

Effective educational leadership practices: School leadership in Bahrain

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Abstract

Improving leadership practices outcomes for students have gained attention over recent years. To broaden understanding of effective leadership practice, this study investigated how school leaders improved students' academic achievement in Bahrain. This qualitative study used interviews and document analysis to examine the practices of ten women leading schools that gained the top student achievement scores in the most recent review by the Bahrain Education & Training Quality Authority (BQA). Findings revealed these school leaders improved students' academic achievement through promoting collaboration, creating trust and respect through relationships, focusing on the leadership of learning and teaching, and providing contextualized opportunities for professional learning for leaders and teachers. The significance of gender and culture in leadership and the importance of a moral imperative for leadership were discussed alongside implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: leadership; improvement; academic achievement; Professional learning; relational trust, distributed leadership.

ممارسات القيادة التربوية الفعالة : القيادة المدرسية في البحرين

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الملخص

اكتسبت كيفية تحسين ممارسات القيادة المدرسية لنتائج الطلاب كثير من لانتباه والحراك خلال السنوات الأخيرة. لتوسيع نطاق فهم ممارسة القيادة المدرسية الفعالة، تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تحسين قادة المدارس للإنجاز الأكاديمي للطلاب في دولة البحرين. استخدمت هذه الدراسة النوعية المقابلات وتحليل الوثائق لفحص ممارسات عشر مدارس رائدة حصلت على أعلى درجات تحصيل الطلاب في أحدث مراجعة أجرتها هيئة جودة التعليم والتدريب في البحرين (BQA). توضح نتائج هذه الدراسة من تمكن قادة هذه المدارس في تحسين الإنجاز الأكاديمي للطلاب من خلال تعزيز التعاون، وخلق الثقة والاحترام من خلال العلاقات، والتركيز على قيادة التعلم والتعليم، وتوفير الفرص السياقية للتعلم المهني للقادة والمعلمين. لقد تمت مناقشة أهمية النوع (ذكرنا أن أم أنثى) والثقافة في القيادة وأهمية الواجب الأخلاقي للقيادة، جنباً إلى جنب مع الآثار المترتبة على السياسة والممارسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قيادة؛ تحسين، إنجاز أكاديمي، التعلم المهني، الثقة العلائقية والقيادة التشاركية.

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Introduction

School leadership is critical to the educational success of students, it has been shown to have a significant impact on student outcomes and is second only to teaching (Leithwood, 2018). However, the majority of published empirical research studies examining the relationship between leadership and student outcomes have been conducted in a small number of western countries. Increasing the research base to include a broader range of countries is critical to understanding the contextual and cultural characteristics that might influence effective leadership.

Educational leadership

Many definitions of educational leadership exist, although typically, researchers focus on the central role of influence in leadership. For example, Yukl (2002) suggested that leadership “involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization” (p. 3). Other researchers have stressed that leadership needs to be centred on personal and professional values. For example, Wasserberg (2002) stated, “I see the primary role of any leader to be the unification of people around key values expressed in personal values, self-awareness and emotional or moral capacity” (p. 158).

There is no doubt that leadership is an essential part of school improvement. Robinson (2011) has defined effective educational leadership as being ‘student centred’ and having an impact on valued

student outcomes. Indeed, school leadership has been regarded as second to teaching in terms of in-school influences on student achievement (Leithwood, 2018). Leaders have an important role in establishing processes, tools, and a learning culture that can support the improvement of student achievement.

Quality student outcomes

One of the most important responsibilities that school leaders are charged with is bringing about positive change and improvement in students' academic achievement. "This involves working at different levels in schools, at classroom level to change practice, at whole staff level to change perceptions and at organizational level to change structures" (O'Sullivan 2011, p. 111). Supporting teaching and learning to improve students' academic achievement is one of the most important responsibilities of school leaders (Earley, 2013).

