. The dominant narrative emphasizes the development of human capital, conformity with international standards, and the cultivation of a globally competitive workforce. However, these discourses marginalize socio-cultural dimensions of learning and veil structural inequalities, raising questions about whose interests are being served and how educational success is defined (Morley, 2020). While Qatar's education reforms have adopted global performance indicators, they also respond to national priorities aimed at preserving cultural identity, promoting Arabic language instruction, and reinforcing Islamic values. This produces a discursive incongruity in which neoliberal and culturalist ideologies are interwoven, generating ideologically hybrid policy texts. Such hybridity invites careful interrogation of how global discourses are localized, contested, or reinterpreted within specific political and cultural contexts (Maringe, 2023).

Education reform in Qatar: policy priorities and global influence

Qatar's education reform trajectory has been driven by the strategic ambition to transition toward a knowledge-based economy and enhance the country's position in global competitiveness indices. In pursuit of these objectives, the State has engaged extensively with international partners, adopted global policy models, and relied on external consultancy expertise. The extensive engagement of the RAND Corporation in shaping the reform agenda exemplifies the influential role of global actors in determining national education priorities (Brewer et al., 2007; Stasz et al., 2007). Grounded in OECD-style "best practices," RAND's recommendations promoted decentralization, curriculum standardization, and performance benchmarking, reconfiguring governance structures and redefining the role of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2025).

Central to these reforms was the standardization of curriculum models, particularly with a heightened focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines to enhance Qatar's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. In addition, performance-based governance models, inspired by Western education systems, have been introduced, alongside the deployment

of international assessments to benchmark Qatar's performance within global rankings and comparative education systems. While these reform efforts demonstrate Qatar's ambition to modernize the education sector and align it with global standards, they simultaneously generate tensions with local cultural values and traditions. Policy narratives seek to reconcile the drive for modernization with the need to safeguard national identity, resulting in ideological clashes and discursive inconsistencies that complicate the expression and formulation of policy objectives (Michaleczek and Sellami, 2025). The coexistence of externally imposed metrics of accountability with internal priorities, including the promotion of Arabic, Islamic education, and national identity illustrates a hybrid reform model that operates as both a legitimacy strategy and a negotiation mechanism in the localization of transnational policy scripts.

This interplay shows importance of examining how neoliberal principles are not merely transferred wholesale but are domesticated, negotiated, and, at times, resisted within specific socio-political and cultural contexts. Such policy orientations raise critical questions about their consequences for the communities they serve: Do performance-based funding models inadvertently disadvantage schools serving lower-income populations? Do standardized benchmarks align with local cultural and pedagogical priorities? Addressing these questions is essential for assessing the ethical and distributive dimensions of education reform.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Critical Theory (CT) and employs CDA to examine how education policy discourse in Qatar constructs problems, legitimizes reforms, and positions actors within broader neoliberal rationalities. CDA treats language as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations (Fairclough, 2003). In this sense, policy texts are not neutral records of decisions but discursive interventions that frame the purposes of education and delineate legitimate actors, values, and practices. From a governmentality lens, dispersed regulation cultivates self-governing subjects within performance systems, highlighting how neoliberal reforms embed surveillance and accountability in ostensibly routine pedagogic and administrative practices.

Negotiating Foucault and Habermas: tensions and justifications

While Habermas and Foucault diverge in their ontological and epistemological positions, this study draws on each in a complementary and deliberately dialogic manner. Habermas's theory of communicative rationality offers a normative lens to interrogate how policy discourse constructs consensus, stability, and legitimacy around reform objectives, assuming that communicative processes can align collective will. In contrast, Foucault's notion of governmentality foregrounds the dissonances, tensions, and disjunctures inherent in governance, where diverse rationalities may operate simultaneously or divergently in pursuit of a common *raison d'état*, and is used to expose how neoliberal rationalities operate

through discourse, producing self-regulating subjects and asymmetrical power relations. Habermas's framework of communicative rationality further highlights the normative deficits that emerge when education is reduced to instrumental reasoning, allowing us to critique the erosion of democratic values and civic purposes.

Recognizing this divergence, the combined use of both perspectives enables the analysis to capture how Qatari education reform discourse simultaneously projects an image of coherent national vision while revealing underlying contradictions, contestations, and hybridities in its alignment with global neoliberal and local cultural imperatives. Rather than seeking to reconcile these divergent positions, the analysis juxtaposes them to illuminate both the dissonances within Qatari reform discourse and the normative consequences of framing education primarily through market logics. This methodological tension is therefore not a weakness but a deliberate strategy to capture how policy discourse simultaneously projects consensus while embedding structural constraints.

CT, particularly in the tradition of Habermas (1989, 2006), offers a conceptual foundation for understanding how discourse structures the public sphere and reinforces hegemonic social orders. Habermas's emphasis on language as constitutive of social coordination informs the current study's approach to policy texts as vehicles through which ideological consensus is produced and educational reforms are framed. In this context, education is portrayed as an instrument of economic development at the expense of its civic and public dimensions. CDA complements this theoretical orientation by providing a methodological framework to analyze how policy discourse justifies neoliberal principles, including marketization, accountability, and global metrics, under the banner of modernization and national progress. It enables a critical interrogation of how certain reform agendas are naturalized, while alternative educational imaginaries are marginalized. This study adopts a multi-perspectival CDA approach.

Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model guides the analysis across three levels: the textual features of policy discourse, the discursive practices of production and consumption, and the broader socio-political structures in which these texts are embedded. This framework allows for a systematic connection between micro-level linguistic strategies and macro-level ideological formations. Wodak's (1999) discourse-historical method further informs the analysis by situating education policy discourse within Qatar's specific political, institutional, and cultural trajectories. This enables a contextualized analysis of how global reform models are selectively domesticated (adapted) or disputed, resulting in hybrid policy texts that intertwine neoliberal ideals with references to national identity, Islamic values, and cultural heritage.

