

The Principals and Teachers' Perceptions Towards Distributed Leadership Practice in Saudi High Schools

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Abstract

Research on school leadership shows that effective leadership is crucial to the development of successful schools and improvement of teaching and learning. Principals play a vital role as leaders in high schools in Saudi Arabia. As Saudi Arabia faces the challenge of changes in education, principals have to attain knowledge of the present leadership theory and research in order to acquire and obtain a theoretical understanding of leadership approaches that are able to make schools more successful. The purpose of this study is to explore how principals in Saudi Arabia understand leadership theory and the extent to which they use the distributed leadership approach. It also explores the leadership practices of principals in the context of their Saudi schools and the ways in which they involve their teachers in leadership activities.

In this study, the participants are the principals and teachers from three high schools in Makkah province of Saudi Arabia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals, and a questionnaire was completed by the teachers. The findings of this study show that the principals have sufficient knowledge for leading their schools; most of their leadership skills have been developed through experience and are concentrated on educational leadership. However, the principals lack theoretical knowledge of multiple approaches and school leadership conceptions, since they have not had opportunities for formal leadership programmes. The results of the questionnaire show that there is some practice of distributed leadership in the schools.

Keywords: Leadership , Education, School, Distributed leadership

1. Introduction

The school leader's role and responsibilities are constantly evolving due to ongoing changes that create continuous challenges for their work. It is difficult to draw clear boundaries around leadership because of the uncertainty surrounding which activities truly represent it (Mayrowetz, 2008). Depending on the school situation and their personal characteristics, leaders may work individually or collaboratively to achieve their goals. However, leadership models where leaders work individually are unlikely to fully utilise the skills and talents available within the school (Duignan, 2006; MacBeath, 2005).

Leadership has been defined in various ways. Cammock (2001) describes it as "a holistic process that involves leaders and followers interacting in particular social contexts" (p. 27). Similarly, Foster (1989) emphasizes that leadership represents "a particular set of relationships among people" (p. 39). Northouse (2010) defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3) and further notes that it "involves influencing a group of individuals who have a common purpose" (p. 3). For the purpose of this study, leadership is defined as a process of guiding teachers towards the development of their knowledge, instructional practice and leadership qualities (Northouse, 2010; Elmore, 2000b).

Previous research on school leadership illustrates that effective school leadership is vital for the enhancement of the learning environment and the improvement of successful teaching (Bush, 2008, Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003). Therefore, distributed leadership has developed as an approach that contributes to the success of schools' performances in many contexts. Harris (2002) identifies it as a key component in enabling leaders to respond appropriately to the challenges of their schools.

The literature on distributed leadership shows two different models. The first model considers distributed leadership as assigning staff members some of the principal's responsibilities. The second suggests that distributed leadership goes beyond dividing leadership tasks (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Hargreaves & Dean (2003) state that sustained change cannot occur when responsibilities are given without authority; those with leadership responsibilities should have the authority to make changes. However, when authority and responsibility rest with a single individual, sustained change is unlikely. This perspective also acknowledges that leadership always involves followership, with teachers participating critically and constructively in leadership practice (Spillane et al., 2004).

The distributed leadership model can be identified through five key dimensions: mission, vision, and goals; school culture; decision-making; evaluation and professional development; and leadership practices (Elmore, 2000). In examining distributed leadership, Gordon (2005) investigated Elmore's framework using the Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale (DLRS) and made some modifications to it to include four dimensions of leadership: mission, vision and goals; school culture; leadership practices; and shared responsibility. These dimensions are briefly discussed below.

Mission, vision and goals represent one dimension directly linked to distributed leadership's effect on student learning. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) define the school mission as both the implicit and explicit purposes understood by school members. Hallinger and Heck (1998) argue that establishing a clear mission is essential for shaping teachers' expectations and creating meaningful learning opportunities for students. Similarly, Leithwood and Montgomery (1982) suggest that a well-defined academic mission enables schools to make decisions based on student interests and to direct resources towards improving learning and teaching.

School culture, the second dimension, is emphasised by Elmore (2000) when he states that culture influences student outcomes. Yang & Chang (2024) argue that teachers with higher level with distributed leadership tend to be more engaged in professional learning communities.

. DuFour and Eaker (1998) define it as "the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm of the organization - norms that shape how its people think, feel and act" (p. 131). Sergiovanni (2001) argues that when culture includes a shared vision, values and beliefs, it acts as "a compass that steers people in a common direction and shapes the decisions and practices of school members" (p. 1). A collaborative culture contributes to high morale, greater commitment to teaching, and improved student achievement. Brandt (2003) asserts that a school culture of deep and sustained professional teaching has a particularly powerful impact on student learning.

