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# Professional development needs of school principals in the context of educational reform

Sufean Hussin\* and Saleh Al Abri

Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Malaysia.

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Retraining and upskilling of human resources in organizations are deemed vital whenever a reform takes place, or whenever a huge policy is being implemented on a comprehensive scale. In an education system, officers, principals, and teachers need to be retrained so as to enable them implement and manage new changes, which are manifested in the form of new policies and strategic development plan mooted by the government. This article presents a study on the core professional development needs of school principals in the context of educational reform in Oman since 1998. The study used the survey method in which the respondents comprised 80 principals in Muscat, Oman. The study found fifteen prominent needs factors or domains which were necessary for professional development of school principals in Muscat specifically. The factors apparently could be group into two kinds of leadership needs, namely instructional leadership and transformational leadership. Also, principals contended that a systematic model relevant for professional development programs of principals ought to be designed and used by the Ministry of Education of Oman. New leadership competencies were needed to implement new policies and changes.

**Key words:** Reformative policy, policy implementation, school management, leadership, professional development.

## INTRODUCTION

Omani society is becoming ever more complex and rapidly changing, especially in an environment that promotes modernization, urbanization, and globalization. With this justification, it is commonly assumed that the education system needs to be revamped and upgraded in order to prepare the new generation of human resources with contemporary knowledge and skills in all fields and sectors needed for social and economic development of Oman. Hence, Oman's education system underwent an extensive reform since 1998 whereby the school structure and curriculum were changed from the traditional general education type to the basic education

type. The most striking features of basic education are the progressive continuity of primary-secondary education curriculum and the intensive use of information-communication technology (ICT) in classrooms and school administration (Ministry of Education, 1998).

With basic education in place, school leadership and management in Oman has to change also, and to that effect, many professional development programs have been organized by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in order to upgrade school principals with the necessary and relevant competencies, knowledge, and dispositions

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [drsufean@um.edu.my](mailto:drsufean@um.edu.my). Tel: 603-79675088. Fax: 603-79675010.

so that they could function and perform effectively as school leaders and managers. The reason is that effective school leadership and management has been argued as the key determinant factor for ensuring excellence and development of schools (Fullan, 2002, 2004). It is also thought by Omani educators that school leadership and management strongly affects teachers' instructional performance and, consequently, students' academic performance. However, effective school leadership and management does not come naturally in the appointment process of school principals; hence, it is essential that school principals must undergo professional training programs, which can impart the necessary competencies, knowledge, and dispositions to enable them to function and perform effectively in the educational reform context.

Omani educators' thinking is supported by abundant research literature. For example, Tirozzi (2000) points out that school principalship development as procedures and practices that set out to improve the professional knowledge, skills and attitude of school principals. Reimers and Reimers (2000) note that improving school principals' knowledge and skills through continual professional development is a critical step in improving school effectiveness, educational effectiveness, and students' learning performance. Ng (2001) reiterates that training opportunities should be provided to principals everywhere to enable them to perform their job according to the required level and quality. Raelin (1986) states that the professionals have a high degree of specialization within their specific areas of work, and they are trained to work independently and to self-govern their work.

Daresh (2003) argues that the principal's role has changed rapidly in the past thirty years, from a middle manager position in the 1970s to an instructional leader in the 1990s. Darling-Hammod (2003) and Drake and Roe (2003) predict that the only truly successful leaders in the next 30 years or so will be "change leaders" - those who can manage and lead change. In other words, the principal's role has changed from influencing the implementation of specific policies and duties to making innovations and leading changes in the school as an organization (Fullan, 2001). School principals should innovate and transform their schools into a learning organization, in tandem with contemporary trends and developments in other countries. As a consequence, principals will have to face new changes and challenges, which the potential to overwhelm them (Fullan, 2007). For this reason, school principals should uphold professionalism by continuously striving for excellence and upgrading their knowledge and expertise. Knab (2009) states that the continual demand for development and improvement in education calls for a strong and creative leadership.