Education quality is important for any nation working to further their current and future development. For this reason, the Kingdom of Bahrain established an independent education quality assurance body (the BQA) to evaluate education quality at all levels of the education system. The BQA developed their schools' review framework on three major qualities. The first of these is the quality of outcomes, which emphasises students' academic achievement and students' personal development aspects. The second is the quality of main processes, which focuses on teaching, learning, support, and guidance aspects. The third quality is the quality assurance of outcomes and processes, which covers leadership, management and governance aspects. Each aspect of the three qualities is judged against a number of criteria. For example, for the students' academic achievement aspect, BQA looks into the "academic standards and the progress students make from their starting points, especially in core and specialised subjects in the different educational stages during the last three successive academic years" (BQA, 2019, 11).

As the workload of principals becomes more complex with increased accountability and autonomy, innovative approaches to school leadership are needed (Goddard & Goddard, 2015). While school leadership's

effectiveness is regarded by many researchers as second only to teaching quality, after several decades of research big questions remain with regards to how leadership matters and what specific practices of leadership are important. In their attempt to answer the question as to why school leadership matters, Pont, Nusche, and Moormen (2008) argued: “It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling” (p. 9).

A moral imperative

The work of educational leadership for school improvement has been viewed as having a moral imperative. For example, Hargreaves (2005) states:

Attempts to change education in fundamental ways are ultimately political acts. They are attempts to redistribute power and opportunity within the wider culture. Educational change is not just a strategic puzzle. It is, and should be a moral and political struggle. (p. 2)

Moral purpose in educational leadership concerns both the ends and the means (Fullan, 2001). Fullan describes the moral imperative of educational leadership and educational change as making a “difference in the lives of students. But the means of getting to that end are also crucial” (2001, p.13). Moral purpose or imperative is complex. It takes much more than simply espousing a moral imperative but involves the complex work of realising it. This is where leadership is so important, as the actions of leaders can “energize people to pursue a desired goal” (Fullan 2001, p. 19).

Personal integrity is central to leading with a moral imperative. When a leader has integrity it means their words and deeds are aligned (Maxwell, 2005). Therefore, leaders must first live with a high level of integrity themselves. Fullan (2001) emphasised the importance of leading with integrity in stating, “leading with integrity is not just instrumental. To strive to improve the quality of how we live together is a moral purpose of the highest order” (p. 14). Many cultures and religions regard integrity as a signature quality for humankind.

The current study

This study identifies and analyses the roles that school leadership played in supporting teaching and learning to improve students' academic achievement. By investigating the work of school leaders who have received outstanding scores in reviews conducted by the BQA, this study sheds light on 'images of the possible'. By studying successful contexts we can explore the role of school's leadership in supporting teaching and learning to improve students' academic achievement. Leadership research is relatively new to Bahrain. The research question guiding this study is: What are the practices and approaches of leaders who are effective in increasing student achievement in Bahrain?

Method

This qualitative research employed a case study design to investigate how school principals lead their schools to improve students' academic achievement.

Context and participants

This research was conducted in ten schools in Bahrain (see Table 1). All were government schools and the sample included elementary, intermediate and secondary schools. The schools (at each level) use the same curriculum, follow the same academic calendar and all use the Arabic language as the medium of instruction. The student population of these schools is diverse, but predominantly of Bahrain origin.

All schools used the BQA and were graded as outstanding in the two years prior to this research being undertaken. This BQA score includes measures to determine the levels of students' academic achievement. For example, awarding a school an outstanding score in students' academic achievement requires that "the quality of practices is reflected in the performance of all or the vast majority of those related to the criterion [academic achievement]. Practices are diverse, of highest quality and are highly productive. Performance and initiatives taken are exceptional, significantly exceed expectations and can be considered as models to be followed" (BQA, 2019, p. 11).

This study used purposive sampling to select defined cases representing the phenomenon of interest: senior leaders who gained the highest scores in the BQA in the last review. The ten principals were randomly selected from schools in Bahrain that had been reviewed by the BQA and received outstanding scores. The distribution of the participating schools was as follows: six primary schools for girls, two primary school for boys, one middle school for boys and one high school for girls. All participants consented to this research through the Ministry of Education of Bahrain, the Director of Scientific Research Department.