Decision-making, the third dimension, is highlighted by Elmore (2000) as central to improving student learning. Supporting this argument, Göksoy (2015) found that distributed leadership encourages teachers to become more engaged in making decisions and promotes collaboration within schools. Authentic measures of school success or failure must be grounded in data-driven decision-making. Schools benefit when data are collected systematically and widely accessible to members of the school. Waters et al. (2004) found that "involving teachers in the design and implementation of important school decisions and policies" produced an average effect size of .30 on students' achievement (p. 4).

Evaluation and professional development, the fourth dimension, focuses on growth and accountability among school members. Neuman and Simmons (2000) stress that improving students' achievement requires that the "adults who work with students should also learn and grow" (p. 3). Ellerbee and Miller (2000) likewise highlight the link between shared professional learning and improved student outcomes.

Leadership practice, the final dimension, reflects how school leaders interact in carrying out leadership responsibilities. Spillane et al. (2001) describe it as the "interaction of leaders and tools of various sorts" (p. 26). Waters et al. (2004) argue that leadership practice should include "a guaranteed curriculum, challenging goals and effective feedback, parent and community involvement, a safe and orderly environment, and collegiality and professionalism" (p. 50).

1.1. The Context of the Study

The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia is responsible for setting the national educational standards and supervises the general education of both boys and girls at all three stages: primary, middle, and high school levels. In addition, special education services are provided to support students with disabilities in living independently and safely (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2012).

The Saudi education system is highly centralised, based on a hierarchical structure and top-down decision-making. The Ministry of Education holds authority over appointments, and principals are often selected without formal criteria, with personal relationships influencing decisions (Al-Aref & Al-Juhani, 2008; Al-Shakhis, 1984). According to Al-Shakhis (1984), school leaders are often appointed in an unsystematic manner, with personal relationships between the candidate and the decision makers playing an important role in the selection process. At the same time, Saudi Vision 2030 recognises leadership as a strategic tool for reform, linking it to improved quality, accountability and innovation (Makhlof, 2021; Siambi, 2023). Initiatives such as the Tatweer School Development Programme aim to modernise schools and foster collaborative leadership practices. Recent international research has highlighted the effective role of distributed leadership for promoting collaboration, shared responsibility, and teacher involvement in school reform (Göksoy, 2015; Yang & Chang, 2024). However, limited research has been published in Saudi Arabia, especially regarding how principals and teachers understand and practise distributed leadership in high schools.

1.2. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate how principals in Saudi Arabia understand leadership theory and the extent to which principals use the distributed leadership approach. It also examines the leadership practices of principals in the context of their Saudi schools and the ways in which they involve teachers in leadership activities. Understanding how principals conceptualise leadership and apply it to practice is essential, particularly regarding the responsibilities associated with distributed leadership. Therefore, this study focuses on the leadership activities principals carry out in their school contexts and how they engage teachers in these activities.

The study addresses two main questions:

1. How do principals and teachers understand and practise school leadership in Saudi high schools?
2. What distributed leadership elements are used in Saudi high schools?

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research employs two complementary instruments: questionnaires and interviews. The study adopts a QUAN qual mixed-methods approach. In other words, questionnaires are

given greater priority in data collection and analysis. This is followed by a qualitative phase, conducted through interviews, which will be used to explain and provide deeper insight into the patterns and findings that emerge from the quantitative results. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership practices in Saudi high schools.

2.2. Research Sample

The participants were 29 principals and teachers from three high schools in Saudi Arabia, all aged more than 18 years. More information about the participants will be provided in the Result section. Convenience sampling, a non-random sampling method, was used to recruit participants who are willing to participate.

2.3. Research Instruments

This study used both questionnaires and interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire consists of three parts: (1) an introduction with a sample of the informed-consent forms, (2) general information and statements measuring the school's readiness and distributed leadership engagement, and (3) 34 items adapted from the Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale (DLRS).

A five-point Likert scale measured frequency of responses: Continually, Frequently, Sometimes, Rarely/Never, and Insufficient Information. Thirty-four items out of the original 40 DLRS items were retained as relevant to the Saudi context. The DLRS items were reviewed and adapted, and the questionnaire was piloted to check clarity and relevance before full distribution. The main questionnaire was then distributed online via Smart Survey to reach a sufficient sample quickly. The questionnaire took approximately 8-10 minutes to complete (see Appendix A).

