A Comparison of Male and Female Saudi School Principals' Perspectives of Instructional Leadership

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Abstract: A qualitative study examining female and male Saudi principals' perceptions of instructional leadership was conducted using an electronic survey. While teacher supervision and supporting new instructional strategies were themes that emerged from the data from both genders, the female participants provided more detail on what they personally did in both areas and identified more altruistic personal virtues that they felt instructional leaders should model. Female Saudi principals also identified active problem-solving as part of their instructional leadership as compared to male Saudi principals who reported directing school improvement efforts through their leadership team. Theories of instructional leadership were developed for each gender from participant responses that indicate that female Saudi principals define and enact instructional leadership in more relational and interactive terms than their male counterparts.

Keywords: *Instructional leadership, Saudi education, principals.*

Introduction

Since Brookover and Lezotte's (1982) work on effective schools, research has continued to show that instructional leadership of principals is essential to the task of school improvement (Glick, 2011). The importance of principals as instructional leaders is not limited to American schools with research from schools around the world indicating that instructional leadership has a significant impact on student achievement. Studies conducted in England (Day et al., 2016) and Iran (Hallinger, et al., 2018) also found that principals who were instructional leaders had a positive impact on student achievement at both primary and secondary school levels. What instructional leadership is and looks like as far as actions undertaken by a principal in a school is somewhat fluid, however, with educators in different countries defining the concept based on their own experiences (Moller & Eggen, 2005; Salos et al., 2015; Urick & Bowers, 2017). There is limited research on instructional leadership of Arab schools, and several researchers who have studied the concept in non-Western countries recommended that future studies explore the unique national contexts of specific Middle Eastern states (Alameen et al., 2015; Arar & Oplatka, 2016; Loveless, 2016). Because instructional leadership has been identified by research as critical in shaping learning environments that support student learning and achievement in schools around the world (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2007; Ylimaki, 2014; Young & Mawhinney, 2012), it is important to further explore how school leaders in various national contexts define and enact their work as instructional leaders.

This qualitative study explored what elements of school leadership male and female principals in the Arab nation of Saudi Arabia identified as representative of their role as instructional leaders of their schools. The reason that gender was selected for a comparison of definitions and actions associated with instructional leadership in Saudi Arabia was that the nation has historically been male-dominated (Aldawsari, 2016; Kattan et al., 2016) but reforms in the 21ˢᵗ century have opened up educational leadership opportunities for women (Arar & Oplatka, 2016). However, women in Saudi Arabia still face many constraints because of their gender, and traditional views of leadership are slow to change (Albakry, 2016; Aldawsari, 2016; Arar & Oplatka, 2016).

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Even in the United States where women have been striving for equal rights and treatment for over a century, female leaders still face unique challenges because of their gender (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schock et al., 2018; Yoder, 2001). Social role and traditional authoritarian leadership expectations often discourage women from seeking leadership positions and often serve as barriers in career advancement for women who do seek leadership positions (Bear et al., 2017; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 20016; Kokok, 2014; Schock et al., 2018) Interestingly, transformational leadership, which is advocated by leadership experts in the United States as often the most effective form of leadership (Eagly, 2007), is often manifested by women more often than men (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Male leaders tend to be associated more often with a transactional leadership style which is associated with agentic traits such as being directive, maintaining a clear hierarchy between the leader and those led, using reward systems to address performance, and sometimes taking credit for work delegated to others as the right of leadership (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Given the historically patriarchal Saudi culture and the differences in leadership found in past studies, male and female Saudi principals' definitions and accounts of actions performed as instructional leaders were examined in this study to determine if differences existed and what those differences might be.

This qualitative study examined the responses of 22 female and 19 male principals in Saudi Arabia to an open-ended survey regarding how they defined instructional leadership and what they did as principals that exemplified their instructional leadership. Participants were recruited through personal visits, phone conversations, and emails to explain what participation in the study entailed. The principals in this study served a diverse range of schools including both public and private elementary and secondary schools serving from as few as 67 to over 3500 students. In order to better understand the design of the study and the findings, a review of the development of the concept of instructional leadership, the role of gender in leadership, and the unique social and educational context of school leaders in Saudi Arabia follows.

Instructional Leadership and the Saudi Context

The definition of instructional leadership has evolved since Brookover and Lezotte (1982) and Leithwood and Montgomery (1982) first developed the concept. DeBrevoise (1984) wrote that instructional leadership was "those actions that a principal [took], or delegate[ed] to others, to promote growth in student learning" (p. 15), however this is so general. The definition articulated by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) has been the most widely used in empirical studies and focused on the following three specific actions: definition of school mission, management of the instructional program, and development of a positive learning climate within a school. Andrews et al. (1991) built upon Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) work and identified four strategies utilized by principals who are instructional leaders. These strategies address the provision of resources for professional development and assessment of student learning; communication and development of an understanding of the school vision, goals, and learning culture; and the provision of feedback and guidance to teachers on an ongoing basis.

The development of a learning culture has specifically been further elaborated on as more research was conducted. Spillane et al. (2004) reviewed the literature on instructional leadership and added to the work of Andrews et al. (1991) by emphasizing the development of trust, collaboration, and academic press among teachers necessary for a learning culture to be established. Hallinger (2005) revisited the definition set forth with Murphy twenty years earlier and articulated a "mutual influence process" of collaboration and dialogue between teachers and instructional leaders in developing a school learning culture. Shared leadership was discussed by Stonge et al. (2008) as a hallmark of instructional leadership of learning-centered school cultures, and Printy et al. (2010) described this sharing of leadership between principals and teachers as "integrated leadership." Integrated leadership fosters the development of a school culture focused on intellectual development by encompassing "teachers' professional learning and growth (talking and collegial dialogues) and various mediating educational and organizational practices (missions, goals, school climate, curriculum, etc.)," and thus covering all elements of Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) definition.