Together, these approaches support a multi-tiered and context-sensitive analysis of how language functions ideologically in Qatari education reform. The study demonstrates how official policy texts construct education as a driver of economic transformation, mainly through vocabularies of "quality," "innovation," and "global competitiveness," while omitting or marginalizing commitments to equity, inclusion, and educational justice. In so doing, it reveals how neoliberal principles are woven into policy content and the discursive structures through which reform agendas are articulated and sanctioned.

Research problem, objectives, and questions

This study examines how Qatar's national education reform initiatives construct dominant policy narratives surrounding the quality of education through its official discourse. Drawing on the tools of CDA (Fairclough, 2003, 2013; Wodak and Meyer, 2015), the study interrogates how policy documents formulate and disseminate specific visions of educational reform, justify interventions, and embed neoliberal rationalities, including marketization, accountability, and international benchmarking. These discursive constructions are not ideologically neutral; rather, they function as mechanisms through which broader global education reform trends are selectively adopted and recontextualized to align with Qatar's national priorities. In doing so, the study highlights how policy discourse operates as a site where transnational policy logics intersect with domestic sociopolitical imperatives, indicating complex entanglements of global neoliberalism and state-led modernization efforts in the Gulf context.

By examining the intersection between language, ideology, and educational governance in Qatar, the study offers insight into how education policy operates as an instrument of governance within the broader project of state modernization. Drawing on CDA as both a methodological and theoretical lens, the study investigates how relations of power and ideology are instantiated in policy language that is often presented as neutral, objective, and apolitical. According to Fairclough (2003), discourse is not simply descriptive but constitutive of social practices and institutional realities, particularly in governance domains such as education.

The present research addresses an important gap in the literature by demonstrating how Qatari education policy operates as a discursive site where global reform models, such as market-driven governance, performance accountability, and global performance standards, are domesticated, adapted, and negotiated in line with national development priorities. In doing so, it contributes to wider scholarly debates on the globalization of education policy and the discursive construction of educational futures in non-Western contexts.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To contextualize Qatar's education reform agenda within the broader evolution of its national development strategy, including its efforts to transition to a knowledge-based economy.
2. To analyze key education policy documents in order to uncover the underlying assumptions, values, and ideological positions embedded in Qatar's official reform discourse.
3. To examine how the concept of *educational quality* is discursively constructed and how it reflects global neoliberal considerations alongside Qatar's local political, cultural, and religious priorities, including those related to national identity and Islamic values.

This research is guided by the following questions:

1. What discursive strategies are employed in Qatar's national policy and planning documents to construct and legitimize neoliberal rationalities in education, particularly through

themes of marketization, performance accountability, and international benchmarking?

2. How do these intersecting discourses (across Qatar's education-specific and broader national development texts) negotiate the tensions between global reform models and the preservation of Islamic values and Arabic-language education, and what does this reveal about the operational limits of cultural hybridity in a neoliberal policy framework?
3. How are key educational actors in Qatar, particularly teachers, students, and policymakers, positioned within these reform narratives, and what do these representations reveal about the technocratic logics and governance rationalities embedded in the wider policy discourse?

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interrogate how neoliberal rationalities are constructed, circulated, and normalized within Qatari education policy discourse. CDA provides a powerful theoretical and methodological lens through which language is understood not merely as a tool for communication but as a constitutive force in shaping social realities, power structures, and ideological formations (Fairclough, 1995, 2003, 2013; Wodak, 1999; Wodak and Meyer, 2015). Within this framework, discourse is treated as both a product and a practice, at once reflecting and constructing dominant social orders.

Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the discursive construction of reform in official policy documents, paying particular attention to how neoliberal premises, such as market-oriented governance, performativity, and global performance metrics, are discursively produced and legitimized in the Qatari context. Methodologically, the study draws on CDA in the traditions of Fairclough and Wodak, which align with Foucauldian understandings of discourse and power. At the same time, Habermas's concepts, including the colonization of the lifeworld, are engaged not as methodological tools but as normative points of contrast, illuminating the civic and ethical consequences of neoliberal reform.

Data selection and Corpus

The corpus comprises a purposive sample of 8 education policy documents published between 2005 and 2025, produced by Qatari state institutions. Inclusion in the corpus was guided by three primary criteria: (1) their centrality to Qatar's national education reform agenda, (2) their explicit or implicit engagement with themes of human capital development and performance management, and (3) their alignment with broader strategic frameworks such as QNV 2030. The selected documents reflect strategic planning, reform evaluation, and vision-setting efforts that significantly shape the educational policy landscape in the country.

Primary data for this study consist of the following official policy and planning documents:

- *Education and Training Sector Strategy 2017–2022* (MoEHE, 2017),

- *Education for a New Era: Design and Implementation of K–12 Education Reform in Qatar* (Brewer et al., 2007),
- *Education Sector in Qatar: Current State Assessment Series* (Qatar Development Bank, 2021),
- *National Qualifications Framework* (MoEHE, 2017),
- *Qatar National Vision 2030* (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008),
- *Qatar's Second National Development Strategy 2018–2022* (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2018),
- *Qatar's Third National Development Strategy 2024–2030* (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2024), and
- *Qatar Voluntary National Review 2017* (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2017).

Together, these documents constitute a rich archive for analyzing how education is conceptualized and rationalized in policy discourse, through reform demands, quality metrics, and neoliberal logics such as marketization, performance accountability, and international benchmarking. Here, it is important to acknowledge that access to detailed information, empirical data, and official documentation on education policy on Qatari remains limited. Some official and semi-official reports are either unpublished or not publicly accessible through official channels, posing constraints on the scope and depth of policy analysis. For instance, two key documents – *Education and Training Sector Strategy 2011–2016* and *Qatar First National Development Strategy 2024–2030* – could not be located despite repeated efforts, further disclosing the opacity and inaccessibility of critical policy materials.

