



European Journal of Educational Management

Volume 2, Issue 1, 13 - 33

ISSN: 2642-2344

<http://www.eujem.com/>

Being a Saudi and Qatari Female Principal: Position Demands, Challenges, and Advice

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined what female principals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, two historically male-dominated cultures who are actively implementing reforms to provide women with more leadership opportunities, reported as typical elements of their daily work. The study also examined the challenges that these female principals reported in their efforts to improve the learning environment in their schools and what advice they would give to women entering the field of school leadership. The themes that emerged from the data were used to construct a grounded theory of the daily responsibilities of Saudi and Qatari female principals, the challenges that faced in fulfilling those responsibilities, and how they advised women entering principal positions to prepare to respond to those challenges.

Keywords: *Principals, Saudi Arabian education system, Qatar education system, school leadership, female leadership.*

To cite this article: Vogel, L., & Alsliman, A. (2018). Being a Saudi and Qatari female principal: Position demands, challenges, and advice. *European Journal of Educational Management*, 2(1), 13-33. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eujem.2.1.13>

Introduction

Although more Arab women are becoming leaders in various fields, there is still limited research regarding female leadership of schools (Albakry, 2015; Aldawsari, 2016; Arar & Oplatka, 2016; Khalifeh, 2011). King Abdullah made education reform a priority in Saudi Arabia and, with the central government providing more local decision-making opportunities, school leadership has become critical to the reform of Saudi education (Ministry of Education, 2014). In the Arab nation of Qatar, female leadership of education has a slightly longer history with the first girls' primary schools that opened in 1955 to the admission of women to Qatar University in 1973 and additional opportunities for women in the education field led by Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, the mother of the current leader of Qatar (Bahry & Marr, 2005; Brewer, Augustine, Zellman, Ryan, Goldman, Stasz, & Constant, 2007; UNESCO, 2008). While the Saudi Arabian school system is more centralized than the education system in Qatar, schools are still segregated by gender in both nations which are historically male-dominated cultures (Kattan, de Pablos Heredero, Botella, & Margalina, 2016; Aldawsari, 2016). Given the reforms that the governments of these two Arab nations have been working on regarding education and leadership opportunities for women (Arar & Oplatka, 2016), a qualitative study was undertaken to capture the voices of female school leaders in Saudi Arabia and Qatar regarding what their positions entailed, the challenges they faced, and what advice they would give to women entering the profession in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The Context of Women and Educational Leadership in Saudi Arabia and Qatar

While the role of women has been changing in Middle Eastern nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the number of women obtaining college educations is not mirrored by female participation in the workforce and women in leadership roles still face obstacles related to traditional gender expectations (Arar & Oplatka, 2016). A 2015 news article in the *Saudi Gazette* quoted a Ministry of Education report that more women (51.8%) than men (48.2%) were attending Saudi universities. Only 14% of the Saudi workforce was comprised of women however in 2014 (Arar & Oplatka, 2016). While the *Arab News* reported in 2017 that the Saudi Ministry of Labor and Social Development expected women to constitute 28% of the workforce by 2020, the dramatic increase was attributed to a "work from home program" geared

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toward “providing adequate job opportunities for citizens, especially women and those with disabilities” (*Arab News*, 2017). Eighty-five percent of employed Saudi women worked in the field of education (Arar & Oplatka, 2016).

Similar trends of high female enrollment in tertiary education but relatively low participation in the labor market has been found in Qatar. James-Hawkins, Qutteina, and Yount reported in 2017 that 81% of the students at Qatar University were women. However, the number of Qatari women in the workforce remained relatively low (although higher than in Saudi Arabia) with 36.3% of the labor force comprised by women in 2008[†] (James-Hawkins, Qutteina, & Yount, 2017). Women were also still expected to “perform all household and child-rearing tasks” and generally resolved the conflict between growing opportunities to acquire an education and hold a job and family responsibilities by “giving preference to family over work and education” (p. 155).

The goals for economic growth that require a more educated citizenry have spurred policies in Middle Eastern nations to encourage more women to obtain advanced degree. The number of women entering the field of education has increased in both Saudi Arabia and Qatar in greater proportions than in other fields because education is considered an occupation “appropriate and acceptable for women” (James-Hawkins, Qutteina, & Yount, 2017, p. 157). In order to understand the dynamics that Saudi and Qatari women in education who move into leadership positions face, one must first understand the history and context of the educational systems in each nation.

Women and Educational Leadership in Saudi Arabia

Authentic local educational leadership is often difficult when nations have highly centralized governments such as Saudi Arabia (Alameen, Male, & Palaiologou, 2015). In traditionally patriarchal Middle Eastern countries, leadership has been viewed as a masculine role with opportunities for women to move into leadership positions limited (Arar & Oplatka, 2016). In 2015, Alameen, Male, and Palaiologou identified a small number of female leaders of “early-years education” (pre-school and kindergarten for both boys and girls ages three through six) who “form the vision and mission, make all kinds of decisions without limitation and appear to be flexible in building relationships and freely involving others in the school’s decision-making” (p. 136).

Educational opportunities have grown within the Saudi educational system as well as the role of women within the educational system since the 1960’s when the first schools for girls were created (Alaymi, 2016). The first university for women was established in 1979 and education was one of the areas of study offered. In 2007, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz ordered the reformation of the Saudi education system focused on “improving teacher and leadership quality, the development of standards and curricula, and the provision of resources and tools to districts and schools” (Khalil & Karim, 2016, p. 505). King Abdullah supported several reforms regarding women’s education as well as incorporating more women in national leadership positions. In 2009, King Abdullah appointed the first female Vice-Minister of Education. He also included 30 women in the national Shura Council that advises the monarch in 2013 and allowed women to vote and stand for local offices in 2015. Most recently, Saudi Arabia has appointed the first female ambassador to the United States in order to support women leadership at an international level. While there are still many restraints on the positions that are acceptable for women to occupy in Saudi society (Arar & Oplatka, 2016), schools remain segregated by gender (Fasari, 2015). While early primary schools are led and taught only by females, women also lead the all-female schools from the elementary level upward. Because female enrollment in Saudi schools is higher than male enrollment (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2016a), women have a large presence as educational leaders across the nation.

Principal Selection and Preparation

Principals were chosen based upon their teaching experience so any teacher could apply for a school leadership position (Khalil & Karim, 2016). While many principals first held the position of vice principal, there was no requirement for administrative experience or training for school leaders. With the focus of King Abdullah’s *Tatweer* education reform policy in 2007 on increasing the quality of both teachers and school leaders (Tayan, 2017), however, specific requirements were adopted for K-12 principals. Currently, principals must hold at least a Bachelor’s degree, have at least four years of teaching experience, have earned an “A” grade on their teaching evaluations in the past two years, and at least two years of experience as a vice principal (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2016, b). There were also seven national universities that were authorized to offer a principal preparation program in collaboration with the MOE (Altuwaijri, 2016). Only 300 individuals each year who already occupied the position of principal were admitted to these programs, and the curriculum in the six required courses was rigidly controlled by the MOE. Altuwaijri criticized the preparation available to Saudi principals as inflexible in meeting the authentic leadership needs of principals, too limited in number of principals served, and occurring while a person was leading a school instead of enabling educators to learn and prove their knowledge prior to being appointed as a principal.

[†] The percentage of Qatari women in the workforce is inconsistently reported in the literature. Felder and Vuollo (2008) cite a United Nations report of over 40% of Qatari women in the workforce in 2003, while Bahry and Marr (2005) reported the percentage to be 30.2% in 2004. James-Hawkins, Qutteina, and Yount are cited above because the statistics are more recent and, because they fall between previous reported percentages, may be viewed as a more accurate number.

Meeting the qualifications to lead a school does not mean a person knows how to do so (Altuwaijri, 2016; Khalil & Karim, 2016). Experience requirements alone do not guarantee that one has the knowledge and skills to lead a school effectively (Khalil & Karim, 2016; Mathis, 2010). Nine of the 12 principals in Mathis's 2010 study reported being self-educated regarding school leadership. Alsharari (2010) attributed the lack of female school leaders' knowledge of how to support teacher and staff growth through professional development and other more school-wide leadership skills to the practice of delegating supervision of classroom instruction and curriculum to aspiring female school leaders.