Professional development is usually conceptualized in

many ways. Based on an international review of the literature by Reimers (2003), professional development is commonly termed as continuing education, in-service education, in-service training, continuing professional development, on-going assistance, human resource development, recurrent education, and continuous career development. Professional development basically focuses on three areas of staff development: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) describe professional development as the way that individuals develop their understanding and knowledge and improve their skills and abilities to improve their performance in their current position or to prepare themselves for a future position. According to Guskey (2000), professional development can be thought of as processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, the learning of students.

Professional development programs are diverse and different from each other, depending on clients from various sectors of businesses and public agencies, but they all share one common starting point, i.e. needs identification and analysis. As for our study, the most relevant analytical model for professional development needs of school principals is the one proposed by Salazar (2002), which comprises fifteen domains as follows:

- i. Setting goals and determining outcomes for the school, teachers, and students
- ii. Designing, implementing, and evaluating the school curriculum
- iii. Building Teacher Professionalism and Skills
- iv. Understanding measurement, evaluation, and assessment of school performance
- v. Understanding students' development and learning
- vi. Acquiring problem solving skills as a school leader and manager
- vii. Acquiring decision-making skills through sharing with teachers and students
- viii. Acquiring research skills for understanding issues and problems in the school
- ix. Mastery in ICT utilization
- x. Defining core values and beliefs in the school community
- xi. Creating a learning organization for making new changes in the school
- xii. Building team commitment among teachers as professionals
- xiii. Building teamwork skills among teachers of different specializations
- xiv. Mastering effective communication skills in leadership
- xv. Resolving conflicts, developing good relations and positive school culture

We have rearranged the fifteen domains into two categories of leadership: domains i to ix pertain to instructional leadership, while domains x to xv pertain to transformational leadership. Instructional leadership emphasizes on curriculum implementation which involves instruction and learning (McEwan, 2002), whereas transformational leadership focuses on influencing, inspiring, and motivating teachers and parents to work cooperatively together based on core values and beliefs in making reformative changes in schools (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999).

We have the view that professional development as a reform policy is subjected to policy implementation approaches theoretically. There are two dominant approaches for examining implementation process and outputs in the policy arena, i.e. the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach. In a centralized bureaucratic system, the top-down approach takes a macro view of implementation by examining the process from the standpoint of the initial policy-maker or the policy itself (Harris, 2007; Matland, 1995; O'Toole, 2000). In other words, top-level bureaucrats are largely interested with seeing how well the implementers are in harnessing resources to yield the intended goals and outcomes of a policy. Schematic and systematic procedures, oftentimes, are developed to guide the implementers in executing their job. In addition, constant supervision and monitoring mechanisms are also being put into place so as to ensure maximum success. This is because, in most instances, the implementers are kept in the dark as to what the policy goals, objectives, outcomes, and benefits are. They lack the understanding and direction of the systemic process, and more importantly, democratic participation by the bottom level is not typically encouraged in the implementation design. In Harris's (2007) perspective, top-down models rely on policy decisions made by the top authority and thus reduce the significance of policy adaptation at the bottom level of implementation. Clarity and consistency of goals are often nebulous, and implementation strategies that are generalized to many policy situations are the obvious features of this approach. Researchers consider Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) and Sabatier (1986) as pioneers in focusing on top-down approaches in policy implementation.

Pülzl and Treib (2007) assert that a perfect hierarchical control over the implementation process is hard to achieve in practice and that unfavorable conditions could cause implementation failure they argue that decision makers, who should exert a concerted effort in structuring and preparing the implementation programs. A significant critique of top-down strategies is that they neglect the weight the implementation staff and field workers have on the delivery of policies. According to Sabatier (1986) top-down models start from the perspective of central decision-makers and thus tend to neglect other actors.

Consequently, this approach leads the view that the framers of a policy decision are the key actors and that others are basically the instruments and impediments. As a result, politicians and administrators will be unable to control the implementation process when using this approach (Harris, 2007).