Ethical considerations

Although this study is based exclusively on publicly accessible documents, ethical considerations remain integral to the research process. Particular attention is given to the contextualization of institutional authorship in order to represent the sources of the documents accurately and to avoid misattribution or decontextualization of policy intentions. Furthermore, care is taken to maintain academic integrity by critically engaging with policy discourse without misrepresenting the stated objectives of the institutions involved. The study also acknowledges the limitations of interpreting institutional texts without triangulating with stakeholder perspectives, while affirming the legitimacy of document-based discourse analysis in revealing underlying ideologies and power relations.

Data analysis

The study employs Fairclough's (1995, 2003) three-dimensional model of CDA as its analytical framework, which comprises textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. This model enables a multi-layered interrogation of language use in policy texts. The *textual analysis* component involves close reading of rhetorical strategies and lexical choices to identify how particular meanings are foregrounded or backgrounded. The *discursive practice* dimension examines the production, circulation, and consumption of these texts,

with particular attention to intertextuality: how policy scripts such as those from the OECD, World Bank, or private sector actors are invoked or adapted within Qatari contexts. Finally, the *social practice* dimension situates the discourse within broader neoliberal governance frameworks, enabling an interpretation of how educational reforms reflect and reinforce macro-level ideological and economic priorities.

The analytical process combined both deductive and inductive coding approaches. A deductive coding frame was first developed from recurring themes in the literature on neoliberalism in education (Kerrigan and Johnson, 2019), including categories such as marketization and privatization, performance and accountability, and international benchmarks. In parallel, an inductive coding strategy was employed to capture emergent themes and discursive patterns specific to the Qatari context, with particular attention to *silences* (omissions) or *absences* (exclusions) related to equity, holistic learning, or indigenous epistemologies. Silences were operationalized by systematically comparing the policy corpus with widely recognized equity and justice dimensions in the literature (e.g., civic aims, critical pedagogy, inclusive education). Instances where expected categories or references, including explicit measures of equity or assessments of cultural knowledge, were absent, underdeveloped, or invoked only rhetorically without measurable indicators were coded as *discursive silences*. To strengthen analytical rigor, each silence was cross-checked across the broader corpus to ensure that the absence was recurrent rather than incidental, and analytic memos were maintained to trace how such omissions shaped the discursive boundaries of what could be articulated as “quality education.” Taken together, these strategies ensured that the analysis was both theoretically informed and empirically grounded, enabling a systematic understanding of how policy language operates as a site of ideological production.

Findings

This section presents the findings of a critical discourse analysis of eight official education policy documents published in Qatar between 2005 and 2025. The analysis aims to identify how neoliberal rationalities are constructed and legitimized, how global policy models are localized, and how discursive tensions shape the conceptualization of educational quality. It is important to note that the interpretation of findings in this study deliberately employs both Foucauldian and Habermasian lenses. Silences and omissions in the policy texts are read, on the one hand, as Foucauldian exclusions that sustain power by narrowing what is thinkable within reform discourse, and on the other, as Habermasian distortions that signal the erosion of democratic and civic commitments.

Similarly, asymmetries in the policy corpus are approached as both technologies of governmentality and as failures of deliberative inclusion. Rather than privileging one framework, the study adopts this dialogic juxtaposition to capture the dual character of Qatari education reform: reforms simultaneously project consensus and legitimacy while embedding exclusions and structural constraints. This intentional dual framing ensures that the analysis illuminates both the dissonant operations of power and the normative consequences of neoliberal logics. The findings are organized around five interrelated themes: (1) market-oriented governance

and performativity; (2) hybrid constructions of quality; (3) intertextual borrowing and global validation; (4) technocratic subjectivities and actor positioning; and (5) discursive silences and exclusions.

1. Market-oriented governance and the logic of performativity

Across all eight policy documents, education is framed as an instrument of economic utility, with reform language emphasizing national productivity, efficiency, and measurable outcomes. This market-oriented framing is evident in recurrent phrases such as “performance-based remuneration,” “value for money,” and “outcome-based budgeting,” which reappear across the *National Qualifications Framework*, the *Education Sector in Qatar: Current State Assessment Series*, and the *Qatar Voluntary National Review 2017*. In the *National Qualifications Framework*, for instance, learning structures are modular and outcome-based, explicitly mapped to labor market needs, with competencies in STEM, digital literacy, and English language acquisition prioritized for employability. The *Education Sector Assessment Report* goes further, recommending that “institutional budgets be tied to performance indicators,” including graduate employment rates and employer satisfaction scores, metrics that translate educational success into economic returns. Similarly, the *Voluntary National Review 2017* identifies “enhanced institutional performance monitoring” as a national priority, linking education sector efficiency to the achievement of broader Sustainable Development Goals.

The policy logic underpinning these measures privileges what Ball (2012) terms the “terrors of performativity,” in which institutional and individual success is reduced to quantifiable outputs that can be monitored, compared, and audited. While efficiency-oriented objectives are operationalized through concrete key performance indicators (KPIs), timelines, and monitoring mechanisms, civic and pedagogical aims remain secondary, often appearing as aspirational statements without corresponding measures. For example, in the *Education Sector Assessment Report*, the objective to “foster critical thinking and innovation” is immediately followed by a set of KPIs measuring the number of patents filed, the rate of STEM graduates, and participation in innovation competitions, metrics that operationalize “innovation” in narrowly economic and competitive terms, rather than in relation to broader educational or democratic values.

This tight coupling of education to national economic strategy aligns with Fairclough’s (2003) analysis of how market logics colonize educational discourse, reframing schools and universities as service providers accountable for measurable returns on investment. In Qatar’s case, this manifests in an outcome-based governance model in which resource allocation, teacher appraisal, and curriculum design are calibrated to optimize economic performance. The dominance of such managerial governance models reflects not only the adoption of transnational policy scripts but also their domestication within Qatar’s state-led modernization agenda, creating a reform architecture in which market imperatives are embedded as the primary drivers of educational change.