Women and Educational Leadership in Qatar

Qatar, also an Arab nation, started educating women and granting women more freedom and access to positions of leadership earlier than Saudi Arabia. Schools for girls were started in 1955 with 70 girls' schools reported in 1970 ("Qatari Women Then and Now," 2017). Five years before Saudi Arabia, Qatari women were given the right to vote and run for public offices in 1999. By 2004, Qatari Planning Council data indicated that 53% of Qatari women held jobs in education which is 80% of all employees of the Ministry of Education (Felder & Vuollo, 2008).

The Supreme Education Council (SEC) adopted education reforms recommended from by the RAND corporation in 2007 that emphasized autonomy and accountability under the Independent School Model (Brewer, Zellman, Ryan, Goldman, Stasz, & Constant, 2007), however the Qatari educational system remains highly centralized (Romanowski, 2015). Women teach and lead the elementary schools to provide a transition for both boys and girls from the home to the school environment, but preparatory and secondary schools are segregated by gender with women teaching and leading girls' schools and men teaching and leading boys' schools. Similar to Saudi Arabia, females outnumber males enrolled in all levels of education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018), thus providing numerous positions for female school leaders. The SEC reported that 67% of elementary schools, 46% of middle schools, and 44% of high schools were led by women in 2014 (Supreme Education Council, 2014).

Principal Selection and Preparation

The Qatar government authorized the RAND organization in 2001 to study, evaluate, and recommend changes to the public education system after concerns over Qatari student performance on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Program for International Assessment (PISA) emerged in the early 2000's (Ellili-Cherif, Romanowski, & Nasser, 2011). Based on the RAND recommendations, the *Education for a New Era (EFNE)* was implemented in 2004 and included professional standards for both teachers and school leaders. These professional standards served as the basis of the first educator licensing system in Qatar. Applicants for a principal license worked with colleagues at their schools to develop a portfolio to illustrate their experience with each standard. Documentation of experience across the school leader standards is required in order to obtain an administrative certificate. Most aspiring school leaders also first obtain experience as an assistant principal or coordinator before moving into the role of a school principal. According to the Qatar Ministry of Education (2017), an educator must hold at least a Bachelor's degree, have 10 years of teaching experience in K-12 schools, and have earned at least a "B" grade in the last three years of teaching evaluations in order to be considered for a principal position. They do not need to have held any other school leadership positions prior to becoming a principal.

Neither Saudi Arabia or Qatar require specific training on school leadership for aspiring principals. While there are MOE sponsored university training programs in Saudi Arabia as was discussed earlier, these brief programs of study are in need of improvement (Alahmadi, 2016; Altuwaijri, 2016). While teaching experience and demonstration teaching ability through teaching evaluations may provide a degree of classroom instructional expertise, the organizational and leadership skills necessary to address the many faceted demands faced by a principal, including the development of a student-centered learning culture and implementation of school improvement efforts, often fall outside of the experience of a classroom teacher (Altuwaijri, 2016).

Challenges

The research that has been conducted on the challenges of principals, male or female, in Saudi Arabia is very limited and nearly nonexistent regarding challenges faced by Qatari principals. Regarding the challenge of enacting positive change within a school as a principal, Alghamdi (2013) found that principals reported a lack of support from the MOE to make decisions related to school improvement. The challenge of making positive changes as a school leader because of limited authority was the most frequent focus of research that sought to clarify the working conditions of Saudi principals. Most recently, Meermar, Poppink, and Palmer (2018) conducted a quantitative study of the perceived amount of authority granted to principals by Tatweer and also what areas the participating principals felt more authority was required for them to carry out the expectations of their position effectively. Meermar et al. built on the prior work of Allheaniy (2012), Alhumaidhi (2013), and Alotaibi (2013) who also explored Saudi principals' perceptions of limits of their authority in running their schools. These earlier studies, however, were conducted prior to the "new authorities in the initial steps of decentralization" of Tatweer (Meermar et al., 2018, p. 6). Khalil and Karim (2016) also discussed some of the more recently identified challenges to Saudi principals' ability to lead including centralization of the education system, lack of local input regarding hiring decisions, unclear performance criteria, lack of discretionary funds, gender segregation, and religious school culture and curricular reforms.

The 173 principals in Meermar et al.'s (2018) study reported that the ability and support to do such things as nominate employees for professional development, close schools in emergency situations, determine dangerous student behavior leading to student transfer, and signing contracts to operate the school cafeteria were very low or nonexistent. These principals also felt that the limitations of their authority prevented them from realizing the outcomes desired by the MOE when they adopted the new authority policy. Meermar et al. also found that the most numerous suggestions for needed additional authority focused on the handling of staff issues such as teacher and staff recruitment, ability to transfer or suspend inefficient or weak teacher or staff, and to hire exemplary teachers. Greater financial independence and empowerment was the second most frequently identified area where principals needed greater authority. Decision-making authority and power to deal directly with operational issues were the next two most frequently identified areas where great principal authority was suggested. Interestingly, Almutairi (2017) found that female principals reported higher levels of autonomy than their male counterparts.

Challenges that women in Saudi Arabia faced such as limited career advancement opportunities, stress from the lack of balance between family and work demands, gender discrimination, and issues related to pregnancy and mobility were explored by Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, and Rajasekar (2017). Their findings were based on interviews with 12 Saudi women, four of which were teachers and one who was an assistant principal. The findings did not indicate if the women who worked in the education field focused on any of these challenges in particular. Abukar and Musa (2015) conducted research on female Saudi principal job satisfaction and found an 81.3% general job satisfaction rate among their participants. The opportunity for further promotion was, however, an area where 72.5% of the principals in their study reported that they were dissatisfied. Rashwan (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with four Saudi female principals, and these school leaders identified challenges regarding their school leadership including having to navigate complex bureaucracies and lack of decision-making authority. Interestingly, Rashwan discusses the progress women have made in rising to management positions rather than leadership positions despite "leadership" being included in the title of this study.

Romanowski (2015) conducted the sole study found by the authors that specifically looked at the challenges faced by principals in Qatar regarding the educational reform process. A sample of 20 principals with even representation of gender participated in this qualitative study. Romanowski identified a theme of moving away from tradition which required principals to be required to increase their involvement with faculty and parents, greater delegation of decision-making power, a shift to student-centered instructional methods, and the integration of technology. The principals in Romanowski's study also identified the difficulty of finding qualified teachers resulting in the hiring of inexperienced teachers who required a great deal of support. The increase in paperwork and non-teaching requirements were also identified as consequences of the new SEC mandates that detracted from teachers' focus on effectively delivering instruction in the classroom. Principals were required to work with teachers to build new curriculum aligned with the new standards which also negatively impacted instruction, student assessment, and teacher evaluation. The frequency of new mandates issued by the SEC was also discussed in relation to the rising number of teachers who resisted the changes brought about by the national education reform policies. Romanowski identified the ability to deal with change, understand various viewpoints in order to arrive at compromises, and the ability to successfully delegate work to teams in order to accomplish required tasks.

Past research efforts have identified challenges faced by Saudi principals in general, many of which stem from a generally perceived lack of authority by school leaders. Challenges faced by women in the workforce in Saudi Arabia has been another area of research but with limited focus on challenges specific to female principals. Studies regarding school leadership challenges in Qatar, particularly examinations of female Qatari principals' experiences were extremely limited. This qualitative study was undertaken to examine the daily demands and tasks faced by female principals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, two Arab countries with traditionally patriarchal cultures who have implemented reforms to increase female leadership opportunities and the challenges that these leaders faced as well as how they would advise other aspiring and current female educational leaders to prepare for and respond to these challenges.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the daily responsibilities of female school leaders in two Arab nations that have implemented substantial educational reforms aimed at increasing both educational attainment and opportunities for women to serve in leadership roles (Arar & Oplatka, 2016; Nasser, 2017). Furthermore, this study examined the challenges to improving the learning environment in their schools and countries identified by female school leaders in these two nations and how they felt aspiring female principals should prepare to respond to these challenges. The research questions guiding this study were as follows: (1) What do Saudi and Qatari female educators report as their daily activities as school leaders?, (2) What are the challenges that Saudi and Qatari female school leaders perceive in their efforts to improve the education of students in their schools?, and (3) What advice would Saudi and Qatari female principals give to women entering the profession of school leadership?