The other approach is the bottom-up approach in which a policy issue or idea from the bottom level go spiralling up each level or ladder of an administrative system and eventually to the top policy-making level, which rethink, plan, and design the necessary policy agenda and strategies in terms of political and economic viability. This perspective considers the entire network of political actors in a particular policy area and it also views implementation as a political process of harmony building and cooperation (Pülzl and Treib, 2007). Fundamentally, this approach focuses on the evaluation made at the micro level of policy enactment as well as the local factors that hinder intended policy outcomes (Matland, 1995). The classical bottom-up researchers are Elmore (1980, 2002) and Fritzen (2005). The criticisms of this approach often accentuate on its overemphasis on local decision making. Its critics argue that central policy-makers are able to set broad policy borders and guidelines that provide a needed structure to policy formulation and implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2002; Harris, 2007).

### **Purpose and significance of the study**

The purpose of this study was to identify and prioritize the important domains of professional development needs of school principals in the Muscat city district. The priority domains and their constituent items obtained from this study would assist the education authority to organize a systematic professional development program for upgrading the knowledge, competencies, and dispositions of school principals in Muscat as well as other regions in Oman, or school principals in other countries.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research used a translated and rearranged version of Salazar's (2002) survey instrument on professional development needs of school principals, i.e. the instrument was translated into Arabic and the needs domains were rearranged into instructional leadership and transformational leadership categories. There were a total of 67 items in the survey instrument, each having a four-point ordinal scale scored as:

*1: not important; 2: fairly important; 3: important; and 4: very important*

As for the sample of respondents for the survey, 80 school principals (65 %) were randomly selected from city district of Muscat, Oman. The survey questionnaire was mailed to the selected

**Table 1.** Internal consistency or reliability of domains in the survey instrument.

No	Factors	Reliability
1	Setting goals and determining outcomes	.753
2	Designing, Implementing and Evaluating Curriculum	.805
3	Building Teacher Professionalism and Instructional Skills	.879
4	Understanding Evaluation of School Performance	.701
5	Understanding Students' Development and Learning	.702
6	Problem Solving	.811
7	Building Shared Decision-making	.742
8	Research Knowledge Skills	.823
9	ICT Utilization	.825
10	Defining the Core Values and Beliefs of Education	.867
11	Creating a Learning Organization	.762
12	Communicating Effectively	.787
13	Building Team Commitment	.796
14	Team working Skills	.821
15	Resolving Conflicts (Building Consensus and Negotiating Leadership Capacity)	.748

principals, and they were requested to return the completed questionnaire in two weeks in a stamped envelope provided. Apart from that, observations and interviews were also made during school visitations to cross-check certain points and issues related to school leadership and management.

## RESULTS

Data obtained from the survey were analysed using a statistical package software. It is to be noted here that all respondents gave a response on the scale of either 3 (important) or 4 (very important), which strongly reflected data skewness, but that the principals in this study essentially needed training workshops dealing with all the items in the survey instrument. This is the actual reflection of the intensity of principals' professional needs in an education reform context in a developing country—which could be less intense in advanced countries.

Due to the skewness of data, we were curious to see the reliability of the Arabic and rearranged version of the survey instrument. Table 1 shows the reliability coefficient values (Cronbach alpha values) for the fifteen domains/factor groups of the instrument. Overall, the survey item groups had high reliability values, ranging from .702 to .879. According to Hair et al. (2010), Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) and Popham (1990), Cronbach's alpha of .50 above is satisfactory for internal consistency of the items.

Table 2 shows the overall results of the survey, as indicated by the mean score for all the fifteen professional needs domains that are all accentuated around the mean 3.50, i.e. most survey respondents rated 'important' or 'very important.' The results indicate that in

the reformative policy context in Oman, school principals are in a dire need for professional training programs that could enable them to perform effectively as transformational and instructional leaders in schools. Transformational leadership requires principals to inspire, motivate, and mobilize school staff and students to make the necessary reformative changes in the areas of instruction, learning, school climate, and technology utilization so as to turn all schools to be modernized excellent schools. High quality school facilities, high quality instruction, and high quality learning all happen simultaneously and effectively. Instructional leadership, on the other hand, requires school principals to focus on effective curriculum implementation, teacher professionalism, and student holistic development.