Alongside questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the findings. The interviews were conducted in Arabic using the phone. This allows participants to share their reactions and perspectives in greater depth, providing contextualised understanding of distributed leadership in Saudi schools.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic via phone to facilitate participation and ensure clarity of expression. Prior to each interview, the research topic and the purpose of the study were explained to all participants. The interviews included five questions focusing on various distributed leadership dimensions and characteristics:

- As a principal, what leadership approaches do you use in your school?
- What helps and hinders you in using these leadership approaches?
- What aspects of your school are the largest barriers to school improvement?
- What leadership activities do you think would make your school more successful?
- How do you identify the formal and informal leadership roles in your school, and how have the roles been assigned?

2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey data. In the current study, measures of frequency were used, as they indicate, “often a particular behaviour or phenomenon occurs” (Mackey and Gass, 2005: p. 251).

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which provide guidance to focus on the research questions while allowing participants to express their perspectives in their own words (Burns, 2000). Each principal was interviewed individually, and interviews lasted from 25 to 35 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, and written notes were recorded for each response. Interview data were coded and analysed thematically.

3. Results

The results of the quantitative and qualitative data focus on the principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of distributed leadership practices in three boys’ high schools in the Makkah province, Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire, which is adopted from the Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale (DLRS), was completed by participants to measure teachers’ engagement in distributed leadership practices. The questionnaire consists of the four dimensions of distributed leadership: the mission, vision and goal dimension; the school culture dimension; the shared responsibility dimension; and the leadership dimension.

3.1. Descriptive Summary of Participants’ General Information

In this study, participants were asked about their last academic qualification, the total number of years of experience in education and primary roles in their school. In the following figure (1, 2), most participants (89.66%) held a bachelor’s degree, while 3.45% had a master’s degree and 6.9% had other qualifications. The majority of participants (69%) were teachers, with a smaller percentage serving as students’ advisor (3%), ICT co-ordinator (7%), deputy principal (14%) and other roles (7%).

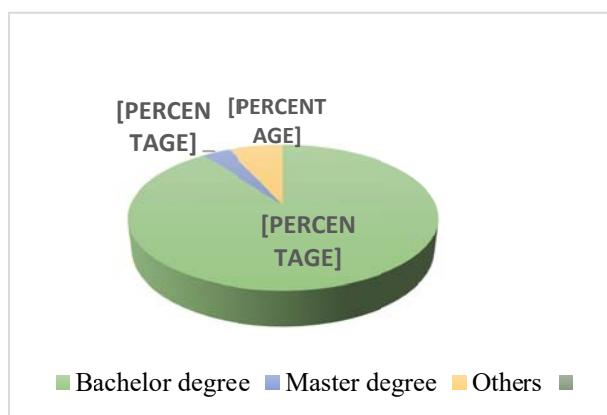


Figure 1. Last Academic Qualification of Participants

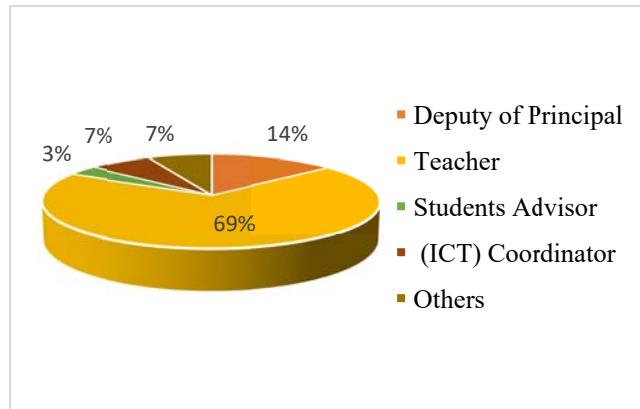


Figure 2. Primary Role of Participants in School

The participants' total years in education and school are shown in figure 3. The study found that all participants had at least one year of experience in education. Most (82.76%) had been in education for 7 years or more, indicating highly experienced teachers. In terms of total years in school, 13.79% had been in their current school for less than one year; 44.68% for 1-2 years; 24.14% for 4-6 years; and 17.24% for 7 years or more. So, the results are obtained from experienced teachers with a number of years in education.