2. Hybrid constructions of educational quality

Policy discourse in Qatar presents a hybrid construction of educational quality, combining cultural-nationalist goals with global

benchmarking instruments. This hybridity, however, is uneven. This asymmetry becomes clearer when examining how policy texts frame the two domains. Cultural aims are expressed in broad, aspirational language: for example, the *Third NDS 2024–2030* (p. 42) commits to “strengthen Islamic values in all educational stages and promote the Arabic language as a cornerstone of national identity,” alongside broader aspirations such as “fostering a sense of citizenship and belonging,” yet without specifying measurable indicators, assessment tools, or curriculum integration strategies. Similarly, the *Qatar National Vision 2030* (p. 17) calls to “preserve Arabic language as a key medium of instruction” but links this only to periodic curriculum reviews. In contrast, the same policy texts provide detailed, quantifiable targets for global benchmarks: “achieve top quartile PISA scores in mathematics and science by 2030” and “ensure all secondary schools achieve NEASC or equivalent international accreditation by 2027” (*Third NDS 2024–2030*, p. 44). The disparity between the vague articulation of cultural goals and the precise operationalization of global metrics illustrates a pattern in which cultural commitments function as rhetorical anchors, while global competitiveness indicators receive specific timelines, targets, and implementation plans.

These tensions are particularly visible when Qatari policy texts invoke national identity and Islamic values alongside neoliberal metrics. For example, the *Qatar National Vision 2030* highlights the goal to “preserve Arabic language as a key medium of instruction and anchor education in Islamic and cultural values” (p. 17), while the *Third National Development Strategy 2024–2030* pledges to “strengthen Islamic values in all educational stages and promote community belonging” (p. 42). Yet, in the same sections, these commitments are juxtaposed with specific targets to “achieve top quartile PISA scores in mathematics and science by 2030” and to ensure that “all secondary schools achieve NEASC or equivalent international accreditation by 2027” (p. 44). This discursive juxtaposition reveals the conflict between a policy narrative rooted in collective Islamic principles, including social solidarity, care for the marginalized, and preservation of cultural identity, and a reform architecture driven by market-oriented, global competitiveness logics. Education is thus situated at the intersection of geopolitical aspirations, where the State seeks to project both cultural authenticity and global modernity. The outcome is a hybrid but asymmetrical discourse in which Islamic values function symbolically, while the operational mechanisms of reform remain tethered to neoliberal performance frameworks.

In contrast, quality is more concretely defined through standardized testing, international accreditation, and performance in STEM disciplines, as a case in point. For instance, while the *Third National Development Strategy* mentions cultural values in its vision for education and lists “preserving national identity” as an educational goal, it prioritizes global rankings, employability, and initiatives such as AI integration and digital learning platforms. Accreditation by ABET and NEASC, along with performance in international assessments, are consistently invoked to define and measure quality. The result is a blended narrative that appears culturally rooted but remains structurally committed to external models of efficiency and output. For example, in the *Third NDS 2024–2030*, objectives for “preserving national identity” and promoting Arabic language appear alongside targets for achieving top-quartile PISA score targets and AI integration goals. The document’s learning objectives include memorization of Qur’anic verses and digital literacy in the same

competency framework, signaling an intentional blending of Islamic pedagogical traditions with global skills benchmarks. Yet, as teacher professional development guidelines show, these religious and cultural elements lack corresponding assessment metrics, suggesting that their inclusion serves primarily symbolic rather than operational purposes. The *Third NDS*’s commitment to “strengthening Islamic values in all educational stages” is accompanied by curricular goals measured in digital literacy, STEM proficiency, and English-language competence, while omitting parallel performance benchmarks for Islamic knowledge. This reflects a GCC-wide pattern in which cultural markers function as legitimacy anchors in high-stakes global performance yardsticks races, particularly within the political economy of post-oil diversification.

This asymmetry becomes clearer when examining how policy texts frame the two domains. Cultural objectives, such as the directive in the *Third National Development Strategy 2024–2030* to “strengthen Islamic values in all educational stages” (p. 42) and the commitment in QNV 2030 to “preserve Arabic language as a key medium of instruction” (p. 17), are articulated without corresponding key performance indicators, assessment frameworks, or budgetary allocations, and in the latter case, without any monitoring mechanism beyond periodic curriculum reviews. In contrast, international standards are presented with precise, measurable targets, as seen in the *Third National Development Strategy*’s aim to “achieve top quartile in PISA mathematics and science by 2030” (p. 44), which is tied to biennial PISA participation and specific score thresholds, and in the *Education Sector Assessment Report*’s requirement to “accredit all engineering programs through ABET by 2026” (p. 31), monitored through accreditation status, renewal cycles, and compliance audits. This reliance on accreditation regimes echoes broader critiques that such mechanisms often operate as isomorphic forces, constraining local creativity and reinforcing homogenized standards (Coutet, 2022). Such a contrast reflects Fairclough’s notion of *interdiscursivity*, wherein cultural discourse is interwoven with neoliberal performance frameworks, and Ball’s concept of *vernacular globalization*, in which local cultural symbols function to legitimise imported policy models without fundamentally altering their structural logic. The persistent absence of measurable cultural performance indicators underscores the argument that cultural symbols in Qatari education policy function more as symbolic gestures than as substantive, actionable levers for reform.

3. Intertextual borrowing and global validation

By *intertextual borrowing*, I refer to the way policy documents import language, concepts, or structural templates from other authoritative texts, often international frameworks, into local policy discourse. In CDA, this term denotes how texts are embedded within a network of other texts, shaping meaning through these references. For example, Qatar’s *National Qualifications Framework* mirrors the tiered structure and terminology of the European Qualifications Framework almost verbatim, signaling both epistemic alignment and policy dependency.