Table 1
Profile of participating school leaders

| | School type | Teacher | Leader |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Principal One | School One/Primary/girls | 15 years | 12 years |
| Principal Two | School Two/Primary/girls | 12 years | 14 years |
| Principal Three | School Three/Primary/boys | 13 years | 15 years |
| Principal Four | School Four/Primary/girls | 13 years | 13 years |
| Principal Five | School Five/Intermediate/ boys | 23 years | 8 years |
| Principal Six | School Six/Primary/girls | 10 years | 2 years |
| Principal Seven | School Seven/Primary/boys | 9 years | 14 years |
| Principal Eight | School Eight/Secondary/girl | 11 years | 9 years |
| Principal Nine | School Nine/Primary/girls | 10 years | 8 years |
| Principal Ten | School Ten/secondary/girls | 10 years | 5 years |

Note: All participating leaders were women.' Leader' years includes working as an assistant principal or principal. 'Teacher' years excludes years as a leader.

Data

Semi-structured interviews

This research employed qualitative research methods using in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect data from the ten school principals. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to access leaders' reality, in other words their perceptions, meanings, and interpretation of the situations

they worked in, argues (Punch, 2013) and allowed interviewees to “speak in their own voices and express their own thoughts and feelings (Berg”, 2007, p. 96). Each leader participated in one extended interview of approximately 60–90 minutes. The first author then followed up with interviewees for clarification regarding responses where necessary. Questions were designed to elicit responses about practices and approaches to leadership held by the school leaders. All interviews were audio recorded and the first author listened to the recordings of the semi-structured interviews, translated and transcribed the recordings from Arabic into English.

Document analysis

To triangulate the data collection and strengthen theory building (Bowen, 2009), the researchers conducted document analysis of BQA’s review reports for these schools. The analysis of the school review reports provided documented records from an external body validating the principals’ positions, thus limiting possible bias that may occur in self-reported findings (Bush, 2008). The BQA’s reports offer what Bush (2008) called “well-grounded evidence” on the impact of school leadership on teaching and learning to improve students’ academic achievement.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was used in data analysis. To organise the data into meaningful themes, an iterative and recursive process of analysis was undertaken, which resulted in the development of overarching themes, each with sub-themes, by the first author. Following this, the two authors reviewed the themes and developed a thematic map (Braun & Clark, 2006) of the overarching themes and narrative.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research describes research wherein findings are valid and reliable in the broadest sense, i.e. they are ‘well grounded’ and ‘sustainable’ (Ritchie et al., 2013) and data collection and findings are credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). A range of strategies were employed to ensure

the trustworthiness of this research. For example, triangulation of data from multiples sources was used to increase the trustworthiness of claims made (Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Ritchie, et al., 2013). Coding was initially undertaken by the first author, with the second author reviewing coding and both authors making necessary refinements where there were different views.

We are aware that the researcher's perspective can influence how data are interpreted. This was made explicit and checked due to the cross-cultural collaborative nature of researcher relationship with the first author being from the Kingdom of Bahrain and the second author being from New Zealand.

Results

Four key leadership practices were evident in this research: promoting collaboration; creating trust and respect through relationships; focussing on the work of learning and teaching; and providing contextualised opportunities for professional learning.

Promoting collaboration

Promoting collaboration was a central practice for these leaders. This included a willingness to delegate power, to create teams, to support subordinates, and to be inclusive of all stakeholders.

Principal One said:

... when I was an assistant-principal the principal gave me the opportunity to lead because she believed in change ... so, I created working teams in a way that guaranteed sustainability. I created a team of five teachers; three of them experienced and two new teachers to prepare them for leadership roles.

Similarly, Principal Two believed "Delegating power to staff is also an indication of respect and incentive." Along the same lines, as to practising participation, Principal Three, who leads a primary school for girls, said:

... the development of any plan is a team effort, the principal is a supportive team member in many cases ... the plan prepared by the upper and middle leadership teams with the consultancy of all teachers and taking

into consideration the parents' points of view. This is besides the students' contributions through the student council.