Several states organizations have worked with universities to develop new articulations of the dimensions of instructional leadership. In 2017, the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington listed the development of vision, mission, and learning-focused culture; improvement of instructional practices; allocation of resources; and management of systems and processes in their work with schools to document improved teacher practices and student learning related to these four dimensions. The California Charter Schools Association's *Instructional Leadership Framework* (2017) included change leadership; equity leadership; curriculum, instruction, and assessment leadership; data driven leadership; and culture of continuous improvement leadership in their elaboration of what instructional leaders do to promote student learning. The New York City Department of Education (2019) developed an instructional leadership framework inventory that focused on strengthening core instruction, knowing every student well, and the use of shared and inclusive curriculum to be used by instructional leadership teams consisting of school administrators and teachers. While these are just a few examples of how the definition of instructional leadership has been adapted to reflect various organizational needs, a broader effort by the National Policy Board for Education Administration (NPBEA) in 2015 impacted how states across America prepare, license, and evaluate principals.

The NPBEA's Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) were revised in 2015 based on "an extraordinary amount of research into educational leadership over the past 10 years" (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 21). These standards serve as the basis for principal preparation programs, state licensure requirements, and principal evaluation criteria across the United States (Murphy, 2017). Each of the 10 standards can be categorized under the three broad categories developed by Hallinger and Murphy in 1985. The development of a school mission is addressed in standard one regarding mission, vision, and core values. The management of instructional programs is covered in standard four on curriculum, instruction, an assessment; standard six that addresses professional capacity of school personnel; standard nine outlining operations and management; and standard 10 which covers school improvement efforts. The promotion of a positive learning-focused school climate is addressed in standard two on professional norms and ethics of educators, standard three which outlines equity and cultural responsiveness practices, standard five that discusses the development of a community of care and support for students, standard seven which addresses the development of a professional community of teachers and staff, and standard eight that outlines the meaningful engagement of families and the community to support student learning.

The definitions of instructional leadership presented here have predominantly been developed through research conducted in American or Western nations. Urick and Bowers (2017) studied principals and teachers from 20 countries and found that there was not a common understanding of instructional leadership, however, school leaders typically identified the "(1) setting goals and vision for the organization, (2) promoting and leading professional development of teachers, and (3) supervising instruction" as elements of instructional leadership (Urick & Bowers, 2017, p. 2). Salos et al. (2015) drew upon Moller and Eggen's 2005 study to study how principals in Norway, Sweden, and Finland constructed meaning regarding their roles as instructional leaders. Salos et al. found that a narrative approach to understanding the phenomenon of instructional leadership is helpful in capturing unique national and cultural contexts that influence how instructional leadership is both defined and enacted. The questions asked of participants in this study were left very open-ended so as not to force a simplification of the definition of instructional leadership and to give voice to elements unique to male and female principals in Saudi Arabia.

The construct of pedagogical leadership which considers the praxis of theory and actions of school leaders within specific contexts unique to each school and school system was also utilized by the researchers in conducting this study (Male & Palaiologou, 2015). Male and Palaiologou explained that, "Leadership as pedagogical praxis is a set of actions imbued with theoretical substance and supported by a system that we claim as the ecology of the community of education settings" (p. 220). Furthermore, the ecology of a community includes the participation of learners, teachers, family, and community members and is shaped by internal values, beliefs, and the local economy and external forces including societal values, the global economy, mass media, information communication technologies and social networking, and such things as the national curriculum and "the 'academic press' of student test scores" (p. 220). The questions in this study were phrased to allow the influence of internal and external forces outlined by Male and Palaiologou to be included, thus encouraging participants to address the board contexts in which they served as instructional leaders. This was viewed as essential given the highly centralized education system of Saudi Arabia and the educational and societal reforms implemented in the 21st century, particularly reforms impacting the role of women in Saudi society and the work force.

Educational Leadership and the Role of Women in Saudi Arabia

As the role of women has changed in Saudi Arabia in the past two decades, so too has the educational opportunities available to them (Alameen et al., 2015; Alnahdi, 2014; Arar & Oplatka, 2016). Prior to 1960, females in Saudi Arabia were provided only an informal education at home or sent to religious schools to learn the Quran or other practical subjects to prepare them to be wives and mothers (Alyami, 2016; Arar & Oplatka, 2016). King Saud established formal primary and secondary schools for women in 1959, and the first university for women was established in 1979 (Alyami, 2016). As more women attained higher education degrees, the majority went into the field of education, particularly at the primary level, as this was considered appropriate for women in their role as caretakers of children (Arar & Oplatka, 2016).

King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz appointed a woman to the position of Vice Minister of Education in 2009, included women in the national Shura Council in 2013, and gave women the right to vote in 2015 (Alyami, 2016). The King's changes have supported the growth of women in leadership positions, however, women are limited to leading all female schools from the elementary level upward (Arar & Oplatka, 2016). Because female enrollment in Saudi schools is higher than male enrollment according to Saudi Ministry of Education (2016a), women have a large presence as educational leaders in Saudi Arabia. The powerful governing boards that shape Saudi educational policy remain "predominantly in the hands of the exclusively male religious authority" (Arar & Oplatka, p. 102).

Women face many challenges to obtaining leadership positions due to deeply-rooted cultural expectations that view leadership "as an exclusively male realm of activity" and "women are seen as unfit and lacking the necessary skills and ability to become leaders" (Arar & Oplatka, 2016, p. 92). Indeed, Gorney (2016) said that Saudi Arabia was the "most profoundly gender-segregated nation on earth" (p. 11). Saudi society is shaped by the concept of patriarchy rooted in Islamic beliefs (Abalkhail, 2017; Alyami, 2016), wherein women are "expected to forfeit their professional promotion

for the benefit of men's advancement, to avoid undermining the patriarchal structure of Arab society" (Shapira, 2006, p. 705). Metcalfe (2011) coined the term "Islamic Gender Regime" to describe the assumed social functions of men and women based on gender as follows:

> Cultural processes assume that a woman will marry early; that her contribution to the family will be as a homemaker; that the household will be headed by a man and that the man will provide financially and 'protect" the family. Male protection is seen as the justification for the exercise of authority over women in all areas of decision making that relates to the public sphere. (p. 133)

Male protection takes many forms from ensuring segregation between the genders in public spaces and that family always takes precedence in a woman's life to national systems that allocate jobs to women that are appropriate to a woman's role in Saudi society. In 2017, royal decrees relaxed the guardianship laws and reversed the ban on women driving (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017) which impact male protection of women in Saudi Arabia, however the effects of these changes are not yet been explored.