A constructionism epistemology was used in this study to examine the phenomenon of Saudi and Qatari female school leaders' perceptions of what their position as school leaders entailed and the challenges they faced in enacting change within their schools as well as what advice they would give to women becoming principals in these two countries. The

constructionist perspective allowed the researchers to focus on the meaning that each individual created based on their beliefs and experiences which was particularly relevant given the contrasting educational systems of the two nations (Crotty, 2013). The constructionist epistemology was appropriate in that the participants were viewed as creating meaning from their lived experiences. As explained by Crotty (2008) a constructionist perspective views meaning to be “constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting” rather than simply being objective or subjective (p. 43). The common responsibilities among the two groups of female principals was viewed as a phenomenon because phenomenology assumes that there are “core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experiences” (Patton, p. 106). Thus, daily responsibilities, challenges to improve student achievement, and advised responses to these challenges were viewed as parts of the phenomenon of being a female principal in an Arab nation.

In order to let the voices and perspectives of the participants be heard, no theory of educational leadership was used to frame the open-ended survey questions used to collect data for this study or interpret the data. Rather, a grounded theory approach was used to systematically compare the data between and among responses and groups of participants, i.e. Saudi and Qatari school leaders, in order to identify core categories or themes in building a theory regarding what female principals in these countries did in their positions, their perceptions of challenges to enact change, and advice to women in these countries who are entering the school leadership profession (Creswell, 2015).

The data for this qualitative study was collected through an electronic survey with open-ended questions sent to the participants after the lead researcher personally visited each participant’s school to explain the study and what participation would entail. The survey asked participants questions regarding their daily activities and responsibilities as principals, the challenges that they have encountered in leading school improvement, and how they would advise aspiring female principals in their countries to prepare for and respond to the challenges that they identified. Demographic information was also collected regarding the professional background, school type and student population, and educational attainment of the participants. Questions were written in both English and Arabic in order to allow participants to respond in their preferred language. Arabic responses were translated to English by the researcher who is a native Arabic speaker.

After Institutional Review Board approval of the study was obtained and the open-ended electronic survey created using the Qualtrics platform, voluntary participation in the study was sought from a snowball sample of female school principals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The researcher fluent in Arabic approached three female principals in each country who she felt would be open to participating and then asked for recommendations from these principals as to other female principals who might be willing to participate. This researcher also personally visited each participant to explain the study and voluntary participation through the completion of the online survey.

Participants were sought until a well-rounded representation of school sizes and types, as well as years of experience of participants, was achieved in the survey responses. School types included both public and private schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education in each nation. Schools ranged from very small student enrollments of 67 students in a school that was in its first year of operation to a school that had been operating for 50 years and had more than 3,500 students enrolled. The data for this study included 22 Saudi Arabian and 16 Qatari female school leaders agreed to participate in the study and completed responses to the survey questions. All of the Saudi participants led urban K-12 schools while the Qatari participants led a mix of urban and suburban K-12 schools.

Using NVivo 11 software, the responses of the Saudi and Qatari principals were first open coded. Axial codes were then developed among and between responses of the participants and themes or categories developed from the data using the cyclical process described by Saldaña (2013). Daily activity responses were open coded then collapse into axial codes until themes/categories were developed for each group of participants, Saudi and Qatari female principals. Responses regarding challenges were then open coded and collapsed into first axial codes and then themes/categories for each nation’s participants. Coded daily activity responses were then linked to the coded responses regarding challenges and advice to enable the analysis of patterns in responses, again for respondents from each nation separately. After separate themes were identified, the responses from each group were compared, not to create an integrated theory, but to identify differences and similarities in the themes that emerged from the data from each group.

Limitations

This study was intended as an initial exploration of the daily activities and responsibilities of a small non-stratified sample of female principals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as the challenges they identified regarding leading school improvement and the advice that they would give to aspiring female principals in their countries. The limitations of this study include the following:

(1) The sample size was small for each nation (n=22 Saudi female principals and n=16 Qatari female principals which limits the transferability of the findings. The results are accurate only for this particular group of respondents at one specific point in time.

(2) The sample was not stratified to be representative of the different types of schools (elementary, middle, high school, or other grade-level configurations) or location (rural, suburban, or urban), but rather is skewed toward urban female school leader representation in both countries and high schools among the Saudi respondents but elementary schools among the Qatari respondents. The sample was obtained through snowball recommendations and thus is also not a random sample which might better reflect the experiences of the overall population so female principals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

(3) The sample included female principals in only two Arab nations which also limits any transference of findings to female principals in other Arab nations. Responses of participants from the two nations included in the study may have been influenced by the specific education and social policies mandated by each of the respective countries.

(4) The data collection format of an electronic survey may have limited the depth of responses as compared to individual interviews.

(5) Participant responses might also have been influenced by the fact that the study was being conducted by researchers located outside of both countries. Thus, participants might have not been fully candid in their responses.

Recommendations for further research that could address these limitations and increase the transferability of findings are discussed later in this manuscript.

Findings

Twenty-two female principals from Saudi Arabia and 16 female principals from Qatar completed the online surveys. Demographic information collected from the respondents are displayed in Table 1. As noted earlier, all of the respondents served schools located in suburban and urban areas. The principals in Qatar served larger schools with the two smallest schools serving between three and four hundred students. Half of Qatari principals in the study led schools with between 601 and 700 students, with four principals leading schools of between 701 and 800 students and two serving schools with between 901 and 900 students. The Saudi principals in this study led more smaller schools four principals leading schools with less than 100 students. Six Saudi principals led schools with between 201 and 400 students, another six led schools serving between 401 and 700 students, and five principals serving schools with student populations of more than 701 students, one of which led a school with nearly 4,000 students. The grade level configurations of schools led by the participants varied with the nearly a third of the Saudi principals reporting a configuration as "Other" which included preschool and elementary or middle and high school combined grade levels. Twenty-three percent of Saudi participants led elementary schools and an additional 18% led preschools. This means that leadership of lower grade levels was represented more heavily in the Saudi principal responses than leadership of middle and high schools (14% combined). The opposite was true among the Qatari participants with 56% of the principals leading middle or high schools and 38% leading preschools or elementary schools.

Table 1. School Level and Student Enrollment of Participants

School Level			Student Enrollment		
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i># of Participants</i>	<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	<i>Enrollment</i>	<i># of Participants</i>
	Preschool	4		1-100	4
	Elementary	5		101-200	1
	Middle	1		201-300	4
	High	2		301-400	2
	K-12	1		401-500	1
	Other	7		501-600	3
				601-700	2
				701-800	3
				1001-2000	1
				3001-4000	1
<i>Qatar</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i># of Participants</i>	<i>Qatar</i>	<i>Enrollment</i>	<i># of Participants</i>
	Preschool	4		301-400	2
	Elementary	2		601-700	8
	Middle	4		701-800	4
	High	5		901-900	2
	K-12	1			

The professional experience of the principals in this study commonly included teaching and assistant principal service. Teaching experience is required in both countries in order to be a principal, however, not all participants in this study reported that they had teaching experience.

‡ Eighty-six percent of Saudi participants and 94% of Qatari principals reported serving as teachers before assuming a school leadership position. Almost 60% of the Saudi principals in this study had also served as an assistant principal while 69% of the Qatari principals reported serving in this position. Four of the Saudi principals and two of the Qatari principals also reported working for their country's Ministry of Education prior to becoming a principal. Years of experience in education was divided almost evenly among the Saudi participants with 29% having 10 or less years of experience, 29% having between 11 and 20 years of experience, and 27% having between 21 and 30 years of experience. Two Saudi principals in the study had over thirty-one years of experience as educators. Fifty percent of the Qatari principals in this study had between 11 and 20 years of experience, 38% having 21 to 30 years of experience, and two educators also having over 31 years of experience in education.

While a Bachelor's degree is required in Saudi Arabia and Qatar to be a school principal, nearly 60% of the Saudi and 56% of Qatari principals also had taken courses beyond their Bachelor's degrees. Three Saudi participants in the study had earned their Master's degrees, however none of the Qatari principals had earned a degree beyond their Bachelor's. Two of the Qatari principals reported completing training with that training fulfilling the Bachelor's degree requirement for one participant.