To be supportive of her staff, Principal Three stated, "the important aspects that I depend on to keep the work going are motivation, encouragement and compensation to my staff members". Principal Four agreed that, "delegating power to staff is also an indication of respect and incentive ... we found it effective in general, despite the fact that sometimes you find differences in the effectiveness of some members in comparison with others, which was expected based on the staff member's experience".

Every leader made comments about the importance of promoting collaboration.

The adoption of a participative leadership style and the promotion of collaborative work structures by these principals was documented by the BQA in the schools' review reports . For example,

- The school leadership establishes its organised institutional work by adopting a participatory approach and recognising the potential and competencies of its staff. (Report about School Seven/Primary Boys)
- The outstanding performance of school leadership, serving as a role-model in terms of accuracy in self-evaluation and strategic planning, the consolidation of the spirit of one family among its members, and promotion of their initiatives. (Report about School One/ Primary Girls)
- The school's senior leadership runs the Al-Orouba 'family' based on the principles of shared responsibilities, teamwork and confidence. Its slogan is 'We at Al-Orouba view ourselves as leaders rather than employees' (Report about School Nine/ Primary Girls)
- The inspirational leadership that encourages excellence and its significant role in preparing a second line of leadership that is ready to assume administrative or academic responsibilities as required. (Report about School Four/ Primary Girls)

The school leadership takes the initiative, introduces tangible improvements in school, all of which are achieved with the participation of the school's enthusiastic and responsible members. (Report about School Three/ Primary Boys)

Creating trust and respect through relationships

Creating an environment that encourages and supports the development of relationships that promote trust and respect among staff members, students and parents was central to the work of each of these school leaders. For example, Principal Three said:

... the first thing I do is to make sure that the climate in the school is built on solid ground of love and respect ...giving incentives also is an indication of appreciation which also strengthens the relationship between the leader and her staff.

Principal Ten stated, “motivation has been instrumental in inspiring teachers to perform their roles excellently ... We celebrate teachers’ best practices.” BQA’s review of this principal’s school supported this claim, “the school’s senior leadership provides inspiration and financial and moral encouragement to the administrative and teaching staff by celebrating their achievements and embracing their projects” (BQA, 2019, p. 4).

Principal Six stated, “the successful school leader is the one who gains her staffs’ trust and respect. With such good relationship the team members will do anything you ask them to do.” Similarly, Principal Seven said, “my strategy is to build strong relationships with my staff that are based on mutual respect and consideration of their individual needs”. Al-Minteshri (2018) argued that the human relationships aspect that the school principals exercise has significant positive influence on the school performance.

Principal Eight describes her approach in handling the communication with parents as follows, “we have an open-door guiding principle to welcome any parent with [a] smile and due respect. So, it is impossible that a parent come[s] to school with a complaint and [we] let him/her leave unsatisfied”. She added, “I learned from my previous principal that coffee has very strong effect in absorbing parents’ anger!” This type of behaviour is clearly shaped by a high moral drive and cultural considerations. Using religious expressions and even Quranic verses in dealing with leadership-related issues was a common practice for the principals participating in this study. Religion and cultural concepts played an important role in relating to staff and students as well as parents.

Principal Two said:

... in preparing myself for leadership I understand this is a responsibility that required strong moral values. This encourages me to work hard to create the learning environment for all learning community members in the school. Students as well as teachers should feel safe and comfortable.

A focus on developing strong relationships based on trust characterised many school communities were highlighted in Principal Nine's statement, "the school chief informed me that she is very pleased to see love and happiness spreading throughout the school's community". She added, "in Jidhafd School [high secondary school for girls], we have a slogan that says, 'Jidhafd is one family'". In a study at the United Arab Emirate University, Chmer (2020) reported "Transparency, effective communication with the teacher, and appreciating and rewarding teachers were among the practices that teachers recommended for their principals (p. 56).

Principal Ten used what she called 'emotional bonding' to describe the types of relationships among the school community. Principal One, whose school scored outstandingly in three consecutive rounds of BQA's reviews, strongly connected students' academic achievement to the teaching and learning aspect with leadership providing support and guidance based on a relationship of trust. She stated:

... one of the most important things that a leader should do is to be frank with the teacher after visiting her in class. It is required that the principal should visit every teacher twice before the BQA [review]. However, I always inform that the teachers shouldn't be [worried about] my visit, I am here to help to improve the school's performance.