Figure 3. Total Years in Education and School

3.2. Descriptive Statistics of Mission, Vision and Goal Dimension

The results show that while schools generally have clear mission statements and aligned goals, there is a need for better collaboration among the teachers and administrators to involve parents and students. An improvement plan is in place in most schools, but a shared setting remains an area requiring development. As shown in the following table, *Item 1* indicates that a significant percentage of teachers reported that mission statements are “continually” or “frequently” clearly written (68.9%), yet fewer teachers believe that parents (*Item 3*, 20.7%) or students (*Item 4*, 31%) can clearly describe them, reflecting their weak involvement in supporting the vision. *Item 2* shows that teachers and administrators generally support the school mission (72.4%), and *Item 6* reveals that over 80% acknowledged the use of school improvement plans as a basis for progress. However, *Item 7* shows that only about

half of the respondents agreed that teachers and administrators work collectively to revise goals annually.

Table 1. Mission, Vision and Goal Dimension

Items	Continually	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	Insufficient Information	Response Total
1. The school has clearly written vision and mission statements.	37.9% (11)	31.0% (9)	17.2% (5)	10.3% (3)	3.4% (1)	29
2. Teachers and administrators understand and support a common mission for the school and can describe it clearly.	24.1% (7)	48.3% (14)	24.1% (7)	3.4% (1)	0.0% (0)	29
3. If parents are asked to describe the school's mission, most would be able to describe the mission clearly.	6.9% (2)	13.8% (4)	41.4% (12)	27.6% (8)	10.3% (3)	29
4. If students are asked to describe the school's mission, most would be able to describe it clearly.	10.3% (3)	20.7% (6)	41.4% (12)	27.6% (8)	0.0% (0)	29
5. School goals are aligned with its mission statement.	17.2% (5)	55.2% (16)	24.1% (7)	0.0% (0)	3.4% (1)	29
6. The school uses a school improvement plan as a basis for progress.	37.9% (11)	44.8% (13)	10.3% (3)	6.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	29
7. Teachers and administrators collectively establish school goals and revise goals annually.	6.9% (2)	41.4% (12)	24.1% (7)	20.7% (6)	6.9% (2)	29

3.3. Descriptive Statistics of School Culture Dimension

As illustrated in Table 2, the responses relating to school culture reflect strong trust and respect and teachers feel valued, with Item 11 showing that over 90% of the teachers believe mutual respect among staff occurs either 'continually' or 'frequently', including 55.2% who stated 'continually'. Item 12 indicates that administrators are seen as open and knowledgeable, as 58.6% of them 'continually' welcome teachers' input and 34.5% do so 'frequently', while Item 27 shows that 48.3% of principals are 'continually' knowledgeable about current instructional issues. However, Items 24 and 25 reveal areas for improvement, including increased collaboration in developing professional development and the joint creation of professional development plans, since only 20.7% of teachers 'continually' develop their professional development plans jointly with principals and 44.8% 'frequently'. Finally, Item 28 shows that principals' leadership and integrity are generally well-regarded by teachers, with 65.5% indicating that principals' practices are 'frequently' consistent with their words and 24.1% 'continually', suggesting strong integrity and a positive school culture.

Table 2. School Culture Dimension

Items	Continually	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	Insufficient Information	Response Total
11. There is a high level of mutual respect and trust among the teachers and professional staff.	55.2% (16)	37.9% (11)	6.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	29
12. The school administrators (head & assistant head) welcome teachers' input on issues related to instruction and improving student performance.	58.6% (17)	34.5% (10)	3.4% (1)	3.4% (1)	0.0% (0)	29
13. The school supports using new instructional ideas and innovations.	55.2% (16)	20.7% (6)	17.2% (5)	6.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	29
19. The principal actively encourages teachers to participate in instructional decision making.	31.0% (9)	41.4% (12)	20.7% (6)	3.4% (1)	3.4% (1)	29
20. Professional staff members in the school have the responsibility to make decisions that affect meeting school goals.	55.2% (16)	37.9% (11)	6.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	29
22. Administrators participate alongside teachers in the school's professional development activities.	34.5% (10)	48.3% (14)	%6.9 (2)	10.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	29
23. The principal actively participates in his/her own professional development activities to improve leadership in the school.	34.5% (10)	51.7% (15)	10.3% (3)	%3.4 (1)	0.0% (0)	29
24. My principal and I jointly develop my annual professional development plan.	20.7% (6)	51.7% (15)	10.3% (3)	13.8% (4)	3.4% (1)	29
25. My professional development plan includes activities that are based on my individual professional needs and school needs.	20.7% (6)	44.8% (13)	24.1% (7)	10.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	29
26. Teachers actively participate in instructional decision making.	6.9% (2)	62.1% (18)	10.3% (3)	20.7% (6)	0.0% (0)	29
27. The principal is knowledgeable about current instructional issues.	48.3% (14)	44.8% (13)	6.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	29
28. My principal's practices are consistent with his/her words.	24.1% (7)	65.5% (19)	10.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	29

