



Assessing the contribution of principal instructional leadership and collective teacher efficacy to teacher commitment in Oman



Yasser F. Hendawy Al-Mahdy ^{a, b}, Mahmoud Mohamed Emam ^a, Philip Hallinger ^{c, d, *}

^a College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

^b College of Education, Ain Shams University, Egypt

^c Center for Research on Sustainable Leadership, College of Management, Mahidol University, Thailand

^d Dept. of Educational Leadership and Management, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

HIGHLIGHTS

- Relationship of principal leadership and teacher commitment partially mediated by teacher efficacy.
- Strongest effects of principal instructional leadership through collective teacher efficacy.
- Confirmed importance of principal instructional leadership in Oman during era of education reform.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 May 2017

Received in revised form

26 September 2017

Accepted 9 October 2017

The past decade has witnessed dramatic change in the direction of education in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). During this period, national leaders in this region accepted that the long-term economic growth of their societies required diversification beyond oil and movement towards the development of knowledge-based economies (Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008; Algarni & Male, 2014; Gaad, Arif, & Scott, 2006; Macpherson, Kachelhoffer, & El Nemr, 2007). This recognition resulted in renewed investment in education in concert with the adoption of reforms that have sought to reshape the aims, structure, and content of their education systems (Al-Ani & Ismail, 2015; Al-Barwani & Osman, 2010; Common, 2008; Gaad et al., 2006; Hamad & Al-Ani, 2016). One consequence of these policy-driven reforms undertaken by the GCC States has been an unprecedented focus on the 'leadership' role of school administrators (Al-Barwani, 2011; Al-Manthri, 2001; Alhajri, 2013; Common, 2008, 2011; Romanowski & Romanowski, 2017; Thorne, 2011).

This trend has been notable, for example, in Oman where educational reforms have resulted in new expectations for school principals (Al-Ani & Ismail, 2015; Al-Farsi, 2007; Al-Ghefeili, Hoque, & Othman, 2013; Hamad & Al-Ani, 2016; Westrick & Miske, 2009). Whereas Omani school principals previously functioned primarily as 'administrators', recent reforms have recast them as 'leaders of learning and change' (e.g., Al-Barwani, 2011; Alghanabousi & Idris, 2010; Al-Ghefeili et al., 2013; Al-Mahdy & Sywelem, 2016; Al-Mahdy & Al-Kiyumi, 2015; Common, 2008, 2011). This reorientation from 'administration' towards 'leadership' is reflected in the redefinition of the principal's role (Al-Farsi, 2007; Al-Manthri, 2001; Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008; Alghanabousi, 2010a), the content of training programs (Al-Abri, 2014; Alhajri, 2013; Common, 2011; Westrick & Miske, 2009), and on-the-job practices (Alghanabousi & Idris, 2010; Alhajri, 2014). Scholars in Oman have sought to document and analyze the nature and effects of this redefinition of the principalship in studies of instructional leadership (Al-Barwani, 2011; Alghanabousi, 2010a, 2010b; Alghanabousi & Idris, 2010; Al-Mahdy & Al-Kiyumi, 2015), transformational leadership (Alhajri, 2014), servant leadership (Al-Mahdy, Al-Harthi & Salah El-Din, 2016), and distributed leadership (Al-Harthi & Al-Mahdy, 2017).

The study reported in this article focused on the 'instructional leadership' of primary school principals in Oman. Over the past 50 years, instructional leadership has gained currency as an approach to school leadership that is associated with positive learning outcomes (Dale & Phillips, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Robinson, 2006). More recently, this research has also explored how instructional leadership influences positive teacher attitudes and behaviors that impact teaching quality and school improvement (e.g., Clark, 2009; Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Lan, 2014; Leithwood,

* Corresponding author. Center for Research on Sustainable Leadership, College of Management, Mahidol University, Thailand.

E-mail addresses: yfathy@squ.edu.om, yfathy@edu.asu.edu.eg (Y.F.H. Al-Mahdy), memam@squ.edu.om (M.M. Emam), hallinger@gmail.com (P. Hallinger).

Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Rew, 2013).

Among the high value targets identified in this program of research on leadership and learning are collective teacher efficacy and teacher commitment (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Collective teacher efficacy refers to a belief among school staff that 'we can make a positive difference' in the learning of students, overcome classroom challenges and adapt to changing conditions (Alhajri, 2014; Hoy, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Ross & Gray, 2006; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Teacher commitment refers to teachers' affective engagement with the school and its efforts to change (Geijsel et al., 2003; Hallinger & Lu, 2014; Ponnusamy, 2010; Ross & Gray, 2006; Solomon, 2007). Research suggests that leadership is required for these teacher attitudes to thrive in a school environment (Geijsel et al., 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006).