The principals also articulated the importance of building relationships of trust with their students. For example, Principal Four said, "for me the most important thing is the psychological stability of the students, and learning comes after that. Giving every student the opportunity to participate in the school's events is crucial to psychological stability."

Focusing on the work of learning and teaching

A key practice that all ten leaders had in common was maintaining a keen focus on learning and teaching in their schools. All principals

communicated that in their view effective school leadership requires professional competency that develops with accumulated experience as a teacher prior to becoming a leader. For example, Principal Two stated, “I accumulated extensive experience being a teacher for 14 years; 9 years as an assistant principal and now 3 years as a principal. I think I have been leading since I was a teacher.”

The ten principals contributed a range of foci in terms of the ways they see themselves focussing on the improvement of learning and teaching in their schools. Principal Three emphasised the importance of professional competency for the effective leader:

[An] effective leader needs to have a clear understanding of the school’s situation before doing anything. ... The leadership role is to facilitate and provide support.

Principals viewed training and preparation as important aspects in developing their capabilities to be successful. Principal One said, “I was lucky to have the opportunity to go to Singapore for training, so I had a vision to develop a framework of action in the school.”

Professional responsibilities require that school leadership creates a conducive environment for in-house training and coaching programmes. Principal Five claimed that, “one important characteristic of the effective leader is to employ the best skills and talents that her teachers possess. For example, an Arabic teacher may have great skills in technology, so I make use of her skills.”

In recognising her staff role in instructional matters Principal One stated,

[It is] very important that the principle and her team are capable in analysing the diagnostic tests. Students’ results are not to be stamped and to be put away; they should be carefully read and diagnosed. It is very important to check the added value; is there any progress?

Participants in this study agreed that the role of leadership in supporting the teaching and learning process is crucial. For example, Principal Five said,

The teaching and learning aspect is central to the success of the school ...so, we work on it the whole year around. For example, this week the

leadership in the school started visiting teachers in classrooms to assess the basic skills (each subject has basic skills) that the teacher must attain and use in classrooms.

For the same school, the BQA (2019) reported highly effective student-centered teaching and learning strategies are implemented by the vast majority of teachers, who manage lessons in orderly and effective manner ensuring the highest productivity. This is an indication that the school leadership gives instructional matters high priority, applying 'instructional leadership approach' in this instance. The involvement of principals in supporting teaching and learning goes deep into specific teaching matters. Principal Two argues that:

[To] fix problems related to teaching and learning I started to work on teaching strategies. I decided to introduce four different teaching strategies (the 6 hats, multiple intelligence, cooperative learning and learning by play) ...Teaching and learning aspect directly impacted my outcomes (students' achievement) so, I have to make sure that we are ready all the time not only when BQA come to our school.

To triangulate the data, the researchers examined BQA's report of this school and found strong evidence that verifies her claim. BQA stated, 'The vast majority of students achieve outstanding standards and academic progress in lessons and at school examinations, due to the effective teaching and learning strategies and differentiated assessment techniques.' In this example, we can see that Principal Two is going beyond external compliance to creating collective accountability (Le Fevre et al, 2020). She is not making instructional leadership decisions because of the BQA, but rather because she believes that this is what will contribute to ongoing improvement in the outcomes for her students.

Similarly, Principal Six made the following statement in relation to her support of the teaching and learning aspect:

Immediately after BQA's last visit, we started to review the recommendations that we received in relation to the teaching and learning aspect. We put teachers in groups based on their professional learning needs. New teachers may need intensive training or even a veteran teacher may also need intensive training because of new developments in her

field (I.e. integrating technology in teaching) ... the support can come from another teacher not necessarily from the leadership. However, the leadership gives guidance and support.

Here we see distributed leadership in action. The leader does not see herself as the only person able to resource and support teacher learning, and importantly does not see that this needs to come from outside the school as external expertise. Rather, she saw that there is capacity within the school to provide professional learning

Principal Four said, "... it is very important that the principal and her team are capable in analysing the diagnostic tests. Students' results aren't to be stamped and put away; they should be carefully read and diagnosed."