Table 2. Educational Experience, Professional Background, and Educational Attainment of Participants from Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Years of Experience in Education			Professional Experience			Educational Attainment		
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i># of Participants</i>	<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i># of Participants</i>	<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i># of Participants</i>
	1-10	7		Teacher	9		BA	18
	11-20	7		Coordinator/ Supervisor	1		Courses beyond BA	13
	21-30	6		Counselor	1		MA	3
	31-40	2		Asst. Principal	13			
	1-10	7		Ministry of Education Position	4			
				Work Experience Outside of Education	1			
<i>Qatar</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i># of Participants</i>	<i>Qatar</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i># of Participants</i>	<i>Qatar</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i># of Participants</i>
	1-10	0		Teacher	15		BA	15
	11-20	8		Coordinator/ Supervisor	11		Courses beyond BA	9
	21-30	6		Counselor	1		MA	0
				Asst. Principal	11		Govt. or Other Training	2
				Ministry of Education Position	2			
				Work Experience Outside of Education	0			

The data from Saudi and Qatari female principals were analyzed separately and then emerging themes from the Saudi principals and Qatari principals were compared in response to each research question. For each research question, a chart illustrating the themes, sub-themes, and axial codes included in each sub-theme identified from the responses of the Saudi Arabian and Qatari female principals are included in the following discussion of the findings. Frequency of coded responses are also included in each chart.

* One Saudi principal in the studied shared that she had worked as a psychologist in a hospital before being recruited to school leadership. The only Qatari principal who did not have teaching experience explained that she had been directly recruited from the SEC to serve as a school coordinator and then moved into the principal position. The remaining two Saudi participants who did not specify that they had teaching experience might have omitted this part of their professional background because teaching experience is a requirement for school leadership in Saudi Arabia.

Daily Professional Responsibilities

In the analysis of the data regarding the first research question, “What do Saudi and Qatari female educators report as their daily activities as school leaders?,” supervision of teachers emerged as the dominant theme among both Saudi and Qatari participants. Saudi participants discussed elements of teacher supervision which included classroom observations, teacher supervision and evaluations, assignment of teachers to various tasks, review of teacher and student data, meeting with teachers individually regarding classroom observation feedback, supervision of teachers’ implementation of the curriculum, supervision of teachers’ professional development, coverage of teacher absences, collaborative teacher problem-solving regarding students, and the planning and implementation of classroom activities. Qatari participants focused on classroom visits, supervision of pedagogy, individual teacher meetings to address either classroom observation feedback or student learning needs, making arrangements for absent teachers, and supervising teacher professional development. Details of the frequency of responses for each axial code comprising the sub-themes and themes can be found in Chart 3 for Saudi participants and Chart 4 for Qatari principals.

Table 3. Saudi Arabian Female Principal Daily Activities Response Axial Codes, Sub-Themes, and Themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes	Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes
Interactions w/Teachers (73)	Teacher Supervision (66)	Classroom observations/ visits (22)	Interactions w/ Students (30)	Greeting Students (15)	Morning queue/assembly (11)
		Teacher supervision/ evaluation (9)			Supervise student arrival (4)
		Assigning tasks to teachers and staff/following up on assignments (2)		Student Supervision (15)	Student classroom activity attendance (6)
		Review teacher and student data (4)			After-school student activity attendance (4)
		Meet with teachers individually (7)			Talk to teachers about students (6)
		Work with teacher on professional development (6)			Talk to students/discipline and rewards (9)
		Supervise implementation of curriculum (6)			Supervise students when they are not in class (9)
		Make sure teacher absences are covered (3)			
		Help solve teachers' problems (5)			
		Plan/Implement activities (4)			
Meetings w/School Committees & Administrators (7)	Meet with school teacher committees (4)	School Safety (14)	Facilities (4)	Supervise facilities (2)	
	Meet with other administrators (3)			Check that school is safe (2)	
			School Cleanliness (5)	Make sure school is clean (3)	
			Student Conditions (5)	Check on school restaurant (2)	
Interactions w/Parents (18)	Meetings w/ Parents (11)	Talk/meet with parents (8)	Responding to MOE (37)	Paperwork (19)	Make sure students are safe/warm/ dressed appropriately (2)
		Try to satisfy parents (3)			Make sure students are never alone (3)
	Communicate w/Parents (7)	Answer phone calls from parents (3)			Responding to MOE mail (10)
		Answer emails from parents (4)			Produce reports and policies in response to MOE mandates (4)
					MOE paperwork (5)
					Plan for MOE policy implementation (3)
					Track policy implementation (7)
					Meet with MOE inspectors (5)
					Meet with school supervisors (3)

Table 4. Qatari Female Principal Daily Activities Response Axial Codes, Sub-Themes, and Themes with Frequencies

Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes	Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes
Supervision of Teachers (34)	Classroom Observations (16)	Classroom visits (11) Supervise pedagogy (5)	Student Supervision (30)	Greeting Students (14)	Attend morning queue (6) Supervise student arrival (8)
	Meetings w/Teachers Individually (10)	Meet with teachers individually to address issues (5) Talking to teachers about student needs/learning (5) Make arrangements for teacher absences (3) Supervise teacher development plans (5)		Student Interactions (16)	Observe students in the hallways (4) Student discipline/rewards (7) Meet with students to help with problems (5)
	Managing teachers (8)			Paperwork (16)	Update reports for school, policies, and documents (7) Report achievements and challenges/Develop plans to address (9)
	Meetings w/School Committees and Administrators (22)	Meet with activity committee (7) Meet with evaluation committee (6) Meet with safety and welfare committee (3) Meet with coordinators (4) Meet with academic assistants (2)		Problem Solving (17)	Address comments/phone calls/emails (5) Implementing/supervising SEC instructions (8) Meeting with parents regarding student issues (4) Meet with visitors from Supreme Education Council (SEC) (8)
				Meetings w/SEC (8)	

All of the Saudi and Qatari principals in the study discussed the importance of spending time observing classrooms every day in order to ensure that the teachers were teaching the curriculum correctly and the students were learning. As one Saudi principal explained, "I have specific plan to attend classes and supervise teachers. After I attend a classroom, I meet with the teacher to discuss the strength and weakness in order to improve the strength and address any weaknesses. I give the teacher some instructions to help her address the weaknesses and, if needed, I assign her to training courses as well." Another Saudi participant who led a combined middle and high school explained that she observed classes on Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays in the middle school and classes in the high school on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

In addition to teacher supervision, 32% of the Saudi principals reported that they meet with teacher committees or other administrators in the school on a daily basis. These meetings were related to what teachers were doing in classrooms and across the school and were considered part of teacher supervision. The Qatari principals also each

reported working with teacher committees on a daily basis but these meetings were not specifically focused on classroom education deliver. Daily meetings with other school administrators was reported by 38% of the Qatari principals, however many of these meetings were in regard to preparation for visits from representatives of the Supreme Education Council (SEC) or preparation of reports for the SEC. Fifty percent of the Qatari principals also reported meeting with visitors from the Supreme Education Council (SEC) on a regular basis. Because of the variation in the focus of the Qatari principals' meetings, meetings with other school committees and administrator emerged as a separate theme.

Interactions with students were reported as the second most frequent activity among both Saudi and Qatari participants in the study. The supervision of students in the morning when students arrived and attending the morning queue were identified as a part of the daily routine for 88% of the Qatari principals and 68% of the Saudi principals. Being present to greet students and available for students to talk to them was very important to the participants who discussed these activities. One Saudi principal shared that, "This is my only chance to meet with all the students and talk with them, unlike when I see them in classrooms. I encourage students who perform in the morning program and help them be confident. I meet with all teachers during the morning gathering." One Saudi participants explained that the queue (or assembly) consisted of "a variety of activities and programs such as exercise, fun, and an instructive program." Another Saudi participant felt that having all of the schools' teachers and administrators at the queue each day conveyed to the students how important morning gatherings were and helped students to enjoy school more.

Saudi and Qatari principals in the study also discussed a variety of daily tasks as part of student supervision including attending classroom and after-school events; meeting with students regarding achievement, rewards, and discipline; and general supervision of students when they were not in classrooms which was included in the theme of interactions with students. Along with greeting students in the morning, student supervision was a sub-theme of interactions with students identified by the participants. Based on frequency of the discussion of topics related to the theme of interactions with students as compared to the other themes identified for both groups of participants, paperwork and planning or supervising the implementation of mandates or policies enacted by the national education organization in either country actually was a more frequently discussed part of the principals' daily routines.