Saudi cultural norms constrain what professions they may chose and who they may interact with (Arar & Oplatka, 2016) but also hamper their movement into leadership roles due to the "assumptions of men as natural leaders" and the view that the display of "'masculine' leadership behaviors" is unacceptable (Abalkhail, 2017, p. 167). These norms also dissuade women from assuming leadership positions and make them doubt their own efficacy as leaders (Abalkhail, 2017; Alsubaihi, 2016; Arar & Oplatka, 2016; Metcalfe, 2011). Al-Asfour et al. (2017) found that women in Saudi Arabia face the following challenges:

Lack of mobility; the salience of gender stereotypes; gender discrimination in the workplace; limited opportunities for growth, development, career advancement; excessive workload cause by a lack of family-work balance, and gender-based challenges related to dealing with pregnancy. (p. 184)

The development of self-confidence and networks dependent on other female leaders, as well as support by male family members, have been suggested as means by which women can more easily take on educational leadership roles with the continued recognition that many of the challenges that Saudi women face in the workplace are systemic and will take a great deal of time to change (Abalkhail & Allan, 2016; Arar & Oplatka, 2016).

Interestingly, research has suggested that Arab female educational leaders often adopt a leadership style typically associated with masculine authoritative traits early in their careers (Arar et al., 2013), and after their authority is established, shift to a more androgenous style (Oplatka, 2006). Abdul-Ghaffar (2011), however, found that female Saudi principals utilized an autocratic leadership styles as compared to their male counterparts who used an analytic leadership style. Alsubaihi (2016) discussed the many facets that have been researched regarding gender differences including the handling of stress, communication, influence tactics, and leadership styles and concluded that, while women's actions and communication may differ from men, leadership styles may be more contingent on cultural and organizational contexts. Aziz et al. (2017) found in their study of Pakistani principals that both male and female principals believed that male principals were better decision makers while both genders were viewed as possessing conflict resolution skills, flexibility, self-knowledge, and high levels of commitment, although the reasons that participants gave for their responses varied a great deal. As mentioned earlier, Western research has linked transformational leadership, noted as the preferred style to enact organizational change, to the leadership of women more than men who frequently display characteristics of transactional leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Hallinger et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 28 studies that showed female principals to be more likely to display active instructional leadership than male principals. Saudi Arabia, however, was not among the countries included in the data sets analyzed by Hallinger et al. Shaked et al. (2018) studied principals of Israeli schools and found that female principals (who mostly led elementary schools) relied on their instructional experiences and knowledge whereas the male principals in their study relied on formal authority given to them through regulations and their own decision-making skills. Also, female Israeli principals identified the importance of positive relationships with teachers as necessary for effective instructional leadership while nearly half of the male principals felt that relationships between teachers and school leaders had no impact on their ability to be instructional leaders.

It should be noted that the current requirements for an educator to become a principal in Saudi Arabia are as follows: completion of at least a Bachelor's degree, at least four years of teaching experience, an "A" grade on evaluations in the last two years, and two years of experience as a vice principal (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2016b). Prior to the establishment of the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Saudi Arabia, principals were selected on their teaching experience alone. Meeting the requirements to be a principal does not, however, always translate into being able to be an effective school leader (Khalil & Karim, 2016). In 2010, Mathis reported that three-quarters of the principals she studied were self-educated regarding school leadership. Efforts to develop a school leadership training program in Saudi Arabia were described by Khalil and Karim in 2016 as still limited by few training centers, gender segregation requirements in training, and lack of knowledge among MOE personnel as to the content necessary for effective school leadership. Karim (2014) reported that 85% of the 180 principals studied had attended four or more training sessions of one or two days and 35% had received a full week of training. Recommendations to better prepare schools leaders, particularly women who would be restricted from traveling to the few training sites because they would need to be

accompanied by a male guardian, included more training sites conveniently located, offering training sessions through 21st century technology (online for example), and including teachers from private schools as well as graduate students majoring in education (Alsharari, 2010; Alyawar, 2010; Khalil & Karim, 2016).

This study was undertaken to all to the understanding of instructional leadership in the Saudi context. Differences and similarities between male and female Saudi participant responses were examined because of the traditional male-dominated, patriarchal nature of Saudi society and prior research that identified gender differences in perceptions of leadership, leadership styles, and leadership behaviors. A qualitative study of open-ended survey responses from 22 female and 19 male Saudi principals were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2014; Vogt et al., 2012) in order to allow the unique Saudi educational context to be constructed by participants rather than through the imposition of predominantly Western definitions of instructional leadership. While the findings are discussed in relation to the literature on gender differences in leadership and specifically instructional leadership (Fuller, 2010; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Hallinger et al., 2016; Kis & Konan, 2014; Krüger, 2008; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Shaked et al., 2018; Torrance et al., 2017), the researchers did not want to adopt a critical perspective in the collection or analysis of the data. Because prior research has varied a great deal as to whether women and men have or develop different leadership styles, particularly given different cultural contexts, a focus was kept on what each group of respondents expressed until theories of female and male instructional leadership were developed based on the data collected in this study.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how male and female principals in Saudi Arabia defined instructional leadership and what actions they felt exemplified their roles as instructional leaders. As discussed earlier, Saudi Arabia was selected because of the numerous educational reforms in the last two decades intended to increase student achievement as well as a number of reforms that have positively impacted the opportunities for women to serve as school leaders (Arar & Oplatka, 2016). The research question guiding this study was as follows: How do male and female Saudi principals define and enact instructional leadership of their schools?