Policy texts across the corpus reveal a strong reliance on external policy authorities, drawing heavily on the language, frameworks, and performance standards of transnational organizations to legitimise reform agendas. The *Education for a New Era* initiative offers a particularly striking example: its diagnostic framing of Qatar’s

education system as “centralized and rigid” originates directly from the RAND Corporation’s assessment, with the resulting reform blueprint implementing RAND’s recommendations with minimal adaptation to local pedagogical traditions or sociocultural priorities. This pattern of adoption without substantive recontextualization recurs in other documents, such as the *National Qualifications Framework*, which borrows its structural tiers, descriptors, and credit equivalences almost wholesale from European Qualifications Framework and Australian models, retaining much of the original terminology and sequencing.

In these cases, reform credibility is derived less from locally generated evidence or consultation and more from alignment with what are framed as “international best practices.” Mentions of global governance bodies (OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank) are frequent and often paired with references to specific international standards or alignment with Sustainable Development Goal targets. The *Third National Development Strategy 2024–2030*, for instance, situates its education reform goals explicitly within OECD comparative frameworks, setting numeric targets for PISA performance alongside deadlines for international accreditation by agencies such as ABET and NEASC.

This intertextual alignment serves a dual function: it confers epistemic authority by associating national reform with globally recognized standards, and it reinforces an accountability model where success is measured by compliance with these standards. Fairclough’s (2003) concept of *recontextualization* helps explain how these imported policy texts are embedded in Qatar’s national discourse, often with minimal transformation. Habermas’s critique of *instrumental rationality* is also applicable here, as the emphasis on technical benchmarking and procedural compliance displaces deliberation over the cultural and ethical dimensions of reform. In privileging global validation over context-sensitive innovation, such borrowing narrows the range of locally relevant reform possibilities and entrenches dependency on external expertise.

4. Technocratic subjectivities and actor positioning

The term *technocratic subjectivities* describes how individuals are shaped, discursively and institutionally, into roles defined by technical expertise, compliance with performance metrics, and alignment with managerial priorities, rather than by pedagogical creativity or democratic engagement. The construction of teachers, students, and policymakers within these policy texts reflects a technocratic governance model in which educational actors are positioned primarily as instruments for achieving systemic outputs rather than as agents of pedagogical innovation or democratic participation. Teachers are consistently framed as service providers, their professional worth assessed through “competency-based professional development” and “output-based incentives,” as stated in the *Education Sector in Qatar* assessment report. This aligns with broader analyses of how neoliberal reforms deprofessionalize educators, reducing teaching to routinized tasks divorced from professional autonomy (De Saxe et al., 2020; Giroux, 2025). In the *National Qualifications Framework*, teacher competencies are linked directly to performance appraisal cycles, with progression tied to the delivery of predefined learning outcomes rather than the fostering of critical inquiry or culturally responsive pedagogy.

Students, likewise, are constructed as future economic contributors, with skill acquisition oriented toward labor market

needs in STEM, digital literacy, and vocational training. The *Third National Development Strategy 2024–2030* describes the education system’s role as “producing adaptable, innovation-driven graduates to sustain national competitiveness” (p. 46), a formulation that frames adaptability as responsiveness to economic imperatives rather than to civic or cultural responsibilities. Even where “citizenship” or “values education” are mentioned, they are not accompanied by mechanisms for fostering participatory engagement or critical thinking, but rather by measurable competencies in employability and technical skills.

Policymakers emerge in these documents as system architects, presented as the principal agents responsible for securing coherence, efficiency, and alignment with both Qatar’s national visions and international benchmarks. Reform discourse often employs technocratic and imperative phrasing, such as “*the State shall ensure...*” (QNV 2030, p. 18; Third NDS 2024–2030, p. 41), which frames policymaking as a top-down, expert-driven, and depoliticized process. In doing so, reform is cast less as a space for deliberation and negotiation and more as a technical exercise in optimization. This framing naturalizes a managerial logic that privileges efficiency, standardization, and compliance with international benchmarks while foreclosing opportunities for contestation or stakeholder influence. Within this schema, teachers, students, and parents are conspicuously absent as co-designers of reform. Teachers are referenced in narrowly instrumental terms, often tied to competency-based professional development and output-driven appraisal systems that reduce their agency to externally defined performance metrics. Students are positioned as “*adaptable, innovation-driven graduates to sustain national competitiveness*” (Third NDS 2024–2030, p. 46), effectively reframing education as preparation for labor market adaptability rather than civic or cultural participation. Parents, when mentioned at all, appear as passive beneficiaries of system improvements rather than active contributors to reform trajectories.

The exclusion of these stakeholders reinforces a hierarchical and centralized policy culture, one sustained by monitoring, accreditation, and performance indicators rather than participatory dialogue. For instance, the *Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2025)* ties institutional progression to compliance with externally borrowed models such as the European Qualifications Framework, while the *Education Sector Assessment Report (2021)* recommends that “*institutional budgets be tied to performance indicators*” like graduate employment rates and employer satisfaction scores. These mechanisms reify compliance as the principal indicator of institutional success, leaving little space for grassroots input or alternative epistemologies. The result is the subordination of educational agency to managerial imperatives, consistent with Dean’s (2010) notion of governmentality, in which actors internalize logics of performativity while believing themselves autonomous. Teachers are encouraged to see adherence to competency frameworks as professional growth, while students are invited to view adaptability as empowerment—even as both are constrained by predefined economic rationalities. In this way, reform discourse constructs an illusion of agency, masking the structural limits placed on democratic participation, cultural pluralism, or justice-oriented reform. By privileging international accreditation, outcome-based budgeting, and STEM-focused benchmarks, the Qatari policy corpus reproduces a technocratic order in which compliance is valorized, collaboration is marginalized, and the imaginative horizon of reform is tightly circumscribed by neoliberal imperatives.