3.4. Descriptive Statistics of Shared Responsibility Dimension

As illustrated in Table 3, shared responsibility between teachers and administrators is generally viewed positively, as Item 8 shows that 37.9% of teachers reported 'continually' and 34.5%

‘frequently’ sharing accountability for students’ performance, while 17.2% said ‘sometimes’ and 10.3% ‘rarely or never’. However, significant areas for improvement include collaboration time, parent-teacher communication, access to performance data and the redirection of district resources. Item 9 reveals that only 6.9% of teachers believe that school district resources are ‘continually’ directed to areas needing improvement, whereas 48.3% stated this happens ‘sometimes’ and 17.2% ‘rarely or never’. Item 18 shows that while shared leadership demonstrates some strengths, with 44.8% of teachers reporting that opportunities for school-level instructional decision-making are available ‘frequently’, only 10.3% said ‘continually’, suggesting a need for stronger formal structures.

Table 3. Shared Responsibility Dimension

Items	Continually	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	Insufficient Information	Response Total
8. Teachers and administrators share accountability for students’ academic performance.	37.9% (11)	34.5% (10)	17.2% (5)	10.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	29
9. School district resources are directed to those areas in which student learning needs to improve most.	6.9% (2)	20.7% (6)	48.3% (14)	17.2% (5)	6.9% (2)	29
10. The school is a learning community that continually improves its effectiveness, learning from both successes and failures.	20.7% (6)	37.9% (11)	34.5% (10)	6.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	29
14. The school’s daily and weekly schedules provide time for teachers to collaborate on instructional issues.	17.2% (5)	27.6% (8)	24.1% (7)	20.7% (6)	10.3% (3)	29
15. School teachers and parents agree on the most effective roles parents can play as partners in their child’s education.	6.9% (2)	24.1% (7)	24.1% (7)	37.9% (11)	6.9% (2)	29
16. The school clearly communicates the ‘chain of contact’ between home and school so parents know who to contact when they have questions and concerns.	24.1% (7)	27.6% (8)	37.9% (11)	10.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	29
17. The school makes available a variety of data (e.g. school performance) for teachers to use to improve student achievement.	24.1% (7)	44.8% (13)	17.2% (5)	13.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	29
18. There is a formal structure in place in the school to provide teachers and administrators opportunities to participate in school-level instructional	10.3% (3)	44.8% (13)	27.6% (8)	17.2% (5)	0.0% (0)	29

decision making.						
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Item 14 shows that collaboration among teachers also needs attention, since only 17.2% said time is ‘continually’ provided for collaboration, while 20.7% stated this ‘rarely or never’ occurs. Item 15 indicates that parent involvement appears weak, as just 6.9% said there is continual agreement on parents’ roles, and 37.9% stated this ‘rarely or never’ happens. Item 16 reveals that communication between home and school also shows gaps, with 24.1% saying it occurs ‘continually’ and 37.9% ‘sometimes’. Item 17 shows that although schools provide data for improving student achievement, only 24.1% said this happens ‘continually’ and 44.8% ‘frequently’. Overall, schools must strengthen these aspects to foster an effective leadership environment.

3.5. Descriptive Statistics of Leadership Practices Dimension

The results presented in the following table show moderate support and interest in leadership roles among teachers, as responses varied across the leadership practices items. In item 21, responses were mixed on whether professional development aligns with the school’s mission and goals, with 31% answering ‘frequently’, 31% ‘sometimes’, 24.1% ‘continually’, and 13.8% ‘rarely or never’, showing the need for better alignment with school goals. According to the results from item 29, 44.8% of teachers stated that their school ‘frequently’ offers formal leadership opportunities, 17.2% ‘continually’, 31% ‘sometimes’, and 6.9% ‘rarely or never’, indicating positive but not consistent leadership capacity building. In items 30 and 31, 24.1% said teachers in leadership roles have sufficient time ‘continually’ and 10.3% said they have sufficient resources ‘continually’, while 17.2% said ‘rarely or never’, suggesting limited support and inconsistent time allocation. Item 32 shows that veteran teachers often hold leadership roles, with 24.1% ‘continually’ and 37.9% ‘frequently’, while in item 33, 20.7% said new teachers are ‘rarely or never’ provided opportunities, indicating an imbalance between experienced and new teachers. Finally, item 34 shows that teachers are interested in participating in leadership roles, with 17.2% responding ‘continually’, 41.4% ‘frequently’, 24.1% ‘sometimes’, and 17.2% ‘rarely or never’, demonstrating clear interest yet the need for more structured support and opportunity.