A constructionist epistemology was used in this study to examine the phenomenon of Saudi principals' instructional leadership definitions and what actions they perform in their role as principals that they feel are characteristic of instructional leadership. The constructionist epistemology was appropriate to guide this study because participants were viewed as creating meaning from their lived experiences. Crotty (2013) explained that a constructionist perspective espouses the view that "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting" rather than simply being either objective or subjective (p. 43). A constructionist perspective allowed the researchers to focus on the meaning that each individual created based on their beliefs and experiences which was particularly relevant given the contrasting educational systems of the two nations (Crotty, 2013). The framework for pedagogical leadership developed by Male and Palaiologou (2015) was used to ground the study because it allowed the researchers to analyze the responses of participants regarding the interactions of the female and male Saudi school leaders within the ecology of their educational and professional communities, as well as the activities and construction of knowledge by participants in regards to supporting the learning of students at the participants' schools.

Data Collection

In order to answer the research question "How do male and female Saudi principals define and enact instructional leadership of their schools?" guiding this study, an open-ended electronic survey was developed that asked questions regarding participants' professional background, formal and informal preparation for school leadership in general and instructional leadership in particular, and various demographic questions regarding gender, size and location (rural, suburban, or urban) of the school they currently worked at in addition to questions regarding what they felt they did as principals that were elements of instructional leadership. Questions were phrased in broad terms so that respondents were encourage to address elements described by Male and Palaiologou (2015) on the internal and external axes of the ecology of the community in which the leaders in this study served. Questions were written in two languages, English and Arabic, in order to allow participants to response in their preferred language. Arabic responses were translated to English by the researchers who are native Arabic speakers.

Participants

After Institutional Review Board approval for the study was obtained and the open-ended survey developed, voluntary participation in the study was sought from a snowball sample of male and female Saudi principals. The researchers fluent in Arabic, one a male and the other a female, initially contacted two or three principals of their same gender to explain the study and seek voluntary participation. These initial prospective participants were contacted either through a personal visit or phone call and were also asked to recommend other Saudi principals as potential participants. Because the Saudi researchers were conducting the study through an American university, the personal contacts were deemed necessary to allay any concerns that potential participants might have in responding to questions and promote honest responses based on the assurance of confidentiality.

Twenty-two female and 19 male Saudi principals agreed to participate in this study. Participants were sought until diverse representation of school sizes and types was achieved in survey respondents. This included leaders of both public and private schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Schools sizes ranged from a very small newly created school of 67 students in the first year of operation to a school that had been operating for over 50 years and had over 3,500 students enrolled. More than half of the female Saudi principals in the study led elementary schools or schools that included the elementary grades, whereas half of the male Saudi principals led high schools. Nearly a third of the female participants had between one and 10 years or between 11 and 20 years of experience as educators, while two-thirds of the male participants were in their second decade of serving as educators. All of the male principals and 86% of the female principals had taught before moving into school leadership, and 59% of the female and 63% of the male principals had also held the position of assistant principal prior to becoming a principal. Positions other than school administration had also been held by 27% of the female principals. Each participant had earned a Bachelor's degree, and three female principals had earned a Master's degree.

Data Analyses

Using NVIVO 11 software, the responses of the male and female Saudi principals were first open coded as recommended by Saldaña (2013). Axial codes were then developed among and between responses of the male and female respondents separately. Axial codes were then collapse to identify themes among the responses of each gender group. A model or theory of instructional leadership definition and enactment for each group of participants, female Saudi principals and male Saudi principals, was developed. Finally, themes and theories were compared between the two data sets to identify differences and similarities in the perceptions of instructional leadership between female and male principals in Saudi Arabia who participated in this study.

To ensure trustworthiness of data analyses, at least two researchers developed open codes for each participant response separately then conferred to identify common open codes. At least two researchers then developed axial codes based on the agreed upon open codes and conferred again. Finally, the researchers agreed upon themes from the axial codes identified and developed the working theory models. An audit trail was kept of the coding, thematic identification, and model development decisions.

Findings

Both male and female Saudi principals in this study identified teacher supervision as their primary instructional leadership task. Both genders also identified the support of new teaching strategies as another prominent component of instructional leadership. This was discussed as in addition to teacher supervision practices, so the support of new teaching strategies was identified as a separate theme, second only to the practice of teacher supervision. The modeling of positive personal attributes was discussed by every male principal but only 81% of female Saudi principals, however female participants went into great detail regarding the attributes that an instructional leader should model. Male Saudi principals in this study also identified school improvement efforts as a fourth area of instructional leadership, whereas specifically modelling life-long learning, problem solving, and the development of student curriculum, particularly enrichment courses were the additional components of instructional leadership identified by the female participants. The themes or components identified by each gender of Saudi principals is discussed in more detail in the next two sections, followed by a discussion of the theories of instructional leadership that were developed to reflect the responses of the male and female participants in this study.