Saudi principals in the study reported spending time each day responding in some way to MOE policies which emerged as a theme for this group regarding daily activities. These activities included completing paperwork such as email responses, writing required reports, and developing consistent school policies were discussed by 86% of the Saudi participants. Planning regarding implementation and then monitoring of school practices related to MOE policies were also specifically discussed 45% of the Saudi principals. As one Saudi principal shared, "The most important thing I do is checking and read the daily update of the Ministry's circulars and decisions. I let the interested stakeholders to know about the new ministry's circulars and decisions in order to follow it." Thirty-six percent of the Saudi principals also discussed having to meet with MOE inspectors or supervisors on a regular basis. While 50% of the Qatari principals also discussed the implementation and supervision of SEC instructions, meetings with representatives from the SEC, and completing paperwork related to required school reports and policies (44%), Qatari principals also discussed a variety of other administrative work that they did on a daily basis that did not related to SEC requirements. Thus, the theme of planning and implementation was identified for the Qatari principals which included efforts to track and report school achievements and challenges, development of plans to address identified challenges, and responding to parent concerns.

School safety emerged as the final theme regarding the daily activities of the Saudi principals in the study. These principals discussed the supervision of school facilities, ensuring the cleanliness of the school environment, and making sure that students are never left alone and are adequately clothed and cared for. As one Saudi principal explained, "My goal is to avoid leaving students alone in classes without supervision because they might hurt themselves," while another participant said that she felt it was her responsibility to "make sure that students are safe and warm." The Saudi principals expressed more of a responsibility for the physical environment of the school in relationship to students' safety and well-being.

Six of the participants in the study noted that each day is different and that emergencies often arise that disrupt what they were planning to do on any given day. "I have a daily schedule, but to be honest I don't follow everything on that schedule. I do some of the things that were written in the schedule because always there are argment things that need my attention," one Saudi principal confessed. A Qatari participant declared that, "There is no typical day!" Another Saudi principal emphasized that, "My daily work is taken from the procedural manual and regulatory guide and these responsibilities are required for all school leaders" before going on to explain what she does on a regular, daily basis. While the activities identified were focused upon in the analysis of responses regarding this research question, many respondents (particularly from Saudi Arabia) included comments such as "I have many responsibilities," "The work is endless," and "I am responsible and supervise everything!" as a preface to their explanations of what they do on a daily basis. As if the depth and breadth of responsibilities and daily demands were not enough, the principals in this study also identified the obstacles that they faced in creating and maintaining a school environment that supported the learning and growth of every student.

Challenges

Analysis of the data regarding the second research question, “What are the challenges that Saudi and Qatari female school leaders perceive in their efforts to improve the education of students in their schools?” yielded three common themes among both Saudi and Qatari participants. The demands of the position were the dominant theme among both groups. The lack of decision-making power was identified by 91% of the Saudi principals and 63% of the Qatari principals making this theme the secondary category of responses from Qatari principals and a tertiary theme from Saudi participants. Lack of resources was the secondary theme for Saudi respondents and a tertiary theme for Qatari principals in the study. Because 77% of the Saudi participants also discussed the workload of implementing MOE mandates, this served as a fourth theme for that group. Tables five and six show the themes, sub-themes, and axial codes with the frequency of responses in each category.

Table 5. Saudi Arabian Female Principals' Challenges Themes, Sub-Themes, and Axial Codes with Frequencies

Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes (with frequency of responses)	Themes	Axial Codes (with frequency of responses)
Demands of the Position (78))	Management & Supervision of Teachers (11)	Hiring experienced and professional teachers (5)	Lack of Decision-Making Power (20)	Lack of authority (17)
		Handling teacher absences (2)		Lack of ability to use/find resources (3)
		Satisfying teachers (4)	Workload of Implementing MOE Mandates (17)	Need ministers of education to understand how schools work (2)
	Technology (10)	Keeping up to date with technology (4)		Competition among schools (3)
		Handling negative aspects of technology (6)		New programs with unclear instructions/ lack of professional development (12)
	Parents (8)	Lack of respect from parents (3) Parental expectations (5)	Lack of Resources (37)	Many responsibilities/ Not enough time (20)
	Students (40)	Student behavior/attitude (8)		Long hours (9)
		Lack of respect (6)		Insufficient facilities (4)
		Student behavior/attitude (8)		Insufficient teacher pay (4)
		Provide a high-quality education that teaches moral behavior (4)		
		Increase student achievement (8)		
		Motivate students (6)		

Table 6. Qatari Female Principals' Challenges Themes, Sub-Themes, and Axial Codes with Response Frequencies

Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes (with frequency of responses)	Themes	Axial Codes (with frequency of responses)
Demands of the Position (46)	Management & Supervision of Teachers (9)	Hiring experienced and professional teachers (7)	Lack of Decision-Making Power (10)	Lack of authority (7)
		Handling teacher absences (2)		Need choices (3)
	Technology (10)	Keeping up to date with technology (5)	Lack of Resources (7)	Many responsibilities/ Insufficient time (3)
		Handling negative aspects of technology (5)		
	Parents (8)	Parental involvement (too much or too little) (4)		
		Parental expectations (4)		
	Students (19)	Student behavior/attitude (7)		
		Increase student achievement (6)		Long hours (2)
		Student motivation (6)		Insufficient facilities (2)

Challenges related to the theme of position demands fell into four categories for both Saudi and Qatari principals. These sub-themes were the management and supervision of teachers, technology, parents, and most of all students. Both Saudi and Qatari principals expressed frustration with hiring and training effective teachers who understood and could respond to the demands of teaching as well as handling frequent teacher absences. A principal from Qatar discussed the high turnover of non-Qatari teachers who come to the country with their husbands and then leave abruptly when their husbands are again transferred. Another Qatari principal was also frustrated by the numerous absences of her female staff of teachers related to child care and family responsibilities. Saudi principals also discussed the difficulties they faced in keeping teachers satisfied, particularly related to being able to pay teachers a sufficient salary or provide necessary materials. "I tell the school owner about it, but I don't have the money to manage it," one principal bemoaned.

Ten principals from each nation identified challenges related to technology as part of the demands of the position, as well. Comments from Qatari principals were divided between the difficulty in keeping up with the most current technology and the negative impact of the wide usage of technology by students personally. "Students have access to technology tools [outside of school], and they learn things in a different way. They want to learn in classrooms using the same method and technologies they play with outside of classes," observed one Saudi preschool principal. While the Saudi principals had similar concerns, more Saudi school leaders noted the negative impact of technology on students than difficulties in staying current with technology in their schools. One Saudi principal noted that students' access to technology, including social media, "affects their identities. As a school, our goal is to protect their identity, values, and culture. We want students to be open to the world but, in the same time, don't lose their identities."

Parents also posed a challenge to the principals in the study regarding demands of the position with both groups noting parental expectations as something that they were always trying to meet. Qatari principals, however, discussed the lack of parental involvement whereas Saudi principals identified the lack of respect they felt that parents showed to both them and their teachers. A Qatari principal related that, while she has over 700 students at her school, only 30 parents showed up for a parent-teacher conference. "We send emails, text messages, phone calls. Whatever we do, parents do not show up in meetings."

The most frequent complaint regarding demands of the position as a school principal in both groups related to students. Qatari principals discussed poor behavior and attitudes towards school and learning which made it difficult to motivate students to achieve to their full potential. A principal from Qatari shared her frustrations by saying, "The second biggest challenge is student motivation to learn. We tried to change, motivate, reward them, the results are still under our expectations. We spent a lot of money on expensive gifts and rewards for students to improve their performance." While these same concerns were identified by the Saudi principals, the lack of student respect for teachers and education was also specifically discussed by nearly a third of the participants. "Students are spoiled; they do not follow the rules of the class. They eat when they want and play whenever they want," lamented a Saudi leader of a large urban school. Four Saudi principals also identified providing a high-quality education that also taught moral behavior as a part of their job that was challenging. As one Saudi administrator explained, "Students nowadays are facing many external influences, so we need to provide moral education to students while they study to help them be the best version of themselves." These concerns for the moral development, cultural identity, and civic responsibility of students were echoed by the other three Saudi principals, as well.