Table 4. Leadership Practices Dimension

Items	Continually	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	Insufficient Information	Response Total
21. The school provides teachers with professional development aligned with the school's mission and goals.	24.1% (7)	31.0% (9)	31.0% (9)	13.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	29
29. The school has expanded its capacity by providing teachers formal opportunities to take on leadership roles.	17.2% (5)	44.8% (13)	31.0% (9)	6.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	29
30. Teachers who assume leadership roles in the school have sufficient school time to permit them to make meaningful contributions to school.	24.1% (7)	27.6% (8)	24.1% (7)	20.7% (6)	3.4% (1)	29
31. Teachers who assume leadership roles in the school have sufficient resources to be able to make meaningful contributions to the school.	10.3% (3)	37.9% (11)	31.0% (9)	17.2% (5)	3.4% (1)	29
32. Veteran teachers fill most leadership roles in the school.	24.1% (7)	37.9% (11)	27.6% (8)	10.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	29
33. New teachers are provided opportunities to fill some school leadership roles.	13.8% (4)	37.9% (11)	27.6% (8)	20.7% (6)	0.0% (0)	29
34. Teachers are interested in participating in school leadership roles.	17.2% (5)	41.4% (12)	24.1% (7)	17.2% (5)	0.0% (0)	29

3.6. Interview Findings

This section presents the findings from interviews conducted with three principals of boys' high schools in Saudi Arabia. The interviews focused on exploring their leadership experiences and styles. The analysis of the interviews revealed several important themes related to leadership practices and constraints. Numbers (1,2,3) were used to label the interviewees.

The first theme relates to the leadership approaches adopted by the principals. All three principals reported using different leadership styles. Principals 1 and 2 favour using the co-operative, democratic and distributed leadership, while principal 3 noted that, in addition to these, they sometimes used a central or and directive approach. All the principals mentioned that they distributed tasks between teachers and administrators. The principals use different leadership approaches to make their schools successful.

The second theme highlights the factors that help or hinder the use of leadership approaches in schools. Supportive factors included consultation with experienced teachers, advanced plans for work, and the identifying of weaknesses. In contrast, Central Ministry of Education systems, bureaucracy, lacking the help of some teachers, shortage of financial support, and restricted principal authorities were identified by all principals as obstacles that hinder the use of leadership approaches. The principals were aware of the importance of effective leadership. However, there are also some obstacles that hinder the use of such leadership approaches.

The third theme relates to barriers to school improvement identified by the principals. The principals (1, 2 and 3) mentioned that there are barriers to school improvement. They stated that inadequate equipment and a lack of professional development for teachers are major obstacles. As revealed in the three schools, there are not enough teachers in the school, as noted by Principal 1, and there is limited support from both the local education office and the Ministry of Education in terms of resources and authority.

The fourth theme focuses on leadership activities and strategies used by the principals. During the interviews, the principals stated that they usually attempt 'creating new leaders' by engaging teachers in leading various tasks in schools. Principals 1 and 2 stated that 'delegating tasks and powers' is a successful leadership activity, while Principal 3 suggested that evaluating the performance of the deputy's principal and teachers is a leadership strategy.

The final theme addresses the identification of informal and formal leadership roles within the school. The principals indicated that they have some input in appointing deputy principal and assigning leadership tasks to teachers, but such decisions require approval from the local education office and school board. This indicates that principals lack the authority and autonomy to make decisions independently.

5. Discussion

The study examines four dimensions of distributed leadership: mission, vision and goals; school culture; shared responsibility; and leadership practice. The findings revealed both strengths and weaknesses across these dimensions. They also provide a comprehensive understanding of how distributed leadership operates in schools.

The first dimension, mission, vision and goals, is one of the most important factors contributing to school success. Most teachers indicated that this element is addressed continually or frequently, although 13.7% reported that it is not yet in place. DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasise that a clear mission statement, developed collaboratively between administrators and teachers, provides the foundation for effective leadership. Similarly, Neuman and Simmons (2000) stress that distributed leadership should develop a shared vision and goals focused on student learning, while Harris (2012) warns that without such shared direction, members may work towards different outcomes.

A weakness identified in this study is the limited collaboration between teachers and administrators in setting and reviewing these goals. Some teachers reported that this rarely or never occurs. Gronn (2000) views leadership as a collective process embedded in

organisational interaction. To address this gap, regular meetings should be held to revise these goals to promote both student learning and teacher development.

