

Principals' Difficulties at Female Saudi Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Teaching supervision is carried out by principals, and its purpose is to evaluate teachers' teaching practices in the classroom. This study addresses a gap in the teaching supervision literature, which relates to the fact that studies in the teaching supervision literature have overlooked the obstacles principals face when supervising teachers in Saudi Arabia.

The study was conducted over 10 days. Using semi-structured interviews, the data was collected from seven female principals in secondary schools. The results showed that the obstacles faced by principals fall into the following two categories: (a) obstacles to supervision caused by some teachers' unhappiness about being observed in the classroom; and because some of them fail to admit to having faults; and (b) obstacles that centre on the classroom environment itself, including noisy students, boring classes, a large number of students, small classrooms, the large number of teachers in a single school, and having to supervise all the subjects.

These findings indicate that: (a) principals encounter certain obstacles to supervising teachers which affect the quality of the supervision itself; and (b) supervision planners may be motivated to consider the obstacles faced by principals in their supervision of teachers, so having this information can be crucial for improving principals' performance of supervision in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: obstacles, principals, schools, secondary, students, supervision, teachers

1. Introduction

'Teachers are in the forefront of successful instruction; supervision is in the background, providing the support, knowledge, and skills that enable teachers to succeed' (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998, p. 7). Literature on supervision suggests that principals are the chief instructional supervisors of their schools (Yunus, Yunus, & Ishak, 2011). They are often seen not just as the person responsible for the supervision of the school's teachers, but also as responsible for all other aspects of school administration (Emenike Iroegbu, Ekaette, & Etudor-Eyo, 2016; Sidhu & Chan, 2010). Research has shown that principals have a hard time assessing teachers for reasons ranging from possibly upsetting work relationships to a lack of knowledge of the subjects taught (Halverson, Kelley, & Kimball, 2004). A principal's day is usually full of various management and administrative functions that include supervising teachers, dealing with unexpected teacher-learner and teacher-parent crisis and resolving conflicts with difficult teachers (Mestry, 2017).

Most of the research that I have come across, especially research carried out in Saudi Arabia, focuses on supervisors' and teachers' perceptions, and on supervision in general or on the supervision of teachers of the Arabic language, art, and physical education. The purpose of this study was to find out whether female principals face any obstacles when supervising teachers in secondary schools. Determining the obstacles is the first step towards eliminating them to improve the quality of supervision.

This study therefore aimed to address the following question:

a. Do Saudi female principals face obstacles when supervising teachers' teaching at secondary schools?

In what follows there is a brief overview of the study, followed by a literature review, methodology and discussion.

1.1 Study Setting

Since this study was conducted in Saudi schools, it is important to provide an overview of Saudi educational

supervision. The Saudi government has made great efforts to improve the country's education system over the past few years through the introduction of new educational programmes, research, and curricula as well as through the building of a large number of new schools and universities (Algarni & Male, 2014; Almudarra, 2017). Educational supervision is a primary element of the Saudi education system. Its main goals are to observe and evaluate the learning and teaching process, lead the development and training of teachers and principals, and develop the curriculum (Al Dosari, 2008). Supervision in Saudi schools is executed by supervisors and principals. The most important supervision in schools is that done by the principal. Teachers should be guided and inspected by principals; therefore, the role of principals as supervisors of the schools should be enforced (Alkrdem, 2011). Moreover, Al-Babutain (1993) pointed out that teachers are assisted by principals with instructional improvements in schools, particularly teachers who are newly-qualified, incompetent, or inefficient. Principals conduct classroom visits only once or twice a semester, but also check teachers' lesson plan folders, sometimes daily and sometimes once a week. Since the focus of this study is on obstacles to principals' supervision, this is discussed in more detail below.

2. Literature Review

Effective school principals contribute to the development of teachers and the entire school community, and to the students' performance (Ekpoh & Eze, 2015; Gaikhorst, März, du Pré, & Geijsel, 2019; Yousaf, 2018). A principal's duties include: (a) administrative work when he/she is allocating duties to teachers, planning schoolwork and formulating rules for the school; and (b) supervisory work which involves overseeing teachers' work checking their documentation of work performed, disciplining staff and students, and providing sufficient instruction (Adegbesan, 2008). Furthermore, principals must hold teachers accountable for providing quality education that offers well-planned curricular and teaching strategies that take into consideration the diverse needs of the variety of students in their classroom (Sidhu & Chan, 2010). Thus, principals need to provide continuous and constructive feedback that is constantly communicated to teachers (Sidhu & Chan, 2010). However, when conducting their administrative and supervisory roles, they often encounter obstacles due to the large number of demands they face. For example, a study by John (2011) investigated the obstacles to instructional supervision faced by principals in public primary schools. The sample consisted of 64 principals. The researcher used questionnaires for data collection. The findings revealed that principals felt overworked since they had many other administrative duties. The study also revealed that hardly any of the principals had undertaken any in-service training on educational management and lacked managerial and professional guidance.

Another study, by Al-ghanabousi and Idris (2010), looked at school principals' practices in Omani schools. The participants were three principals who had been working in their roles for at least three years and data was collected through an open-ended interview and observations. The study uncovered a number of factors that prevented the principals from effectively evaluating their teachers' performance. In the first place, they did not have enough time to evaluate teachers due to their many different tasks. Moreover, the participants complained of a lack of training on management and assessment techniques.