Principals are they key persons in school organization that assume the role of leadership, and they are very influential in shaping teacher professionalism, school improvement, and school performance. In this regard, professional development program should be made for each of the fifteen domains, and thus in Oman, the Ministry of Education should make 15 specific professional development modules for schools not only for Muscat, but for all other regions and districts in the country. Also, other countries in the Gulf region or in Africa or in the developing countries in Asia could learn from the Omani experience.

Furthermore, specific analysis was done for all the items in the survey, according to their domain, using simple descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Domains 1 to 9 pertain to instructional leadership of school principals in

**Table 2.** Overall results by mean score and standard deviation (SD) values for the fifteen domains of professional development needs of school principals.

No	Factors	Mean score	Sd
1	Setting goals and determining outcomes	3.4817	.08750
2	Designing, Implementing and Evaluating Curriculum	3.3867	.09609
3	Building Teacher Professionalism and Instructional Skills	3.4975	.08655
4	Understanding Evaluation of School Performance	3.4567	.05686
5	Understanding Students' Development and Learning	3.4400	.07810
6	Problem Solving	3.5020	.06573
7	Building Shared Decision-making	3.4940	.07861
8	Research Knowledge Skills	3.5600	.05354
9	ICT Utilization	3.4880	.09311
10	Defining the Core Values and Beliefs of Education	3.4550	.05802
11	Creating a Learning Organization	3.4817	.06616
12	Communicating Effectively	3.4567	.05508
13	Building Team Commitment	3.4980	.05450
14	Team working Skills	3.4600	.06356
15	Resolving Conflicts (Building Consensus and Negotiating Leadership Capacity)	3.5200	.12349

Muscat, Oman. As for Domain 1—setting goals and determining outcomes—results indicate that principals in a school reform process required training workshops or seminars on practical ways of vision setting, benchmarking outcomes, creating positive school culture, and setting performance standards. These are the main tasks of principals as an effective instructional leader, and the tasks are then translated to the core business of schools, which is curriculum designing and implementation.

As for Domain 2, curriculum designing becomes the top concern of most school principals (83.8% of them) who said that this aspect was very important for their professional development. Curriculum designing should take into account of the diversity of environment and culture so that there is relevance between the lessons learned and the life situation of children in different regions and communities in Oman. Knowledge and skills in the curriculum design domain would help principals in guiding their teachers to modify the curriculum according to students' aptitude level and the local context (McEwan, 2002). Principals also needed training sessions on how to implement the new curriculum effectively and on how to evaluate the curriculum.

As for Domain 3, the main task of a school principal is being an instructional leader, i.e. building teacher professionalism and instructional skills. All items in the instructional domain are highly important. As instructional leaders, principals should demonstrate their competency in being an excellent professional teacher who is capable of conducting in-house workshops on educational goals, education policies, school culture,

teacher professionalism, instructional design and technology, instructional competencies, current research on teaching and learning, and teaching standards and performance (Blasé, 1987). Apart from that, principals must also upgrade master teachers who should then supervise novice teachers. Actually, those are the core tasks of principals, and this means that principals must be chosen and appointed from the rank of high-performance senior teachers with post-graduate qualifications. Principalship is a critical job position because theoretically excellent principalship would yield excellent teachers, and consequently both are the critical variables for the formation of excellent schools (McEwan, 2002).

As for Domain 4, results show that principals need training workshops and seminars on how to improve and evaluate their school performance. They need to know the organizational components of the school first, then the strategies to improve each component, and then the evaluation items for each component. Staff might feel the heat to change and improve, and they would show resistance or other negative reactions. A lot of documentation usually comes along with performance evaluation. It is commonly assumed that school performance is largely centred on students' development and learning performance as well, and this is another aspect needed by principals in their professional work.

Consecutively for Domain 5, instructional leadership skills include developing teachers' instructional skills in classrooms, creating evaluation forms and criteria for student learning and academic performance, and planning

strategies on how to increase school performance. These tasks seem so challenging, demanding, and stressful on principals, and certainly they need expert educators to assist them via workshops and seminars (McEwan, 2002). For effective implementation of a reform policy in Oman, school principals urgently require training in the area of instructional leadership.