In this research, we examined how the instructional leadership of school principals in Oman was associated with the collective efficacy and commitment of teachers. The following research questions guided the study.

1. What is relationship of principal instructional leadership, collective teacher efficacy and teacher commitment in Omani primary schools?
2. How does principal instructional leadership influence collective teacher efficacy and teacher commitment?

Since the turn of the 21st century, the center of gravity in research on educational leadership and management (EDLM) has undergone a subtle but observable movement away from its 'magnetic North' in Anglo-American societies. Whereas prior to 2000 articles from continental Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa were seldom published in international EDLM journals (Oplatka, 2004), there is ample evidence today of a growing presence of published EDLM research from developing societies (Hallinger, 2017; Hallinger & Hammad, 2017; Oplatka & Arrar, 2017). Thus, our research to the growing diversity of the global literature in educational leadership.

1. Education context for school leadership in Oman

Any study of the education system in Oman must take the society's history into account. For example, consider that the system has grown from only three schools in 1970 to more than a thousand in 2016. This journey of national educational development in Oman has unfolded through a continuing series of educational reforms. During the 1970s and 1980s, the nation's education system focused on expanding children's access to schooling. Reform policies shifted during the 1990s to emphasize 'education quality'. Since the turn of the millennium, reforms have sought to ensure that students gain twenty-first century skills that track the nation's goal to move away from a petroleum-based economy. Despite this decades-long evolution, the Omani educational system continues to face a variety of challenges. These include inadequate human resources, modest physical infrastructure, and a system of staff training, support and accountability that remains work in progress (Al-Abri, 2014; Al-Mahdy et al., 2016).

Oman's educational system is highly centralized. It is overseen by a Ministry of Education (MOE) responsible for implementing the nation's strategic plan for educational development. As noted above, within this education system the formal role of school principals has traditionally been to administer rules and regulations drawn up by the MOE. Indeed, during previous decades, there was never any explicit expectation for principals to provide

'leadership' only administration. Efficient management of resources, correct implementation of national education policies and procedures, and maintenance of stable relations *vis a vis* senior administrators in the education bureaucracy and stakeholders in the community were the paramount criteria in the evaluation of school principals (Al-Farsi, 2007; Al-Manthri, 2001; Common, 2008; Thorne, 2011; Westrick & Miske, 2009).

Today, however, MOE (2015) guidelines encourage principals to 'care' for teachers", give a warm welcome to new teachers", "encourage teachers' self-confidence," treat ineffective teachers with patience and calmness," and "take teachers' preferences" into account in supervision. Omani culture evidences a deep appreciation of service to others. For example, older children and parents are expected to serve others within the family. These norms of behavior derive from Islamic values in which parental obedience is "next to the mandate of obedience to Allah" (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016) and shape tacit expectations of leaders.

National curriculum reforms and restructuring initiated in 2000 created a new 'institutional context' for school leaders (Al-Ghefeili et al., 2013; Al-Manthri, 2001; Common, 2008). Curriculum reform brought new approaches to teaching, learning, and evaluation (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). For the first time in Oman, the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning was placed at the center of education reform (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). These systemic initiatives raised awareness, again for the first time, of the need for principals to exercise 'instructional leadership' (Al-Barwani, 2011; Alghanabousi, 2010a, 2010b; Al-Mahdy & Al-Kiyumi, 2015; Al-Manthri, 2001).

Recently, the MOE issued a 'Mandate' consisting of a detailed description of what school principals should do in order to ensure quality in their schools (Ministry of Education, 2015). The Mandate outlines more than fifty specific practices of school leaders (principals and deputy principals). Notably, the duties also give new authority to school leaders so that they will be able to achieve better learning outcomes for students. For example, the Mandate states that the school leader should:

[E]nsure adherence to the code of conduct by all school staff, monitor organization commitment, support national initiatives, support innovative practices, develop a school culture in which creative contributions by school staff can lead to change in positive school outcomes, and steer models of best practices in school. (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 10).

Notably the Mandate focuses on the need for school principals to adopt a role that focuses on teacher commitment to change in teaching and learning. This new expectation highlights the need for principals to become more active in leading teachers in the development of teaching and learning (Al-Barwani, 2011; Al-Manthri, 2001; Alghanabousi, 2010b; Common, 2008). Thus, it is within this changing context of Omani education that the authors chose to examine the nature of the principal's instructional leadership role, and how their practices shape the self-efficacy and commitment of teachers.

2. Theoretical perspective

Over the past 50 years, studies of transformational leadership, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, integrated leadership, and teacher leadership have contributed to our understanding of school processes and outcomes. Although scholars continue to debate the strengths of different approaches, over the past decade there has been increasing agreement that instructional leadership represents *one of the core roles* of the school principal (Bush, 2013; Fancera & Bliss, 2011; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger & Wang,

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