Female Saudi Principal Instructional Leadership Components

Six themes of instructional leadership emerged from the female Saudi principal responses. These included (in order of percentage of respondents identifying each component) the following: supervision of teachers (100%), modelling of life-long learning (100%), support of new teaching strategies (95%), modeling of personal virtues (81%), problem solving (64%), and development of curriculum (50%). Female Saudi principals in this study also identified five specific aspects of what they did as instructional leaders in the supervision of teachers which included classroom observations, providing feedback to teachers, supporting the use of new technology in classrooms, personal review of student achievement data, and review of input from coordinators and teacher supervisors regarding teacher performance. A theory of female Saudi instructional leadership was developed based on the participants responses and is illustrated in Figure 1.
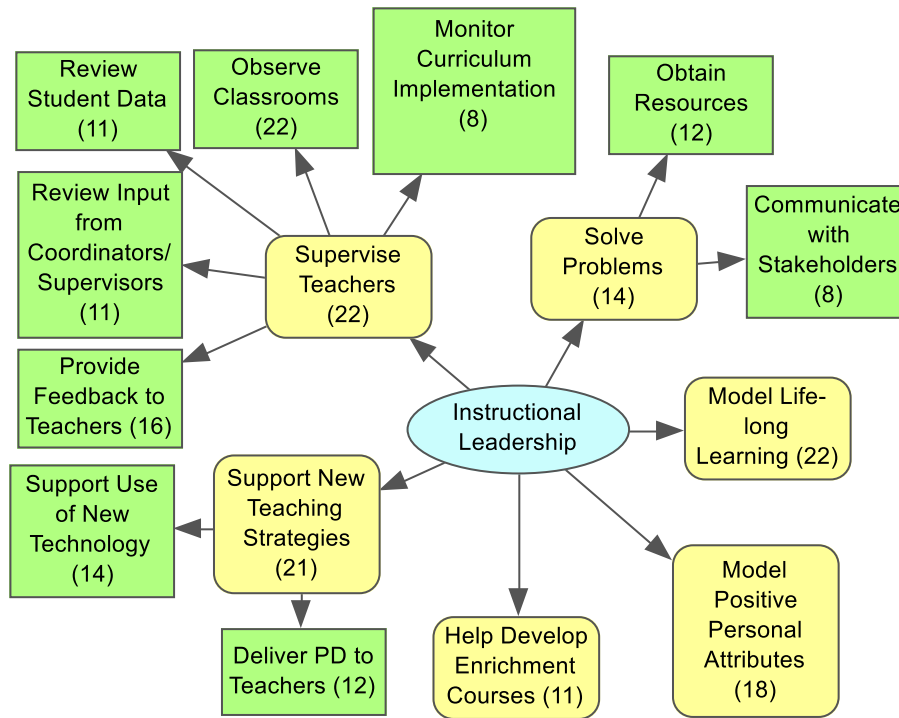
Figure 1: Saudi Female Principal Instructional Leadership Model (with number of participants who discussed each topic).

The most predominant theme of teacher supervision was discussed by each female participant both in the initial questions regarding instructional leadership and across all questions. One Saudi female principal explained in response to the question as to what they do that they consider to be instructional leadership that, "Having individual discussions with teachers after I attend their classes to improve their performance because students' achievement is a mirror to their teachers' performance in classrooms, so when teachers improve their performance, students improve their achievement." Subthemes within this category included daily or weekly classroom observations, feedback provided to teachers, review of student data, review of feedback from coordinators or supervisors, and curriculum monitoring.

A second theme of instructional leadership identified by 96% of the female principals in the study was the support of new teaching strategies which included the subtheme of delivering professional development to teachers and supporting the use of new technology. One principal explained how she develops a training plan to meet the needs of teachers she observes in classrooms at the beginning of each semester and then either delivers that training herself or asks a teacher who is strong in a particular area to lead the training that she sets up. Cooperative learning and increasing student engagement through more active learning were two of the most frequently discussed classroom strategies, however 41% of the female principals in the study also discussed how they try to keep up on the latest technology so they can share how to use it in the classroom with their teachers. Actively seeking out how to use new technology "helped me to facilitate technology to enhance student learning," one Saudi female principal explained.

Female participants also identified problem solving (with sub-themes of obtaining needed resources and communicating with stakeholders) and the development of curriculum, particularly enrichment courses or activities, as elements of their instructional leadership. Whether it is replacing a teacher or something that occurs that is against an MOE rule, the female principals in this study explained that making decisions, even when they had to seek more information to inform that decision, made them instructional leaders. "I need to have a good reason why I did it this way," one participant elucidated. Obtaining resources, either professional in terms of recruiting teachers or goods and services such in order to make repairs or maintain the school and grounds, was also discussed regarding decision making. While this may not seem to be directly related to instructional leadership, the participants framed the choice of teachers who can help students achieve an instructional leadership decision. Likewise, participants saw having a safe and inviting school environment both in the school and surrounding grounds as laying a groundwork for both teachers and students to concentrate on learning. Decisions around curriculum also were noted by over a third of the female Saudi principals. Principals in private schools noted more latitude to adjust curriculum, however, the addition of enrichment opportunities for students were described by participants as an area that they had been able to exercise their instructional leadership.

All of the female principals also discussed that the modelling of life-long or continuous learning was part of their role as instructional leaders, and many (81%) of these principals also listed specific positive personal attributes that they thought all school leaders should nurture and model as instructional leaders. Whether it is through obtaining an advanced degree or additional training, consulting with experts, researching a new educational practice, or keeping up

on new technology applications, female principals in this study declared the need to "continue updating the knowledge and practice" in order to be a successful instructional leader. Virtues that participants identified that they felt helped them to be instructional leaders included the following: persistence, confidence, patience, creativity, fairness, flexibility, honesty, positivity, and showing love and loyalty to those that they worked with and served.