Another recent study, Allida et al. (2018), looked at the principals' obstacles when supervising teachers. Based on a sample of five principals the results showed, first of all, that they had insufficient time to conduct supervision. Secondly, some teachers did not accept correction and refused to admit their mistakes. In addition, teachers tried to prepare intensively when they knew they were being supervised, thus giving the principals the wrong impression.

This section has therefore identified the need to fill a gap in the supervision literature. Supervision researchers have overlooked the obstacles faced by female principals at Saudi secondary schools to supervising teachers, as they have mostly just looked at whether principals had received any management training and their attitudes towards their jobs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants were seven female principals (aged 40–52), whose majors were Arabic, Math, Geography, and physics, and who had worked as principals of secondary schools for an average of 10 years. The reason for choosing secondary schools was because this final stage of general education is important and plays a fundamental role in preparing students for their future career. Female schools were chosen because the researcher could not access male schools in Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Instruments

The instrument of this study was a semi-structured interview in which the interviewer asked the same questions

to all participants although not necessarily in the same order or with identical wording (Dornyei, 2007). Advantages of using semi-structured interviews include allowing the researcher to repeat some questions or to explain items that are vague as well as allowing additional questions in order to provide further information on not completely relevant answers (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). Therefore, it was hoped that the use of the semi-structured interview in this study might elicit the principals' views on the obstacles to supervising teachers in more depth, allowing them greater opportunity to discuss what they felt and thought. The interview was in Arabic because all the participants in the study were first-language Arabic speakers; their responses were later translated into English.

3.3 Procedure

Ethical issues were taken into account when conducting this study. The schools' permission was sought and granted and the participants were informed about the reasons for the study. Consent forms were also collected from the principals. The participants were then interviewed.

4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study based on the interviews and supported by relevant quotations from the participants. Obstacles found fall into the following two categories: (a) obstacles to teacher supervision and; (b) obstacles that involve the classroom environment.

Regarding the first category, concerning teacher supervision, the results showed that the principals expressed negative attitudes towards supervising teachers in general. Some principals stated that some teachers were unhappy to be observed in classroom. As one principal said, 'Some teachers are not happy to be informed about the principal's visit'. Another principal said, 'When I tell teachers that I would like to attend a class, they give excuses such as 'I am busy today', 'I am sick today', or 'I cannot today'. The majority of the principals indicated that their teachers sometimes fail to admit their faults. As one principal said, 'Teachers do not ask many questions in many different ways in the classroom so that a student can understand the question. But when I ask about the reason, they put the blame on the students and say that the students do not understand'. The principals in this study encountered teachers who did not admit their faults, not only when doing classroom observation but also when they checked students' notebooks during their classroom visit. As one principal said, 'I found that one teacher had not checked one student's notebook for about a month and another one for a week'. Another said, 'Sometimes I find students who do not complete their books'. 'Some teachers give several unacceptable excuses such as that the student did not give her the notebook, or that the student was absent'. However, these excuses were not acceptable to the principal because they showed that the teacher did not care whether their students were on the right track, and that a teacher did not care about checking notebooks and books. This supports Allida et al.'s (2018) findings that teachers sometimes failed to admit their faults.

The principals mentioned other obstacles in the classroom environment, such as noisy students, boring classes, a large number of students, small classrooms, the large number of teachers in their schools, and having to supervise all subjects. For each of these obstacles, the principals provided comments such as:

'Some students are noisy and you take time to discipline them'.

'Classroom observations are sometimes boring, as teachers do not use thinking skills' tasks such as matching pictures which changes the routine and makes the class active and interesting, even for me'.

'We have difficulties due to the large number of students and small classrooms'.

'The Saudi Ministry of Education states that a principal has to supervise teachers who are very good, 4 times a year and 3 times a year for excellent teachers. However, we cannot, as the number of teachers is very large. In fact, I have 41 teachers'.

'Why do you want principals to be, for example, a teacher of maths and computers, religion, science and so on?'

The findings above support the discoveries of Allida et al. (2018), John (2011), and Al-ghanabousi and Idris (2010), who found that their participants had difficulties in supervising teachers due to: (a) not having enough time to supervise their teachers; (b) having a large number of teachers to supervise; and (c) having other administrative work.

The study was limited to the extent that it only addressed obstacles faced by principals supervising teachers at secondary schools. It is recommended that future research should look at whether principals also face difficulties when supervising teachers at primary and intermediate schools. Another limitation is that the study was conducted at female schools so it is recommended that future research should also look at male schools. Based

on these findings, the information will be beneficial for principals and supervision preparation programs in designing coursework that can address these obstacles.

5. Conclusion

Principals play a key role in any school system. They are responsible not only for managing and monitoring schools but also for supervising teachers. This study showed that there are major challenges facing principals in supervising teachers at secondary schools. The principals expressed negative attitudes towards supervision such as: noisy students, boring classes, the large number of students, the small classrooms, the large number of teachers in their schools, having to supervise all subjects, teachers who are not happy to be observed, and those who failed to admit their faults. The results suggest that to carry out supervision effectively, principals should be enrolled in workshops in order to be provided with supervision techniques for English language classes.

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