As noted earlier, the lack of decision-making authority emerged as the secondary theme regarding challenges that Qatari school leaders faced in improving their schools and the tertiary theme for Saudi principals.[§] While the Qatari principals were more concise in their responses, i.e. "need to be more independent," "need freedom in leadership," and "need to make decisions independently," both groups discussed how they must contact their nation's centralized education agency in order to make any substantive changes. A Saudi principal explained that the "school principal does not have the needed authorities to be creative and lead the school with a vision." Highlighting the minutia which is prescribed by the MOE, another Saudi principal described how she could not even change whether the students went outside for the morning queue without permission.

The third common theme of challenges to leading their schools that was identified by the principals from both countries was the lack of resources. Both groups most frequently identified the lack of time to accomplish all that they were asked to do and the resulting long hours required, however 90% of the Saudi principals expressed this concern while only 31% of the Qatari principals discussed the lack of time as a challenge. Eighteen percent of the Saudi principals and 13% of the Qatari principals also identified the insufficiency of their school facilities as a challenge that they faced. Several of the Saudi participants noted the rapid growth in the Saudi population with one principal explaining that 40 to 45 students in a classroom was becoming quite common. Four Saudi principals also discussed the lack of funding for both teachers' pay and materials.

Unique to the Saudi participants in this study, 77% of the principals identified the workload related to implementing and supervising multiple programs in the same time as a challenge. The most frequent complaint was regarding the frequency of new program initiatives that were mandated but with unclear instructions sometimes as to how to implement those programs and little or no professional development for either school leaders or teachers. "We have many responsibilities to do which makes it difficult for us to set our priorities. Sometimes I get confused about which task I should start working on first" a Saudi principal explained. Principals in this study expressed they have been implementing several programs recently that add more responsibilities and create a barrier to leading school improvement.

Advice to Aspiring Female Principals

The participants in this study also shared their advice for those considering becoming school leaders regarding the challenges that they had identified, answering the third research question of, "What advice would Saudi and Qatari female principals give to women entering the profession of school leadership?" Table seven lists the themes, sub-themes and axial codes along with response frequencies regarding the responses of both Saudi and Qatari participants. The participants' advice focused on personal development regarding relational skills as well organizational knowledge and skills.

[§] While 90% of Saudi participants identified a lack of authority and 63% of Qatari principals identified the same challenge, all of the Saudi participants discussed the lack of resources they experience which made the lack of resources the secondary theme among Saudi principals regarding challenges.

Table 7. Saudi Arabian and Qatari Female Principal Advice Themes, Sub-themes, and Axial Codes with Frequencies

Saudi Arabian Female Principals' Advice		
Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes (with frequency of responses)
Continuous Professional Development	Skill/Knowledge Development (11)	Life-long learning (7)
	Leadership Development (31)	Additional training (4) Leading rather than managing (7) Develop the skills of and relationship among your teachers/ leadership team (12) Decision-making (6) Organizational skills (6)
Development of Relational Skills	Self-development (48)	Personal virtues (28)
	Development of Others (26)	Moral purpose (5) Attitude toward challenges (7) Be a good role model (8) Motivate others (5) Listen to others (4) Understand others (8) Care for others (9)
Qatari Female Principals' Advice		
Themes	Sub-themes	Axial Codes (with frequency of responses)
Continuous Professional Development	Skills Development (11)	Life-long learning (8)
	Leadership Development (20)	Additional training (3) Leading rather than managing (8) Develop the skills of your teachers/ leadership team (7) Organizational Skills (5)
Development of Relational Skills	Self-development (36)	Personal virtues (17)
	Development of Others (8)	Moral purpose (7) Attitude toward challenges (8) Be a good role model (4) Motivate others (3) Listen to others (2) Understand others (3)

The primary theme common to the responses of both Saudi and Qatari principals in this study was the development of relational skills that included self-development or improvement and the development of skills in working with students, teachers, and parents. Development of a host of personal characteristics or virtues was most frequently given advice to aspiring principals by all of the participants in this study. The development of trustworthiness, patience, honesty, creativity, flexibility, diplomacy, and a strong work ethic were among the most recommended traits for aspiring principals to work on. Aspiring principals were also urged to find and be guided by a moral purpose to serve students. As one principal of an urban school in Qatari inspiringly shared, "It is not a job. It is a message you carry. Dedication and loyalty is the soul of it. Being a school leader is the most beautiful thing that happens in your life." New principals were also encouraged to adopt a positive attitude toward challenges, embracing each challenge as an opportunity to better serve students. A quarter of the Qatari principals and over a third of the Saudi principals in this study specifically discussed how it was the duty of a principal to be a good role model for students and teachers. As one Qatari leader observed, "Principals must be positive and supportive in order to inspire the school community," and a Saudi principal expressed her opinion that, "School leaders should be the light for their stakeholders. They need to be developers, creative, and role models in order to reach their desired goals." The emphasis on personal development perhaps acknowledged the lack of power to change structural challenges that they had identified, advising future principals to prepare themselves to function within confining structures by focusing on moral strength that could serve others.

The second sub-theme identified within the theme of the development of relational skills was the development of others. The principals in this study encouraged future principals to focus on motivating students and teachers and listening to others in order to better understand and respond to others' needs. "School leaders must listen to other people. Principals must hear from different people and avoid making judgement," urged one Saudi principal, while another encouraged aspiring principals to understand that "Every person has his/her own way to be treated, and principals should know the best way to treat each individual in their school." One Saudi principal advised those hoping to become principals to learn as much as they can regarding emotional and social intelligent "because, as long as you understand people around you whether teachers or parents, you will succeed." Genuinely caring for others was linked to the development of others by 41% of the Saudi principals as well.

Continuous professional development was the secondary theme of advice from the principals in this study. Half of the Qatari principals and 32% of the Saudi principals urged aspiring principals to be life-long learners with 18% of each group specifically advising that new principals obtain additional training in order to learn the best strategies for responding to the needs of students and supporting teachers' instructional effectiveness. Leadership development was the primary sub-theme regarding continuous professional development. Participants in the study urged new principals to learn how to lead rather than just manage, develop the skills of and positive relationships among their teachers and leadership teams, and the organizational skills that they will need in order to prioritize and accomplish all that they will be responsible for as a school leader. "There is a difference between a manager and a principal; the manager gives instructions while the leader motivates stakeholders to develop themselves," a Saudi participant explained. The Saudi principals also emphasized that aspiring principals need to hone their decision-making skills, particularly in gathering a variety of perspectives and information before making a decision, in order to make fair and constructive decisions as a school leader. As one Saudi principal cautioned, "Sometimes leaders hear things that aren't true, so they need to investigate the situation in order to seek the truth. They need to know the details before making a decision in order to be fair with everyone and have justice." Many of the participants echoed the impact that a principal can have, not just by making decisions, but in prioritizing and handling daily responsibilities in a manner that demonstrates care for others.

A third of the Saudi and Qatari principals in this study also advised aspiring principals to fully understand the demands of the position. Some advised shadowing principals on a regular basis as well as reading about school leadership so they "know what to expect and be prepared for it." These comments were not identified as a separate theme, however, as this advice was linked to several aspects of leadership development which was discussed as a sub-theme above.

Discussion and Recommendations

As discussed earlier, there is not a great deal of research that has been conducted regarding the experiences and challenges of Saudi women who are school principals (Abukar & Musa, 2015; Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, & Rajasekar, 2017; Almutairi, 2017; Rashwan, 2015) and only one study that included female school leadership in Qatar that the authors were able to locate. This study attempted to allow the voice of a small sample of female principals in these two traditionally patriarchal societies to be heard regarding the demands and challenges they have experienced and the advice they would give to those aspiring to be principals. Through the analysis of the qualitative responses of 22 Saudi and 16 Qatari women principals, themes and sub-themes were identified regarding the daily responsibilities, challenges, and advice that the participants in this study gave to aspiring principals.

Saudi and Qatari principals in this study reported teacher supervision as a dominant daily responsibility. This is perhaps not surprising given the focus of MOE reforms in Saudi Arabia to increase education quality and student achievement (Aburizaizah, Kim, & Fuller, 2018). In the Qatari context, this finding is consistent with the need for principals to work very closely with teachers to implement all of the new curriculum required by the SEC identified in Romanowski's (2015) study, as well as the need for principals to guide teachers in their use of student-centered instructional strategies that is critical element of the national educational reform efforts.