Male Saudi Principal Instructional Leadership Components

Four components of instructional supervision were identified by male Saudi principals who participated in this study. These components included the following (in order of percentage of respondents discussing each component): supervision of teachers (100%), modelling of personal virtues (100%), supporting new teaching strategies (89%), and supporting school improvement efforts (89%). Male participants identified four aspects of teacher supervision that they felt illustrated their instructional leadership including classroom evaluations, monthly evaluation meetings with leadership teams, review of data regarding student and teacher performance with leadership teams, and personal follow-up with teachers. A theory of male Saudi instructional leadership was developed based on participant responses and is shown in Figure 2.
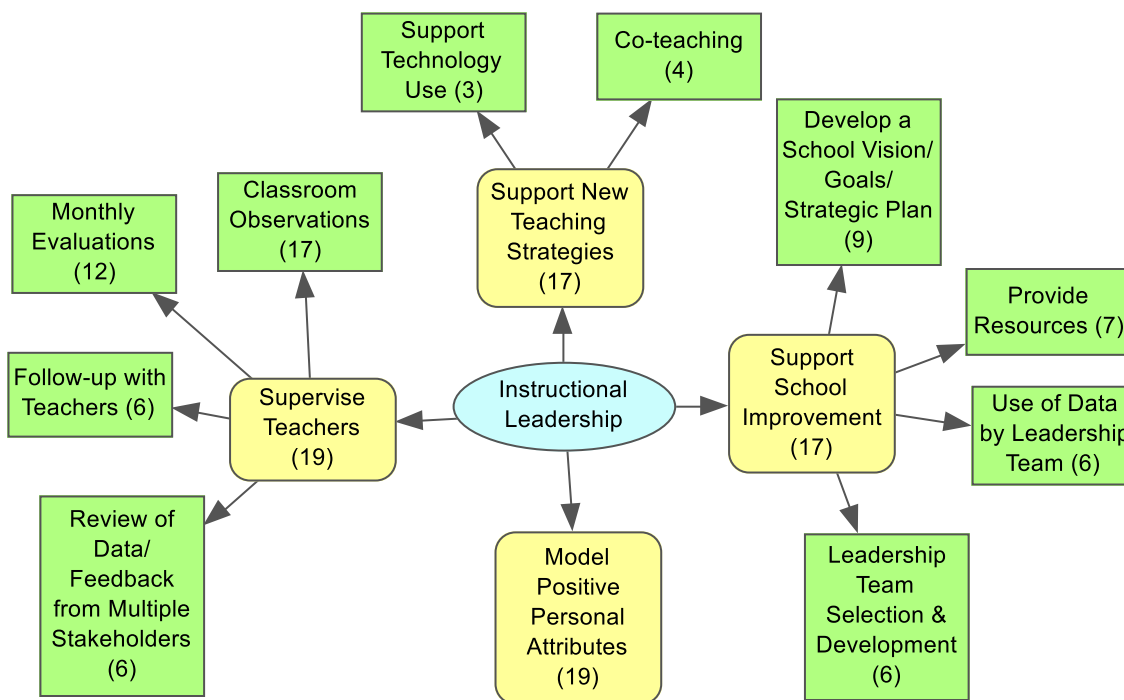

Figure 2 : Saudi Male Principal Instructional Leadership Model (with number of participants who discussed each topic).

Male Saudi principals also each identified teacher supervision as a core component of their instructional leadership, similar to the responses of the female principals in this study. The male participants identified teacher observations as their way as instructional leaders of "working with teachers to support students." In addition to classroom observations, monthly meetings with teachers to discuss their performance and any issues seen in classrooms, additional follow-up conversations with teachers regarding their instructional practices, and the review of data and feedback from multiple stakeholders were described as part of teacher supervision necessary to be an instructional leader. One male principal explained that he demonstrated instructional leadership "through observation and supervision visits, follow-up records of teachers, and through the statistical results of students." Informal classroom "walk-ins" were mentioned by a third of the male principals in this study as part of their teacher supervision practices. Another principal described the sharing of teacher supervision with his assistant principal and subject-area teacher leaders who then report their opinions to him, noting that he "reviews all" when evaluating a teacher. A private school principal also discussed how he listens to the "opinions of beneficiaries" including parents and students as part of his supervision of teachers.

Supporting new teaching strategies were identified by 89% of the male principals as part of their instructional leadership. Subthemes for supporting new teaching strategies focused on the implementation of technology and co-teaching in the classroom to promote more "active learning" and "to shift towards modern, constructional learning." Technology was explained by one male principal as "a means for the teacher in delivering the information to the student in a simple, interesting, and attractive to the attention and focus" of students. Technology was thus a "learning resource to apply learning strategies activit[ies]." Over 20% of the male principals in the study also noted the use of co-teaching strategies in their schools as one of the instructional strategies that they had helped to implement.

Supporting school improvement efforts was also identified by 89% of the male Saudi principals as a component of their instructional leadership. Subthemes for school improvement support included the development of a school vision, goal, and/or strategic plan; providing necessary resources; selecting and developing a strong leadership team; and using data with the leadership team to make decisions. "Put [out] a clear vision and share it with your team" in order to move your school forward one male principal advised, echoing the responses of others. Making sure that the right people were part of the leadership team was also mentioned by almost a third of the male Saudi principals as important for building support for instructional leadership. Principals who "have a dream of capacity," goals, and a plan of action to accomplish those goals were viewed as more effective instructional leaders. Modern technology and professional development opportunities were identified as resources that it was incumbent upon a school instructional leader to secure. Weekly or monthly meetings with teachers and with the school's administrative team as well as the review of student achievement data with the administrative team was also discussed as a means of "identifying strengths and weaknesses" that would lead to school improvement by almost a third of male participants.

The final component of instructional leadership that male Saudi principals in this study identified was personal virtue. Each of the male principals discussed positive personal attributes that they and other instructional leaders should cultivate in order to be successful. The characteristics identified included positivity, creativity, patience, wisdom, and fairness.

While the female and male Saudi principals who participated in this study agreed on teacher supervision, supporting new instructional strategies, and modeling personal virtues as components of instructional leaders, the depth of explanation of what was involved in these components and why these components were important varied between gender groups. The female principals in the study also identified more personal involvement with teachers and all stakeholders in the other components of instructional leadership that they discussed. These differences and a comparison of the theories of instructional leadership developed from participants' responses will be examined more closely in the following section.

Discussion

Even though the data collection process for both genders were identical, only two of the male principals provided details and examples in their answers whereas the female principals provided a great deal of detail and numerous examples. Male participants typically responded in short phrases, such as "monthly evaluation meetings with leadership team and informal walk-ins" whereas female participants described their part in teacher supervision in much more detail. For example, one female principal explained the following:

> We have daily notes from my walk through and observation. My teachers are well prepared all the time. I enter the classrooms any time during the day to observe teachers and my students are used to this system. Sometimes specialists visit my school without any notice and they apologize from coming without notification, but I tell them it is okay; my teachers are prepared any time to be observed. In addition to this, teachers do self-evaluation every month so I can know their evaluation to their performance; how much the evaluate themselves.