Another area of great concern among principals is Domain 6, i.e. handling problems of various kinds pertaining to curriculum implementation, instruction, learning, and performance evaluation. Principals need the knowledge and materials on problem solving process in school management. Analysis reveals that principals essentially needed the knowledge and competencies in: (i) researching the sources and extent of problems; (ii) identifying and classifying problems; (iii) formulating alternative solutions to problems; (iv) prioritising alternatives; and (v) action plan for tackling problems. Principals cannot do those tasks alone; they need a team of people to do damage control.

Problem solving leadership could be made easier through shared decision-making, as in Domain 7, which should involve teachers, students, and parents to share their ideas and to distribute responsibilities to many different groups of people, who could be the source of problems. Analysis reveals that principals needed the knowledge and skills on how to get teachers and students to participate proactively and share their ideas on school improvement. Basically people want to have the sense of ownership or the sense of belonging when they are called for a shared decision-making sessions (Sabatier, 1986). Rules, criteria, facts, alternatives, and intended outcomes need to be laid out specifically in making good decisions. Democracy is the spirit that should be in place when principals insist on sharing ideas in decision-making sessions, and objectivity is a matter of rule of thumb.

Another important need for professional development among principals is the ability to conduct simple research, especially action research, as in Domain 8, for understanding many issues and problems in school management and leadership, and consequently to derive appropriate and relevant solutions to address the issues and problems. Results indicate that principals in the reformative policy of Oman were in need of research knowledge and skills—not to the extent of doing a dissertation or thesis. They essentially needed the scientific mind in: (i) asking the right questions; (ii) searching the relevant literature online to find some answers; (iii) making notes based on observations or interviews in their school to find the answers; (iv) postulating some possible theories that fit the observed pattern of behaviours and values; and (v) getting the right solutions to address the emerging issues and problems contextually.

Another area of instructional leadership for schools in many developing countries is Domain 9, i.e. the utilization of information communication technology (ICT) in school management and leadership. The older generation of school principals seem to believe in 'the good old ways of doing things' and have the ICT phobia. This somewhat inhibits effectiveness in school management and leadership in the contemporary world of internet and globalization. Our study found that school principals were aware of the importance of ICT for enhancing instruction, learning, and management, and they required training programs for upgrading their knowledge and competencies on various softwares and applications that are necessary and useful. It could be seen at this juncture that too much is expected on school principals, and thus principalship appears to be a very challenging job.

The ensuing paragraphs now discuss the professional needs concerning transformational leadership of school principals. Results of data analysis for Domain 10 reveal that principals needed to know what were the core values and beliefs of education in Oman. Generally, among the prevalent beliefs were: (i) education is important for literacy the people and national development in many sectors; (ii) education is for quality of life; and (iii) education is the means for better socio-economic status of individuals. The core values in education were: (i) equal access to education for all children; (ii) high quality of schools and education; (iii) high professionalism in administration and management of the education system, in line with Islamic principles.

Transformational leadership also pertains to Domain 11, i.e. the ability of principals to apply the concept of learning organization in their school. They need to visualize and translate the core values and beliefs into the school vision and strategic plan of initiatives. Professional workshops and seminars would be the best platform for disseminating and instituting those values and beliefs in the education system (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999). This is the way of learning organization, i.e. an organization that continuously learn to make adaptations and innovations in response to developments and reformative demands in the external and internal environments (Senge, 2006). Our study found that principals required the knowledge and skills for encouraging their teachers to be responsive to professional issues, especially regarding effective instructional approaches and technologies for different subjects and age-groups of children in different localities. There is no one best teaching method that fits all subjects and situations; this is a fallacy if it is so. Apart from this, principals need to know how to teach their teachers via in-house workshops on doing simple research at the school level. Simple research projects can be viewed as a diagnostic tool for teachers to understand issues and problems in schools. Principals need to know how to

create positive learning environments for teachers, students, and parents for the purpose of school improvement and performance.

With regard to Domain 12, school principals in Muscat asserted that building team commitment was deemed vital in transformational leadership. Team commitment was a new word for many principals and teachers, and it was difficult to achieve it in the context many different ethnic groups and cultures in Oman. The results of our study showed that principals needed three capacities for building team commitment: (i) developing a strong and positive relationship among staff, students, and parents; (ii) opening input channels for getting suggestions and sharing ideas; (iii) providing a good mechanism for staff and students to work together and improve.