The Saudi principals next discussed daily demands in responding to MOE mandates most frequently, even more than daily interactions with students. This finding is consistent with the work of Meemar et al. (2018) and Khalil and Karim (2016) regarding the constrictive central authority of the MOE in Saudi Arabia. The need for greater local authority to make decisions regarding personnel, school scheduling and operation, and curriculum was identified in these earlier studies and viewed as impediments for realizing the outcomes desired by the MOE in the implementation of education reform in Saudi Arabia. Qatari principals, however, most frequently discussed activities that they did every day related to planning and program implementations with 50% noting activities related to SEC mandates. This finding is also consistent the findings of Romanowski (2015) regarding the principal's role in overseeing the implementation of a plethora of curriculum reforms and a shift in pedagogical philosophy from teacher-centered to student centered.

Both groups of principals identified several aspects of the demands of their position that they considered as challenges in leading school improvement. The most frequently discussed aspect of the demands of the position of principal focused on the management and supervision of teachers which, as discussed earlier, is not surprising because the teachers must carry out the many new curriculum reforms to meet government accountability requirements in both

countries. Dealing with issues raised or created by students, parents, and the use of technology is also consistent with the shift toward more local control in with Tatweer in Saudi Arabia (Meermar et al., 2018) and the new role that principals are required to fulfill identified by Romanowski (2015).

The lack of resources was the second most frequently discussed challenge identified by the Saudi principals, followed by the lack of decision-making power and then the workload of implementing MOE mandates. These findings provide additional support of the lack of authority given to Saudi principals under Tatweer (Meermar et al., 2018). The Qatari principals, however, focused more on the challenges of limited decision-making power than the lack of resources. Romanowski (2015) discussed how Qatari principals felt that they lacked input into national educational policies and curricular reforms, however the lack of autonomy of Qatari principals has not been identified in past research as much as it has been in research involving Saudi principals. The parameters of autonomy that Qatari principals (as well as Saudi principals) feel they need in order to increase educational quality and student achievement is an area that requires further investigation.

Advice from both groups of principals as to how future principals can prepare for and respond to the challenges that they had identified included the development of relational skills (primarily through the development of a host of positive personal attributes) and the pursuit of continuous professional development regarding various aspects of leadership, management, and organizational skills. While the religious affiliation of the participants in the study were not examined, the response to the many external challenges that these female principals identified was primarily through self-knowledge and self-improvement which can be seen as a reflection of the Islamic emphasis on education as enabling humans to “follow the path of righteousness” through the development of knowledge that positively promotes the holistic improvement of the individual and, by extension, of society through the individual’s virtuous practices and contributions (Shar, 2006, p. 367). To be a good leader, one must guide with wisdom and a demonstration of values within the Islamic social system which is dominant in both Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Shah, 2015). It is also incumbent upon leaders to support the moral growth of others according to Islamic teachings which supports the identification of development of others as a subtheme of advice to aspiring principals given by the participants in this study.

Although this study sought to better understand the school leadership experiences of specifically female principals in Saudi Arabia and Qatari, the questions asked of the participants did not address either the daily activities and responsibilities or challenges from a gender-focused perspective. This was intentional to see if respondents would respond to various questions by identifying their experiences or perspectives as uniquely influenced or related to gender. Aside from one mention of a school owner being female and two explanations of which kinds of schools are run by women (i.e. preschool/elementary or girls’ schools), only five participants directly referred to gender in their responses.

One principal from Qatari discussed how having all female teachers at her school meant that many of her teachers were frequently absent to attend to family responsibilities or during pregnancy, while another principal noted her desire to “exchange expertise and strengths” with other Qatari women in education. Of the three Saudi principals who specifically discussed gender, one discussion focused on the lack of respect that she felt her female teachers were shown by students and parents, while the other two discussions of gender were more positive. One of the Saudi principals explained how she assigns the name of a famous female in Islamic history to each class and asks the class to research the person. The final Saudi principal to directly address gender expressed her hopes that she will see a female minister in her lifetime because, “the country has smart and strong women who can fill this position.” This lack of discussion of gender may indicate that the participants saw themselves responding as principals rather than specifically female principals.

Development of a Working Theory of Saudi and Qatari Female Principal Responses to Leadership Challenges

After the analysis of the data and identification of themes and sub-themes, the authors examined the relationship of the themes and sub-themes across the three research questions in order to develop a theory of how Saudi and Qatari principals respond to the challenges they deal with on a daily basis in their efforts to lead improvement in their schools. Figure 1 illustrates the theory developed based on the responses of the female Saudi principals, and Figure 2 shows the theory developed based on the responses of the female Qatari principals who participated in this study. The authors recognize that the development of categories within any theory does not adequately capture the complexities found within the data and is an attempt to more simplistically represent a complex phenomenon.

Many of the daily responsibilities identified by the Saudi principals in this study were linked to several of the challenges that the participants felt they faced in leadership school improvement efforts. While the supervision of teachers was a demand of the position which they felt they had limited power over because of centralized hiring and personnel management of teachers, the number of mandates issued by the MOE also required these principals to supervise teachers closely to ensure that the mandates were being implemented. The completion of paperwork such as accountability reports, keeping up with current mandates, and implementing each mandate was linked to both the amount of MOE mandates and accountability expectations as well as the lack of local autonomy to implement changes based on the needs of the students served by each school. While student interactions, primarily through supervision,

were viewed as a significant daily demand of the position, participants expressed frustration with the lack of decision-making authority when dealing with parents. Issues of school safety regarding the condition of facilities, cleanliness, and the students were link in the participants' responses to the demands of the position as well as a lack of resources.