Principal Seven stated, "the most important thing we do [is] that the students' grades reflect their real performance in classrooms. We achieve that by training our teachers, not only with teaching strategies, but also how they can target the essential skills of the students". She added, "I do discuss the analysis of grades in the [presence] of all teachers, so every teacher knows the situation regarding the students' academic achievement. If a problem [is] found in this [respect] a team will be formed immediately to address it with specific steps." This example shows how the leader identifies one of her roles as identifying problems and creating solutions; by targeting, providing immediate support and making problems of practice public so that all can learn from them.

Providing contextualised opportunities for professional learning

All ten leaders paid particular attention to providing opportunities for professional learning for both leaders and teachers. The BQA (2019) regards the provision of professional development as one of the main positive features in its reviews of Bahrain schools. It reported that in School Two.

[The] localisation of training through [the] 'Muharraq Academy for Excellence', ... develops training programmes, raises school members' competency in carrying out effective classroom situations, and improves their digital skills (p. 3).

Nine of the ten principals emphasised the idea of localisation of professional learning (in-house professional learning) to their teachers. For example, Principal Seven stated,

... we have an internal training center to raise the competencies of our teachers. We have a weekly meeting to develop our strategic and technical aspects. We always seek new strategies and train our teachers to apply that in classrooms.

The contextualised and localised professional learning to improve teaching and learning for some schools was extended to joint ventures with neighbouring schools. In that regard, Principal Five stated,

... one of the important issues that we give high attention is the cooperation with our neighbouring schools. For example, we formed a learning community with another school to help each other in many aspects ... It is important to mention that we have two important projects in the school related to teaching and learning both about localization of training which are based on conducting workshops, exchange visits and assessing their impact.

This was validated by BQA's (2019) report on this school, which states that School Five is 'raising teachers' professional competency through in-house training, under which monthly training workshops and programmes are organised followed by evaluative class visits to assess the impact of the training.

Principal two said "so after we secured good discipline in classrooms and created a safe learning environment we started to work on effective teaching and learning strategies". However, creating a good learning environment is not necessarily linked solely to effective school leadership, (Robinson, 2011). The School Two BQA's (2019) review report identified the effective application of teaching and learning strategies by this school. For example.

The vast majority of teachers apply various effective teaching and learning strategies in which students are the core of learning. These include cooperative learning, learning in pairs, 'think, pair, [and] share', brainstorming, learning through play, learning through acting and simulation, e-learning, the student teacher, and discussion and dialogue

(School Two BQA Review).

Principal Two applied a more holistic strategy in supporting teaching and learning to improve students' academic achievements. She understood from her accumulated experience as a teacher for over 15 years that, without an organised and safe classroom environment, neither teaching nor learning may happen. However, she was also aware that creating a classroom environment that is inviting and grasps the attention and interests of students was important. The leadership in this school implemented several professional learning programs and workshops to boost teachers' pedagogical competencies, which was documented by BQA in the school review report, 'the school focuses on improving the quality of teaching and learning, based on the diagnosis of teachers' training needs ... Teachers use varied and conducive interesting learning resources such as the smart board, data show, [and] digital empowerment tools.'

Principal Two said,

...on the second day after BQA's visit to our school we call for a meeting for the improvement team to overview BQA's report regarding students' academic achievement to identify what is effective and what needs improvement. [She added] to create awareness and to remind everyone with the situation and what is the plan to overcome these issues, we posted this information in multiple places in the school.

For the purposes of analysing and reporting this research we have discussed these themes separately. However, as articulated by Principal One, these themes are integrated and related in practice. Principal One said, "for a principal to be successful in leading her school, she needs to be prepared professionally, socially, culturally, as well as morally within the context of Bahrain". Next we discuss these findings and the interrelated nature of the practices that comprise effective leadership in Bahrain schools.