Similarly, female principals in the study also elaborated on how they try to be collaborative with teachers to improve their practice such as the principal who said that it is important to her to, "attend classrooms and the good discussion that I have with the teacher after my attendance. I do not like the conversation the have with the teacher to be coming from one side by giving instructions; I like it to be from both sides where both of us create plans for improvement." Male participants referred to follow-up with teachers rather than providing feedback to teachers, and they described more one-way rather than mutual communication between themselves and teachers. For example, one male principal said that he, "explores some recommendations for development" with teachers after an observation and several others only discussed follow-up on teacher performance as conferring with others on their leadership team to see how a teacher was doing.

While positive personal attributes were identified by all the male participants and 81% of the female participants in this study as being important for an instructional leader, the male principals identified traits by saying, "Be fair" or "Be wise." The female participants, however, elaborated on the purpose and benefits of modelling particular traits, such as the principal who shared the following thoughts on what an instructional leader must be:

> …a leader and not a manager. A school leader must be fair in all aspects of her/his career. In addition, a school leader should be a light for stakeholders around her/him, be a developer, creative, and persistent in order to be a role model so she/he can reach the desired goal, which is the superiority of the student, teacher, and the community around the school.

Female principals also unanimously identified life-long learning as a characteristic of an instructional leader which was identified as a separate theme from personal virtues based on the frequency and depth that participants discussed the idea. Life-long learning was discussed as something that not only benefited the school leader but also helped to instill the same practice in the teachers and students who were being led. The male principals only discussed obtaining more

training to be more personally effective. The modelling of virtues also was seen as important "for the impact on the employees to raise the school environment and achieve the desired goals" of the principal by male participants.

As discussed earlier, female leadership is increasingly associated with transformational leadership which is increasingly valued in the field of educational leadership (Thorpe, 2018). Focusing more on communal traits such as problem-solving, development and empowerment of followers, responsiveness to the individual needs of followers, transformational leadership has a moral dimension of responsibility for followers' well-being (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Transformational leadership also embraces collaboration and a reliance on personal relationships between a leader and followers. The responses noted above from female Saudi principals underscore the importance of developing individual relationships with teachers, modeling positive traits to inspire others rather than only for personal benefit, and working collaborative with all school personnel. One female principal confessed what she identified as a short-coming to be corrected when she explained the following:

> I admit that I have a centralized leadership style where I don't give authorization to other employees. I like to do everything by myself and because of that I am took a course recently called "effective delegation" in order to learn from it.

This example illustrates the many references to the importance of working with others and collaborating among the female principals' responses where a concern for the development of positive relationships were expressed which is associated with female leadership behaviors (Louis et al., 2016).

The five aspects of teacher supervision that the female Saudi principals discussed were all activities that they reported being personally involved in and not delegated to others. They observed classrooms, personally reviewed student data, individually reviewed input from coordinators or subject-area supervisors, personally provided feedback to teachers, and actively supported the use of new technology in classrooms by learning how to use the technology and sometimes modelling its use for teachers. They also personally monitored the curriculum being taught while observing classrooms. The activities that the female principals were personally conducted in order to understand and respond to the needs of teachers and, by extension, students. The four aspects that the male principals identified as part of their instructional leadership only included one activity that was personally conducted and that was classroom observations. The less interactive approach to instructional leadership by men as compared to women is similar to findings by Hallinger et al. (2016). The follow-up with teachers, review of performance data, and monthly evaluations were all identified as leadership team activities by the male principals in this study. The four male principals who discussed supporting co-teaching as a new instructional strategy talked about ensuring that co-teaching was taking place rather than participating in co-teaching to model this as new instructional strategy. This could indicate a more transactional, hierarchical view of school leadership as compared to the female Saudi principals' views expressed in this study (Shaked et al., 2018). Even in the support of new teaching strategies, the female principals shared how they helped to deliver professional development whereas the male principals only identified the new strategies that they had supported the implementation of, again expressing a distancing between the principal and teachers in the male responses that was not present in the female principal responses. Similarly, the female principals in this study noted their development of enrichment curriculum while no such direct involvement with new curriculum was identified by the male participants, also indicating a more active, hands-on leadership role by the women who led schools in this study also identified by Shaked et al. (2018).

In defining problem-solving as a component of instructional leadership, female Saudi principals who participated in this study stressed the importance of relationship building through collaboration with others to obtain resources and also through collaboration with stakeholders which echoes prior findings by Shaked et al. (2018). One female principal advised that instructional leaders should "read about emotional intelligence and social intelligence because, as long as you understand people around you whether teachers or parents, you will succeed." The male principals in this study saw procuring resources for the school as part of their general efforts to direct school improvement efforts. Interestingly, half of the male principals identified the development of a vision, goals, or most frequently, a strategic plan as part of their role as instructional leaders to improve student achievement. The use of others on the leadership team also was identified by a third of the male principals as important for moving school improvement efforts forward. The female principals, however, talked more about what they did as individuals to address problems or improve their schools even when referring to leadership teams. Thus, there appeared to be a delineation between collaborative efforts where the principal worked with others identified by female principals and the delegation of activities where the principal might plan an effort but others would actually implement that endeavor identified by male principals in this study.

As illustrated by the foregoing examples, the differences between male and female Saudi principal responses in identifying components of instructional leadership reflect what has been noted in earlier research regarding the importance placed on relationships, consideration and responsiveness to the needs of followers, and a more interactive style of leadership of females as compared to males (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hallinger et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2016; Shaked et al., 2018; Thorpe, 2018). The responses of participants in this study did differ, however, on the elements of instructional leadership identified by Andrews et al. (1991) and elaborated by Urick and Bowers (2017) with the exception of the supervision of instruction, although even the actions identified as contributing to the supervision of

instruction differed between males and females in this study. Development of a school vision and goals were discussed by the male principals in this study but not by the female principals. Professional development was discussed regarding new teaching strategies by both female and male Saudi principals, however the female Saudi principals described delivering professional development whereas the male principals only discussed supporting such learning without further detail as to what their part in that support entailed. Notably, the participants in this study, both male and female, discussed the importance of personal virtues as important for instructional leaders to be successful which had not been emphasized in past research.