5. Discursive silences and the limits of reform imagination

In CDA, *discursive silences* refer to significant omissions or underdeveloped areas in policy texts, issues that are either absent or mentioned without substantive detail, thus shaping what is thinkable or sayable in public discourse. In the Qatari policy corpus, such silences are evident in the minimal attention to equity or critical pedagogy, with inclusion often reframed solely in terms of economic participation. Just as revealing as what is present in the policy discourse are the themes that are conspicuously absent or only superficially addressed. Across all eight documents, commitments to equity, inclusion, social justice, or culturally grounded knowledge systems appear infrequently and, when they do, are framed in functionalist terms. For example, in the *Qatar Voluntary National Review 2017*, “inclusive education” is explicitly linked to “preparing all individuals for participation in the labor market” (p. 33), an articulation that narrows the concept to economic integration and sidesteps its broader implications for empowerment, human rights, and community participation.

Similarly, references to Arabic and Islamic education often function rhetorically, lending legitimacy to reform agendas without shaping curricular priorities, assessment frameworks, or funding allocations. In the *Third National Development Strategy 2024–2030*, the stated aim to “embed Islamic values in all educational programs” appears alongside detailed STEM and AI integration targets, yet is not accompanied by parallel performance indicators for the cultural objectives. This disjuncture suggests that while cultural signifiers are visible in the discourse, they operate more as symbolic affirmations than as substantive design principles for reform.

The absence of critical pedagogy, civic engagement, or pluralistic educational aims points to what Fairclough (1995) terms the “colonization” of discourse by market logics, whereby the range of conceivable educational futures is constrained to those aligned with economic competitiveness. By reframing equity and inclusion in instrumental terms, the policy discourse forecloses possibilities for alternative reform trajectories rooted in justice, ethics, or indigenous epistemologies. Habermas’s warning about the subordination of normative commitments to strategic imperatives is apt here: the narrowing of reform imaginaries not only limits the scope of policy debate but also reduces the role of education to that of a managed subsystem of the economy, rather than a dynamic arena for democratic and cultural development.

Discussion

This study examined how neoliberal rationalities are constructed and disseminated through Qatari education policy discourse, revealing a reform narrative dominated by market-oriented governance, performance accountability, and international benchmarking. These priorities marginalize civic and participatory aims, exemplifying Dadvand’s (2024) argument that neoliberal reform erodes the democratic mandate of schooling by reframing equity in terms of workforce integration. At the same time, the selective incorporation of Islamic values, Arabic language preservation, and national identity markers illustrates Goudarzi et al.’ (2022) claim that equity rhetoric normalizes market logics, functioning as a legitimizing device that reconciles global scripts with local symbolism.

CDA constructs such as intertextual borrowing, technocratic subjectivities, and discursive silences show how Qatari policy imports global templates, redefines actors’ roles around managerial imperatives, and omits alternative visions of educational purpose. Comparative research corroborates these dynamics: in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, hybrid models similarly combine benchmarking and accreditation with symbolic appeals to cultural identity (Maringe, 2023; Michaleczek and Sellami, 2025), while GCC-wide analyses note how OECD-driven borrowing is routinely coupled with heritage references (Wiseman et al., 2014), producing what Omwami and Rust (2020) describe as “localized neoliberalism.” The Qatari case extends this picture by showing how hybridity is mediated through high state capacity, oil-generated fiscal resources, and a consultancy-driven but centrally controlled governance culture.

While this analysis foregrounds the structural and ideological limitations of neoliberal reform logics, it is important to acknowledge that certain mechanisms associated with international assessment standards and performance accountability have produced tangible benefits in the Qatari context. For example, alignment with international accreditation bodies such as ABET and NEASC has incentivized program modernization and faculty development, while participation in international assessments has catalyzed investment in teacher training, STEM curricula, and data-informed pedagogical practices. From a governance perspective, these reforms can be interpreted as enhancing institutional transparency and comparability, which may facilitate strategic planning and resource allocation.

The redefinition of educational actors within this policy framework reflects a technocratic restructuring consistent with Ball’s (2012) notion of the “terrors of performativity,” whereby teachers are positioned as deliverers of measurable outputs, students as future economic contributors, and policymakers as system designers tasked with optimizing efficiency. Such role constructions in Qatar are not simply generic manifestations of neoliberalism but are anchored in specific governance practices, for example, outcome-based budgeting, competency-based teacher licensing, and STEM-focused performance metrics, which operationalize global templates in locally resonant ways. These findings also extend Fairclough’s (1995, 2003) concept of the colonization of discourse by market logics: in Qatar’s case, economic reasoning is not only embedded in the lexicon of reform (“value for money,” “performance-based remuneration”) but is institutionalized through quality assurance frameworks and international accreditation requirements that structurally prioritize measurable outputs over culturally grounded pedagogies.

While agency in neoliberal/Western discourse is framed as individual autonomy and self-regulation, embodied in policy representations of students as adaptable, self-optimizing graduates and teachers as competency-driven professionals, agency in the Islamic polity of Qatar is more relational, grounded in values of *ummah* (community), collective responsibility, and care for the marginalized. Policy texts such as the *Third National Development Strategy 2024–2030* (p. 42) reference strengthening Islamic values and promoting “community belonging,” yet these commitments are juxtaposed with individualized performance metrics like PISA scores or graduate employability rates. This tension highlights how the egalitarian notion of agency is culturally inflected: in Qatari reform discourse, Islamic community-oriented understandings of agency are symbolically invoked but remain subordinated to neoliberal imperatives of efficiency and competitiveness.

Cultural referents in policy texts, particularly references to Arabic language, Islamic education, and national heritage, function as discursive anchors, aligning with Fairclough's (1995) notion of interdiscursivity and Ball's (2012) concept of vernacular globalization. These markers lend reforms a veneer of cultural legitimacy but exert little influence on curricular priorities, assessment frameworks, or pedagogical practices. The result is a hybrid discourse that appears culturally grounded yet remains structurally neoliberal, with "quality education" defined largely through global competitiveness indicators supplemented by symbolic identity commitments. In practice, this hybridity takes the form of superficial curricular adaptations or rhetorical policy statements, while the substantive mechanisms of accountability, benchmarking, and performance measurement remain tied to global neoliberal frameworks. From a Habermasian perspective, such hybridity is narrated as coherent and consensual, whereas a Foucauldian lens exposes its dissonances, revealing how competing rationalities are strategically reconciled within the reform process.