Discussion

Four key practices have emerged as central to the leadership practices of successful school leaders in Bahrain. These are promoting collaboration, creating trust through relationships, focussing on the work of learning

and teaching, and providing contextualised opportunities for professional learning for leaders and teachers. In addition to these four practices, some underlying approaches or ways of being have emerged as being central to the way these leaders work. The complexity of schooling, the diversity of problems and circumstances require that leaders adopt multiple approaches and practices in their leadership choosing the most appropriate one for each situation. This is what Bush (2008) called ‘contingent leadership’. He argues that “contingent leadership acknowledges the diverse nature of school contexts and the advantage of adopting leadership styles to the particular situation, rather than adopting a “one size fits all” stance” (p. 22).

Three of the schools in this study are located in communities with low socioeconomic status, in communities that typically have student underachievement. However, they achieved outstanding scores in the BQA (2019) reviews despite the challenges that low socio-economic conditions can tend to create for students. This research is encouraging in that it indicates effective leadership can enable a school to ‘beat the odds’ in terms of creating an environment that support student learning and achievement.

Gender, culture and school leadership

The intention of the initial research proposal for this study was to randomly select five male and five female principals representing schools that had received outstanding scores in BQA’s reviews to participate in the study. The researchers, however, found that female principals lead all of the schools in Bahrain that had received outstanding scores. The fact that researchers were unable to collect data from male principals due to a lack of outstanding scores indicates there may possible be potential differences in educational leadership styles based on gender within the context of Bahrain. Recognising that a larger study would be needed to verify these claims, we explore some possible factors that might mean there is a gender factor at play here.

In the cultural context of the Middle East there was a common societal perception that women were not expected to hold significant leadership

roles. These perceptions and stereotypes were thought to be cultural and religious. “Even though reality has shown that women can compete with men, some people continue to use religious reasons” to block women advancement to leadership roles and maintain the status quo” (Rohman 2013, p. 46). This more traditional and conservative expectation of the cultural positioning of women may, in fact, function to energise women who have chosen to be educational leaders (such as the ten women in this study). Each communicated a strong desire to overcome the challenges presented by the common perception that females cannot fulfil leadership roles. Whether or not these challenges turned to motivational energy for females to succeed in their leadership responsibilities would be interesting to study further.

Participatory and distributed leadership

The practices of these ten leaders can be described as representing both a participatory and a distributed approach to leadership. One possible interpretation of the perceived and articulated importance of adopting participative leadership by all the participating principals are the influences of gender and culture. The literature associates a tendency towards participative leadership model with women in leadership. For example, Eagly and Johnson (1990) observed gender differences in leadership noting that the women studied tended to adopt a more democratic or participative style than did their male counterparts. Along similar lines, Sebastian and Moon (2018) argued, “Women leaders have been described as more democratic, relationship oriented and transformational” (p. 4). Whether or not there are differences based on gender are beyond the realms of this study, suffice to say that these leaders distributed leadership and responsibility throughout their school and this collaborative approach is associated with successful leadership for school improvement and change (Stoll, 2020). In a study in Kuwait, Al-Dyhani (2021) found, “positive relationship between the democratic type of leadership and the ability to solve schools problems...” (p. 255).

The importance of building relational trust to lead learning

The capacity of these principals to build positive relationships with their staff, students and parents appears to have aided their success in their leadership roles. By focussing much of their attention on creating strong relationships over time they developed, not only the trust of their school community, but they also benefited from the collaboration and the engagement that the community members provided to help in the schools' improvement. This integrated level of trust is crucial to school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). These relationships were also important with superiors.

By building trust, these leaders were able to work with those in their schools to develop professional learning that was contextualised and specific to the needs of the school (Author 2020a). Drawing on the learning from the BQA assessment, the needs of their students and the learning needs of the teachers enabled the leaders to provide 'in the moment' and contextualised professional learning opportunities for both leaders and teachers.