The next professional need, Domain 13, is building teamwork spirit among school managers, teachers, and students. Teamwork cannot happen if group dynamics is wrong. People must put away their differences and focus on what to be achieved together through mutual support and cooperation. Tribal or ethnic sentiments must be suppressed to form teamwork spirit, and transformational leaders must harness resources and strengths within groups. Group leaders must negotiate and articulate what needs to be done to group members in order to get the intended outcomes. Based on our study, results showed that the biggest concern in forming teamwork in schools was improving school performance, especially students' academic performance and teachers' job performance, according to the standards or benchmarks set by the Ministry of Education. Usually, teams in schools are based on a particular discipline of study or subject area, such as language team, science team, arts team, social science team, cultural team, sports team, and special education team. The team leaders are usually the head of various departments in schools, and they usually have meetings to plan and strategize what needs to be done to achieve the required standards and benchmarks. Teamwork spirit and commitment can be enhanced through incentives and rewards, or by the realization of ulterior moral purpose in the school vision and beliefs on education (Bass and Avolio, 1990; McEwan, 2002). Good articulation of the higher moral purpose and beliefs certainly should come from the inspirational capacity of a transformational leader.

As for Domain 14, clear communication of vision, goals, approaches, strategies, criteria, and rules surrounding the core business of education and schools is by itself an art of influencing and convincing people, but based on theories, facts, and evidence to corroborate the art. Clarity, logic, and sensibility of words and concepts in spoken language are also the vital elements. Thus, it is imperative for principals to learn the theories of communication and effective strategies in communication. Workshops and seminars on the art of effective

communication should be done by influential personalities who serve as role models.

Another advantage of good communication and articulation of points is conflict resolution through bargaining and negotiation. With regard to Domain 15, there are so many conflicts in school which arise from cultural differences, value differences, misconceptions, prejudices, workload distribution, and disciplinary issues. A transformational leader is one who is capable to resolve conflicts amicably among people, turning negative emotional climate to a positive one. The results of our study showed that principals need the knowledge and skills in managing conflicts, in converting conflicts to positive actions and emotions, in the art of negotiation, and in employing analytical and scientific thinking. The current thinking on this issue is that conflicts are the necessary part of human life which cannot be avoided, and conflicts are good for initiating new changes. Conflicts should not be viewed negatively and thus they should not be suppressed and controlled. Conflicts need to be resolved at the negotiation table by various strategies, such as collaboration, compromise, sharing, and tolerance (Avgar & Neuman, 2013). The objective is striking a win-win situation for all. New changes and perspectives usually arise from discourses in a conflict resolution process.

## Conclusion

The results of this study have shown that the school principals in the Muscat city district, Oman, actually do indeed need fifteen areas of professional development to improve their instructional and transformational leadership capacity, especially after the enforcement of basic education reform policy of 1998. Based on this research results, principals agreed that the government, especially the Ministry of Education of Oman, should conduct a systematic training program for school principals throughout the country in order to upgrade and upskill them (Fullan, 2001).

In addition, this study has shown that there is a wide gap between the theory and process of policy implementation. The top-down bureaucratic theory of policy implementation fails to consider diversity of human dispositions, diversity of values, diversity of strategies, and the lack of professional knowledge and skills of policy implementers at the school and district levels, especially whenever a big reform takes place. The top-down bureaucratic theory also fails to consider the importance of transformational leadership of school principals in inspiring and motivating teachers and students toward achieving the goals of basic education policy. And importantly, the top-down bureaucratic theory also fails to address the importance of incentives and

awards for stimulating commitment and motivation of people in policy implementation process. Instead, the tools of monitoring and supervision are commonly applied to steer people to do the right things; usually the more daunting the tools, the more alienated people become. Theoretically, according to Hill and Hupe (2002), positive human dispositions and incentives are two critical factors that affect the rate and effectiveness of policy implementation.

### Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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