This asymmetry also privileges particular actors. International consultants and global agencies (e.g., RAND, OECD, accreditation bodies) acquire authority as their policy templates are adopted with minimal adaptation, while Qatari policymakers consolidate technocratic control through centralized monitoring and performance regimes. Economic elites benefit from the production of a workforce aligned with diversification and competitiveness goals, whereas teachers and local pedagogical communities experience reduced autonomy and limited influence over reform agendas. In this sense, asymmetrical hybridity reflects not only a discursive imbalance but also a redistribution of power toward transnational expertise and domestic technocracy.

While overt forms of resistance are largely absent from the official policy texts, it is important to acknowledge the spaces of subtle contestation that accompany neoliberal reform logics. Teachers, for example, often engage in what McCarthy et al. (2025) term "performative compliance," outwardly conforming to competency frameworks while informally preserving pedagogical autonomy. Similarly, cultural markers such as Arabic language or Islamic education, although tokenized in reform discourse, can be strategically reappropriated by educators to justify classroom practices that diverge from technocratic expectations. These forms of quiet negotiation highlight that asymmetrical hybridity is not only imposed from above but is also subject to reinterpretation, adaptation, and occasional resistance at the school level. A Foucauldian perspective thus directs attention to the micropolitics of power, where governmentality is never absolute but always mediated through spaces of compliance, negotiation, and contestation. As a result, the symbolic inclusion of cultural identifiers does little to shift the underlying logic of reform, instead serving as a discursive mechanism to reconcile the tension between modernization agendas and cultural preservation narratives. For instance, teacher professional development frameworks include modules on Islamic values, yet these are neither assessed nor linked to promotion criteria, suggesting that cultural content serves rhetorical rather than operational purposes. This pattern highlights Qatar's unique approach in which cultural identifiers are decoupled from assessment frameworks while STEM and English proficiency dominate measurable outputs.

Intertextual borrowings from transnational organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank, and RAND Corporation

confer epistemic authority on reform agendas, often with limited local adaptation. This exemplifies Fairclough (2003) recontextualization, in which global policy models are embedded in national discourse with minimal transformation, and resonates with Habermas (1989) critique of instrumental rationality, as these adoptions occur through top-down technical implementation rather than participatory deliberation. The RAND-designed *Education for a New Era* initiative illustrates how such externally generated frameworks can marginalize indigenous pedagogical traditions, reinforcing hierarchical knowledge flows and privileging external validation over local expertise. In doing so, these borrowings shift the locus of authority away from local stakeholders and place it within transnational policy networks, thereby diminishing the role of local educators, policymakers, and communities in shaping reform trajectories that genuinely reflect their sociocultural realities.

The silences in the policy discourse are equally revealing. Commitments to critical pedagogy, educational justice, and civic participation are either absent or reframed through an instrumental lens. Even when terms such as "inclusion" and "equity" appear, they are narrowly defined in alignment with labor market needs, highlighting the utilitarian conception of education that Habermas warns emerges when strategic objectives supplant normative commitments. This narrowing of reform imaginaries constrains the scope for transformative, pluralistic, or justice-oriented educational agendas. By prioritizing measurable economic outcomes over holistic development, such discourse not only limits the diversity of educational aims but also forecloses the possibility of cultivating critical democratic engagement and culturally sustaining pedagogies that could serve as counterweights to the dominant neoliberal paradigm. Combined, these findings suggest that Qatari education reform is shaped by a "velvet cage" of neoliberal orthodoxy, a policy framework that presents itself as culturally anchored and progressive, yet remains structurally constrained by imperatives of global competitiveness and depoliticized governance. The metaphor of a "velvet cage," adapted from sociological reworkings of Max Weber's concept of the *iron cage*, captures this paradox with precision (Weber, 1992). While the *iron cage* signified the inescapable rationalization and bureaucratization of modern life, its "velvet" counterpart denotes constraints cushioned by material resources, prestige, and the promise of global recognition. In the Qatari context, the cage is lined with the comforts of high state investment, international accreditation, and alignment with elite global benchmarks, features that make its limits both palatable and enduring. Although packaged in the appealing language of modernization and quality assurance, these reforms circumscribe educational purposes within technocratic and market-oriented logics, narrowing the space for democratic deliberation, ethical reasoning, and locally driven pedagogical priorities. Cultural references provide a veneer of local responsiveness, but the underlying logic privileges economic rationalities over dialogic, ethical, or emancipatory aims.

By demonstrating how global neoliberal scripts are selectively localized, this study not only confirms existing critiques (Dadvand, 2024; Goudarzi et al., 2022) but also extends them by revealing how equity rhetoric and cultural symbolism function as strategic mechanisms for embedding global reform logics in non-Western contexts. This analysis underscores the need for more inclusive and participatory policy processes capable of expanding reform beyond

the narrow confines of performance metrics and economic competitiveness. Such an approach could enable educational futures grounded in justice, cultural plurality, and genuine democratic engagement, resisting the subtle constraints of the velvet cage while preserving the resources and legitimacy that make reform sustainable.

Comparatively, the UAE's Vision 2021 reforms and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 education initiatives exhibit parallel dynamics in aligning education policy with national economic diversification strategies, relying on international accreditation and standardized testing as primary quality measures (McKellar, 2020; Steiner-Khamisi, 2025). However, unlike Qatar, which has maintained extensive state-led oversight in reform implementation, Saudi Arabia has pursued more decentralized models, while the UAE has relied more heavily on privatization and school choice mechanisms (Ibrahim and Barnawi, 2022). Beyond the Gulf, similar tensions between global neoliberal templates and local sociocultural priorities are evident in Singapore's education system, where high PISA performance coexists with curriculum frameworks that integrate civic and moral education (Tan, 2025). Such comparisons underline that while Qatar's reforms reflect global policy transfer trends, their localization is shaped by specific political economy conditions, governance arrangements, and national identity narratives.