A moral imperative

It is important to consider context when researching leadership practices and outcomes because, for example, societal values and beliefs, social networking, national curriculum influence student and leadership outcomes. When we seek to understand the findings of the current study it is important to hold "an integrated conceptualization of the relations between teaching, the learning ecology of the community and the social set of axes in which the educational organisation is set" (Male & Palaiologu, 2015, p. 214). Bahrain is a unique context where specific values and norms may impact on how leadership is enacted and the effect it has. Important cultural attributes of the Bahraini community may have played a crucial role in informing leadership decisions enacted by participating principals in this study. For example, religion's role in influencing the actions of the leaders within the context of this study cannot be ignored. All of the participants in this study are Muslim women. Each emphasised that their leadership styles were guided by moral values born out of the Islamic

tradition. It is possible that “the merging of religious, social, political, and educational roles influenced the development of the concept of educational leadership in Islam, retaining some characteristic ideological features over time” (Hamzah et al. 2016, 190). Hence, we conclude that the approach each leader took to their work is intertwined with their religious and moral values. Values, such as commitment, passion, caring, sharing, respect, giving and humility, inform the participatory leadership style that all participating principals have adopted. Similarly, argued Zaharris et al. (2017), “...great leaders in history are not remembered for what they accomplished, but rather for the spiritual core of values they imparted to their followers: fairness, kindness, trust, respect, honesty and integrity” (p. 81). When leaders set high moral standards and seek excellence for themselves, they become convincing models and gain the trust and cooperation of their subordinates. In describing the moral dimension of leadership, Sergiovanni (2005) says, “Leadership as moral action is a struggle to do the right thing according to a sense of values and what it means to be a human being. Leaders need to be concerned with what is good as well as what is effective” (p. 115).

The role of the BQA in school improvement

The BQA served as a research tool in that we used school outcomes from the BQA as a measure to identify successful schools, i.e. schools that achieved the highest scores were identified as the schools to participate in this research. Our findings also indicate that the BQA is potentially a powerful systemic resource in supporting school improvement. All ten leaders in this study referred to it for guidance and used evidence from it to problem-solve and plan their approach to improvement. This reinforces the power of systemic resources and systems that represent methods and ideas about how to achieve valued purposes and goals. The BQA served as a comprehensive review tool with a self-evaluation form. It also functioned as a guiding document for planning. The BQA may be an important part of this picture of effective leadership from the perspective that it drives a continual focus for leaders on developing accountability and improvement. And it does this in a way that has the potential to support coherence in

improvement across a school system (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).

The BQA functioned to create a sense of collective responsibility which is critical for school improvement (Author 2020b). Rather than the BQA functioning merely as a compliance tool, these leaders worked with the BQA to interpret and use evaluative feedback and gain input on potential next steps for improvement. The development of collective responsibility happens when educators stop thinking and working in isolated and individualistic ways about students, but take a view of the whole school and its students (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2020). It appears that these leaders developed collective responsibility through their collaborative approach and use of the BQA to guide practice.

Conclusion

Leadership is challenging and the complexity of effective leadership in a changing and uncertain world cannot be underestimated. Effective schools draw on both generic and locally contextualized skills' (Pont, et al., 2008) and this research has revealed some of the more contextually specific practices relative to a specific moral imperative and how this guides practice. The leaders in this study have a complex view of leadership and are not focussing on just one aspect of student need, or teacher or leader practice – instead, they are integrating the various practices of leadership.

Although caution is needed due to the small scale of this research, the findings suggest that gender may play a role in the effectiveness of school leadership in Bahrain as gender may influence the ways in which these female principals approached their leadership responsibilities. For example, the use of participatory ways of developing strong relationships appeared to allow them to mobilise the whole school community (teachers, staff, students as well as parents) in order to attain outstanding students' academic achievement.

Leadership is contextually embedded. This study in Bahrain has revealed effective leadership is driven by a strong moral purpose, the systemic provision of tools and resources to support coherence, internal and external accountability, and ongoing professional learning for staff to support the improvement of learning and teaching. Implications for policy

include the importance of focussing on systems and resources such as the BQA that provide guidance and direction for leadership practice. Future research that would contribute to comparative education studies might cast a wider net to examine the leadership practices in a broader range of schools in Bahrain. This would allow a more in-depth examination of the possible implications of both gender in leadership in this context and the significance of a moral imperative to inform and motivate leadership actions.

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