School culture represents the shared assumptions, values, and habits that shape how members of an organisation think and act (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A strong culture of trust and respect was evident between teachers and administrators, who were viewed as knowledgeable and supportive. Brandt (2003) notes that such cultures that promote professional learning positively affect student outcomes. Phillips et al. (2023) indicate that distributed leadership has a positive impact on teacher collaboration, innovation, and organizational learning when supported by trust and shared vision. Most teachers (58.6 %) agreed that the head teacher welcomes their input, though a small minority (3.4%) felt otherwise. Neuman and Simmons (2000) stress that teachers must also engage in continuous learning for improvement; however, several teachers reported limited professional growth opportunities, revealing a weakness in distributed leadership practice. Clearly, greater attention and investment are needed in this area to strengthen distributed leadership practices.

The results for shared responsibility indicate that most teachers and administrators jointly assume responsibility for students' academic performance. Research consistently links shared decision-making with improved student achievement (Waters et al., 2004; Phillips, 2003). Teachers' participation in designing and implementing school policies fosters ownership and collaboration, and this was reflected in the positive responses. However, a small proportion noted that shared responsibility occurs infrequently, suggesting potential for further enhancement. A related area for development is parent-school partnership. While communication channels exist, teachers expressed differing views about parents' appropriate roles in supporting learning. Waters et al. (2004) emphasize that effective school leadership incorporates parent and community involvement alongside professional collaboration. This highlights the importance of parents' cooperation in supporting principals and teachers to achieve school success.

Leadership practice refers to the interaction of leaders, followers, and tools within the school (Spillane et al., 2001) and should involve both formal and informal leaders. Findings were generally positive: most teachers reported opportunities to assume leadership roles and engage in professional development aligned with school goals. Lambert (2003) notes that effective leaders influence, guide, and mentor others through collaboration. Nevertheless, 13.8% of teachers indicated that these opportunities rarely occur, implying a need for stronger mentoring and facilitation. A major constraint identified was time: responses were divided, and 20.7% of teachers said they had no time for leadership activities. Without adequate time, leadership potential cannot be realised. Elmore (2000) highlights that leaders should protect teachers from non-instructional burdens to enable instructional focus. Resource limitations were another concern, reported by 17.2 % of teachers and attributed to insufficient Ministry support. This finding suggests that leadership roles are generally assigned based on teachers' areas of expertise rather than simply their years of service, yet without the necessary resources, the effectiveness of these roles remains constrained.

The interviews with principals revealed that they have a strong understanding of leadership and can guide their schools towards achieving goals. Effective leaders utilise the skills of all school members to achieve organisational goals efficiently. However, the bureaucratic system, which requires that school principals operate strictly according to the Ministry of Education's regulations, restricts them from making decisions that could improve their schools. Hargreaves and Dean (2003) argue that distributed leadership extends beyond delegation and requires genuine authority to sustain change. The principals recognised the leadership challenges in Saudi Arabia and emphasised the need for flexibility, as different contexts demand different styles (Harris, 2002). Some authority has been delegated to principals, reflecting a shift from centralised to shared leadership that promotes innovation (Harris, 2012). Yet bureaucratic barriers, inadequate financial support, and limited resources continue to hinder effective implementation. Additional issues include some principals' reluctance to develop new leaders or share power, which weakens distributed practices (Hatcher, 2005).

6. Conclusion

Research on school leadership highlights its critical role in improving educational quality, yet few studies have explored how Saudi principals understand and apply leadership theories, particularly distributed leadership. In Saudi Arabia, leadership is often seen primarily as administrative management rather than as a collaborative process. This study highlights the importance of developing a deeper understanding of leadership as a shared practice that empowers teachers and enhances school effectiveness. While the country has expanded educational access, improving learning quality remains a major challenge. The Ministry of Education has begun addressing this through leadership programmes aimed at supporting principals, though further development is needed.

The findings suggest several implications for practice. Developing professional leadership programmes is essential to strengthen principals' theoretical and practical understanding of leadership. Successful principals demonstrate practical skills, but many require deeper theoretical grounding. Greater autonomy in decision-making is also vital, as bureaucratic constraints often prevent meaningful change. The Ministry of Education should establish general frameworks while granting principals flexibility to innovate. Furthermore, empowering teachers as leaders through sufficient time and resources can promote shared leadership and continuous school improvement. Preparing principals through targeted professional programmes remains a national priority.

This study provides valuable insight into principals' understanding of leadership and the challenges of implementing distributed leadership in Saudi schools. Despite its contributions, the study has some limitations. Only three principals were interviewed, which limits the generalisability of the qualitative findings. Similarly, the overall sample size was small, reducing the extent to which results can represent all Saudi schools. Future studies should therefore include larger and more diverse samples to strengthen the validity of findings.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Distributed Leadership Questionnaire (English Version).