Moreover, some reform initiatives that align with neoliberal governance rationalities have coincided with policy objectives valued within Qatar's national development agenda. The expansion of STEM education has supported economic diversification strategies, while gender parity in higher education enrolments, particularly in STEM fields, has positioned Qatar as a regional leader in educational equity. Cultural appeals, though often symbolic in policy discourse, have in some cases influenced resource allocation toward heritage preservation programs, Arabic language initiatives, and values education modules within the national curriculum. These examples suggest that neoliberal and culturalist discourses, while ideologically distinct, can converge in ways that advance both global competitiveness and selected sociocultural priorities.

Situating the Qatari case within this broader comparative field reveals that its hybrid reform trajectory is neither unique nor wholly derivative. Across diverse contexts, ranging from the Gulf states to high-performing Asian systems, policymakers grapple with reconciling the imperatives of global competitiveness with commitments to cultural preservation and civic development. What distinguishes Qatar is the intensity of its reliance on external consultancy (e.g., RAND Corporation), the centrality of state-led modernization agendas, and the integration of reform into broader geopolitical positioning strategies. Recognizing these comparative patterns reinforces the argument that analyses of education reform in the Gulf must account for both shared regional trajectories and nationally specific configurations of neoliberal and culturalist discourse.

Conclusion

This study examined how neoliberal rationalities are constructed, sanctioned, and propagated through the discourse of education policy reform in Qatar. Using CDA, the analysis reveals a dominant technocratic rationality that emphasizes market-based governance, performance accountability, and international benchmarking. Reform narratives consistently frame education as a tool for economic

productivity and global competitiveness, while civic, ethical, and transformative dimensions are relegated to the margins. Although policy texts invoke cultural signifiers, including Islamic values, Arabic language, and national identity, these cultural markers function largely as rhetorical devices rather than as substantive epistemic anchors. The resulting discourse is hybrid but asymmetrical, one that integrates references to national heritage without disrupting the structural logic of global neoliberalism. This domestication of transnational policy scripts serves to justify reform narratives without challenging the requirements of performativity and human capital development.

The analysis also highlights how educational actors are discursively positioned within hierarchical and depersonalized hierarchies. Teachers are cast as service providers accountable to output-based regimes; students are envisioned primarily as future labor-market entrants; and policymakers are depicted as technocratic agents responsible for adapting reforms to national visions and international standards. The exclusion of stakeholder voices, especially those of teachers and students, as well as parents, points to a top-down, expert-driven policy culture that marginalizes democratic participatory governance. Perhaps most revealing are the silences that permeate the discourse. Across all eight documents analyzed, there is a clear lack of attention to equity, inclusion, social justice, or alternative knowledge systems. These omissions are not incidental but ideological, signaling a discursive constriction that limits the possibilities of envisioning education beyond economic instrumentalism. In this way, policy discourse does not only describe education but actively constitutes the boundaries of what is seen as possible, desirable, and legitimate.

Recognizing these convergences does not diminish the importance of critiquing the structural dominance of economic rationalities, but it highlights that policy outcomes in hybrid governance environments may simultaneously reflect global neoliberal norms and locally valued priorities. A balanced analysis must therefore attend to both the constraining effects of performance-driven reform and its potential to catalyze targeted improvements in quality, equity, and innovation. The findings highlight the need for education policymakers in Qatar and the wider Gulf region to reassess the ideological foundations of current education reforms. Instead of replicating global templates, reform efforts should be rooted in meaningful engagement with local social, cultural, and pedagogical realities.

Expanding the discursive space to include values of justice, inclusion, and cultural plurality is essential for fostering an education system that is not only efficient but also equitable and context-sensitive. Institutionalizing mechanisms for democratic engagement and stakeholder participation would enhance the adaptability and credibility of the reform process. Such mechanisms are particularly vital for addressing the asymmetries identified in this study, where international consultants and global benchmarks were shown to dominate reform design while teachers and local educators experienced reduced autonomy and limited influence. Democratic engagement structures could help rebalance these dynamics by amplifying stakeholder voices that are currently marginalized in policy processes. At the same time, it is important to recognize that recommendations emerging from this study are intentionally framed through both Foucauldian and Habermasian lenses, reflecting the dialogic theoretical orientation underpinning the analysis. Yet, as Foucault reminds us, such calls for participation may themselves function as technologies of governmentality—mechanisms that normalize compliance while presenting the illusion of democratic

agency. Recognizing this risk underscores the paradox of reform: participatory mechanisms can both contest and reproduce neoliberal logics.

This study is limited by its exclusive reliance on document-based discourse analysis, which, while offering rich insights into textual construction, cannot capture the lived experiences or intentions of policymakers and stakeholders. Furthermore, access to certain key documents, especially those produced by non-governmental entities, such as those commissioned by Qatar Foundation or private consultancy firms, including the *Education and Training Sector Strategy 2017–2022* and the *Qatar National Development Strategy 2024–2030*, remained restricted, thus narrowing the scope of the policy corpus. By employing both Foucauldian and Habermasian perspectives in parallel, the study underscores that Qatari education reform discourse cannot be fully understood through a single lens: it is simultaneously a site where power operates through exclusions and governmentality, and where the erosion of civic and democratic commitments reveals the normative deficits of neoliberal rationalities.

Future research would benefit from triangulating policy discourse analysis with qualitative fieldwork, including interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic studies involving educators, students, parents, and policymakers to explore how reform narratives are negotiated, interpreted, contested, or recontextualized by those directly affected. Comparative studies across GCC countries could provide valuable insights into regional similarities and differences in how neoliberal education policy discourses are articulated and localized. Longitudinal discourse studies may also trace evolving policy narratives in response to significant national and global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or Qatar's post-World Cup repositioning, which may prompt shifts in national priorities.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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