Conclusion

This study adds to the small body of literature on Saudi female and male principals in general and specifically on instructional leadership. The principals in this study did include in their responses a few aspects of Western definitions of instructional leadership such as the one articulated by Hallinger and Wang (2015) based on Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) conceptual framework. This included managing the instructional program, specifically supervising and evaluating instruction, identified by both genders of principals. Female principals also identified curriculum monitoring and teacher professional development, while the male principals in this study discussed the development of a school's vision and goals. These differences and similarities between the findings of this study and prior research both in the United States and in other nations underscore the need for continued exploration of instructional leadership as a culturally and contextually situated practice. As discussed by Miller (2017), increased understanding of leadership in different cultural contexts can help promote "an informed understanding of each other" as well as "global inclusion and mutual understanding" (p. 19).

While the research question guiding this study focused on what male and female Saudi principals identified as instructional leadership activities, perhaps the larger question is, "Is there a difference between Saudi female and male instructional leadership?" Based on the data collected from the participants in this study, the answer would appear to be that there is a difference in how female and male Saudi principals understand and enact instructional leadership. Female Saudi principals reported a more active participation in instructional leadership from supervising teachers to supporting new teaching strategies and problem solving. The female principals also discussed more leadership of curriculum.

While both genders discussed attributes that they felt good instructional leadership should possess, the female principals explained the need for these behaviors in more altruistic terms whereas the male principals framed the attributes as beneficial to their position and career. Male Saudi principals also identified work with their leadership team as the means through which they demonstrated instructional leadership. These differences are supported by the literature that identifies female leadership as more active or interactive with followers and reflecting responsiveness to the needs of followers associated with transformational leadership (Shaked et al., 2018). Male Saudi principals identified instructional leadership characteristics more closely associated with transactional leadership and a "traditional" hierarchical view of leadership. The latter is perhaps not surprising given that Saudi Arabia has traditionally been a patriarchal society where, until the past decade, women have had limited rights and opportunities for leadership (Arar & Oplatka, 2016).

Recommendations

The findings of this study raise many questions that could be explored in future research to better understand both the perception of Saudi principals of instructional leadership and also the differences between male and female Saudi principals as instructional leaders. Some of the possible studies that could illuminate this subject further include the following:

-The survey administered in this study could be administered to a larger number of male and female Saudi principals from a variety of school sizes, configurations, and settings (rural, suburban, and urban) to see if the findings of this study are transferable to the larger population. This would also eliminate the possible differences in length and detail of responses between the genders found in this study which might have resulted from the personal contact with the female participants with one of the researchers prior to completion of the survey.

-A quantitative survey based on the findings of this qualitative study administered to this larger sampling could also result in generalizable findings. Such a study could also examine the possible relationship between student characteristic variables (i.e. gender, family economic and educational backgrounds, school settings and size, etc.) and student achievement in schools with responses of male and female principals as to the various components of instructional leadership. This could provide insight as to the possible impact of instructional leader gender on student achievement, albeit indirect.

-Interviews with both female and male Saudi principals could provide more detail on what each gender identifies as instructional leadership practices. This would provide more insight as to the kind of leadership (active or collaborative as compared to passive or directive) actually enacted by either gender.

-A qualitative study that included interviews with both female and male principals and teachers of both genders regarding perceptions of instructional leadership actions would provide insight as to whether the self-reported instructional leadership actions of female and male principals are accurate.

-A quantitative survey of female and male principals from other Arab nations would provide clarification as to the commonalities and differences between instructional leadership in various nations with similar male and female social role views.

-A qualitative study using interviews to collect data could also be conducted with a sampling of female and male principals in a variety of Arab nations would also provide more detailed information as to similarities and differences of instructional leaders of each gender in Arab nations with a tradition of patriarchal social practices.

Further study of the instructional leadership perspectives and self-reported behaviors of female and male Saudi principals would not serve to create a gender-specific stereotype but rather to identify the reality of the impact of gender on this critical aspect of school leadership. In 2014, Grogan discussed how gender is often dismissed as irrelevant in educational leadership discussions; however, she concluded that, "gender seems to matter just as much today as it always has" (p. 6). This would appear to be even truer in societies where the social roles of men and women are very clearly delineated such as in Arab countries like Saudi Arabia (Arar & Oplatka, 2016). Rather than perpetuating female school leaders as "exceptional" (Shapira, 2006), more research in this area could normalize female school leadership and also illustrate the strengths that female instructional leaders bring to the position of principal. As Arab societies such as Saudi Arabia open more opportunities to women to demonstrate skills such as organizational leadership, a better understanding of how each gender contributes to accomplishing the goals of increased student learning and achievement could broaden the benefits of education for all students.

Limitations

This study was intended as an initial exploration of the definition of and perspectives on instructional leadership for a small non-stratified or random sample of male and female principals in Saudi Arabia. The limitations of this study include the following:

(1) A small sample size (n=22 female and 19 male Saudi principals) which limits the transferability of the findings. The results are only accurate for this particular group of respondents at one specific point in time.
(2) The sample included in this study were not stratified to be representative of the different types (elementary, middle, or high school or other grade-level configurations) or location (rural, suburban, and urban), and so the results are not representative of the overall population of male and female principals in Saudi Arabia.
(3) The included female and male principals only in Saudi Arabia which limits the transfer of findings to principals in other Arab nations. The responses obtained in this study may have been influenced by specific education policies mandated only in Saudi Arabia.
(4) The data collection format of an electronic survey may have limited the depth of responses as compared to possible responses in an individual interview format.
(5) The face-to-face contact to explain the study and invite participation of female Saudi principals by the female researcher may have influenced the female participants to provide more detailed answers.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Vogel: Conceptualization, study design, analysis of data, writing. Alhudithi: Data collection, analysis of data, editing/reviewing. Alsliman: Data collection, editing/reviewing

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