Distributed Leadership Questionnaire

General Information (Please provide the following information)

• **Your last academic qualification:**

- Bachelor degree
- Master degree
- Others: Please specify.....

• **Total Years in Education:**

1. less than 1
2. 1 - 3
3. 4 - 6
4. 7 or more

• **Total Years in School:**

1. less than 1

2. 1 - 3
3. 4 - 6
4. 7 or more

- **Your primary role in School**

1. Deputy Principal
2. Teacher
3. Students Advisor
4. Learning Resource (ICT) Coordinator
5. Others. Please specify.....

Directions: Record your responses in the first four columns of the General Purpose Data Sheet. Use the five-point scale from Continually (A) to 'Rarely/Never (D) to describe how regularly the following statements apply to you and your school. Select 'E' if you do not have sufficient information to respond to the statement.	Continually	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	Insufficient Information
1. The school has clearly written vision and mission statements	A	B	C	D	E
2. Teachers and administrators understand and support on a common mission for the school and can describe it clearly.					
3. If parents are asked to describe the school's mission, most would be able to describe the mission clearly.					
4. If students are asked to describe the schools' mission, most would be able to describe it clearly.					
5. School goals are aligned with its mission statement.					
6. The school uses a school improvement plan as a basis the progress.					
7. Teachers and administrators collectively establish school goals and revise goals annually.					
8. Teachers and administrators share accountability for students' academic performance					
9. School district resources are directed to those areas in which student learning needs to improve most.					
10. The school is a learning community that continually improves its effectiveness, learning from both successes and					

failures				
11. There is a high level of mutual respect and trust among the teachers and professional staff.				
12. The school administrators (Head & assistant Head) welcome teachers' input on issues related to instruction, and improving student performance				
13. The school supports using new instructional ideas and innovations				
14. The school's daily and weekly schedules provide time for teachers to collaborate on instructional issues.				
15. School teachers and parents agree on the most effective roles parents can play as partners in their child's education				
16. The school clearly communicates the 'chain of contact' between home and school so parents know who to contact when they have questions and concerns				
17. The school makes available a variety of data (e.g. school performance) for teachers to use to improve student achievement				
18. There is a formal structure in place in the school to provide teachers and administrators opportunities to participate in school level instructional decision-making				
19. The principal actively encourages teachers to participate in instructional decision-making				
20. Professional staff members in the school have the responsibility to make decisions that affect meeting school goals.				
21. The school provides teachers with professional development aligned with the school's mission and goals.				
22. Administrators participate along side teachers in the school's professional development activities.				
23. The principal actively participates in his/her own professional development activities to improve leadership in the school				
24. My principal and I jointly develop my annual professional development plan.				
25. My professional development plan includes activities that are based on my individual professional needs and school needs.				

26. Teachers actively participate in instructional decision-making.					
27. The principal is knowledgeable about current instructional issues.					
28. My principal's practices are consistent with his/her words.					
29. The school has expanded its capacity by providing teachers formal opportunities to take on leadership roles.					
30. Teachers who assume leadership roles in the school have sufficient school time to permit them to make meaningful contributions to school					
31. Teachers who assume leadership roles in the school have sufficient resources to be able to make meaningful contributions to the school					
32. Veteran teachers fill most leadership roles in the school.					
33. New teachers are provided opportunities to fill some school leadership roles.					
34. Teachers are interested in participating in school leadership roles.					

Appendix B: A Sample of the Informed Consent Form.
CONSENT FORM

The title of project: **The Principals and Teachers' Perceptions toward Distributed Leadership Practice in Saudi High Schools**

Dear Participants

You are invited to participant in this study that related to the perceptions of school principals and teachers toward the distributed leadership practice in high school in Saudi Arabia. The purposes of this study is to explore and investigate how principals in Saudi Arabia understand leadership theory and the extent to which principals use the distributed leadership approach. It also explores and how principals engage their teachers in leadership activities. It takes the answer to this questionnaire between 8 to10 minutes.

Express my deep thanks to you to give me this precious part of your time to participate in this research and if you would like to receive additional information about this research, please feel free to contact me:

Researcher Name: Hassan Saeed Alshehri

Mobile: +966504320064

E-mail: hassan0330@hotmail.com

Please initial the boxes:

I confirm that I have understood the information for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	Yes	NO
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.	Yes	NO
I agree to take part in the study.	Yes	NO