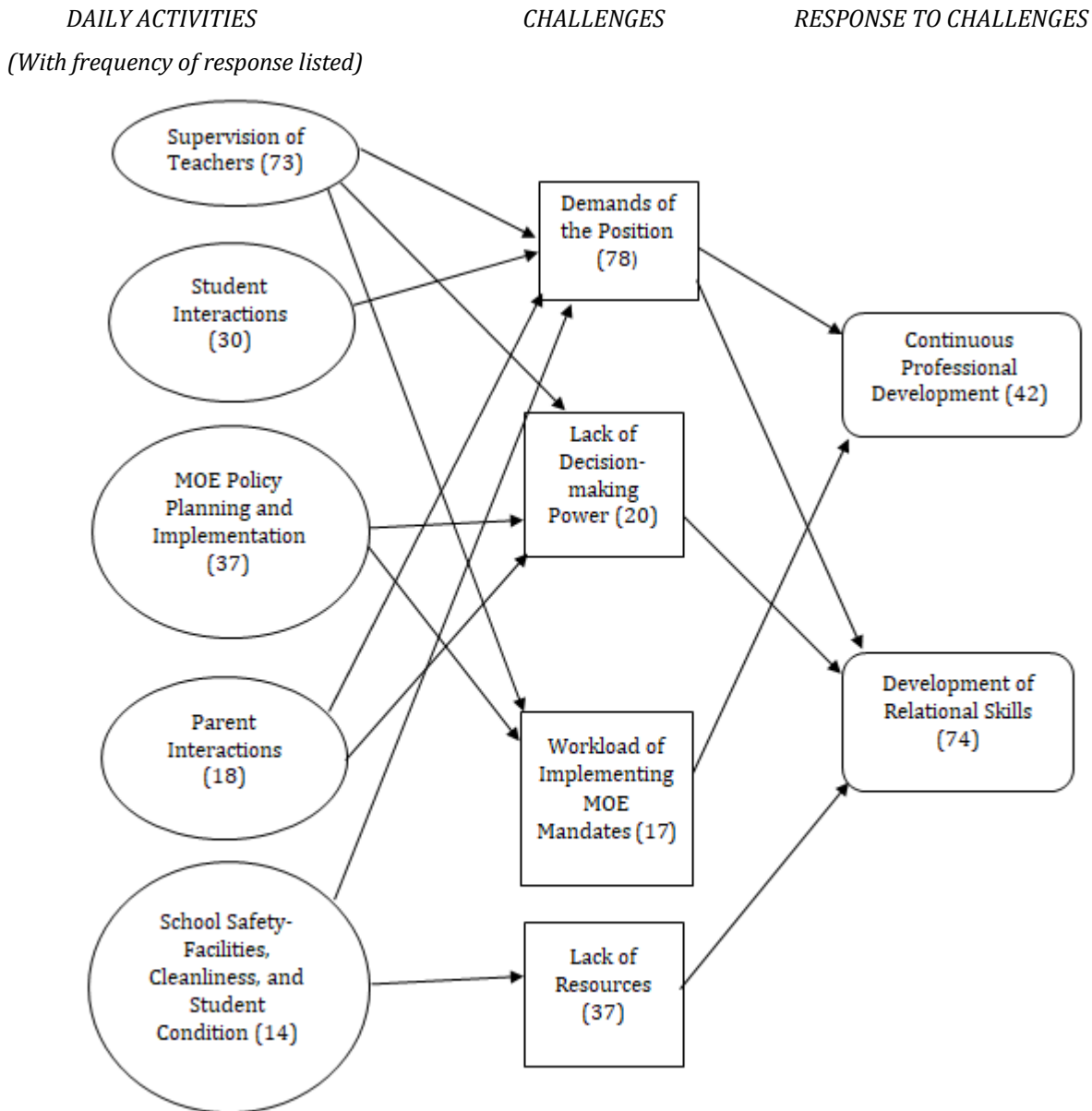


Figure 1. Theory of Saudi Female School Leader Perceived School Leadership Challenges and Responses in Relation to Daily Professional Activities

The Saudi principals discussed continuous professional development to develop and hone their organizational skills as well as their knowledge of management and leadership strategies as the best way for aspiring principals to prepare to respond to the demands of being a principal and to better manage their time to respond to MOE mandates. The development of relational skills, including the nurturing of a host of personal virtues that would enhance their interactions with others as well as enable them to better serve as role models, was advised in order to deal with the lack of decision-making power and resources. Working well with other stakeholders was viewed as critical to managing and exerting as much control as possible over the many facets of the school organization that they were responsible for but did not have autonomy to act upon. This speaks to the acknowledgement of these school leaders of relational power which, while informal, can encourage followers to do the things that a leader desires, including using resources or obtaining additional resources.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the Qatari principals reported that much of their time spent on problem solving and the completion of paperwork, the two sub-themes for planning and implementation activities, were attributable to a lack of

resources. The supervision of teachers and students, as well as the many meetings with teachers and other administrators required, were part of the demands of the position that were challenges. The Qatari participants also saw their lack of decision-making power or autonomy as being a challenge to their effectiveness in responding to issues raised through the supervision of teachers and students, as well as in working with teams. Similar to the Saudi principals, the development of virtuous personal attributes such as trustworthiness, diplomacy, loyalty, understanding, happiness, generosity, creativity, flexibility, perseverance, patience, and confidence were viewed as critical to the development of relational skills necessary for effectively interacting with and understanding other stakeholders. These personal attributes and resulting relational skills were also viewed as necessary to enable the positive development of both students and teachers.

Figure 2. Theory of Qatari Female School Leader Perceived School Leadership Challenges and Responses in Relation to Daily Professional Activities

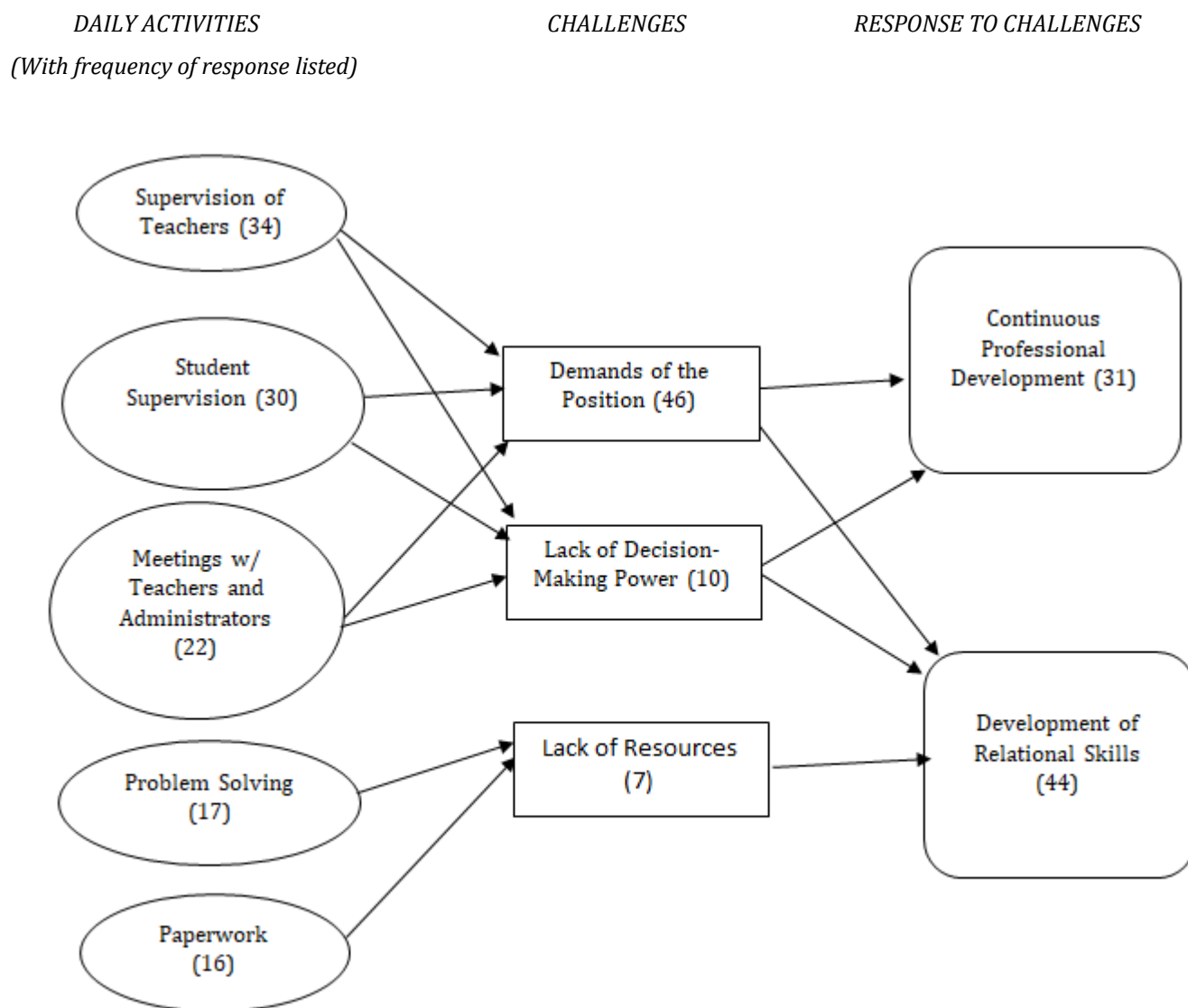


Figure 2. Theory of Qatari Female School Leader Perceived School Leadership Challenges and Responses in Relation to Daily Professional Activities

Also similar to the Saudi principals' responses, aspiring principals in Qatar were advised to engage in continuous professional development in order to manage the demands of the position and to facilitate positive change within their schools as much as they could give their limited decision-making authority. As noted for the theory developed from the Saudi participants' responses, the advice from the Qatari principals in this study implicitly recognizes the power of what some identify in the leadership literature as charisma which is the willingness of followers to do what a leader asks of them because of the nature of the leader and the relationship of the leader with her followers (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010). In other words, the power of persuasion to lead when formal authority is limited.

Recommendations for Research

As discussed in the limitations section, the findings discussed were drawn from the responses of a small number of female principals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. While the electronic survey used open-ended questions to collect the data in this study and personal contact with each participant was made to invite completion of the online survey, this study was viewed as an exploration of how the women leading schools in these two nations identified their daily responsibilities, challenges to leading positive change in their schools, and the advice they would give to aspiring principals as to how to prepare and respond to those challenges. The findings of this study, as well as what this study did not or could not address, provide many avenues for future research to more fully understand the lived experiences of female principals in Arab nations. The following are some of the possible avenues of research that would be of value:

(1) The replication of this qualitative study with a larger sample of female principals from other Arab nations such as Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates as well as from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In order to overcome the limitation possibly posed by the collection of data through an online survey, individual interviews could be conducted. This also would enable the consideration of physical context and body language in the responses of participants.

(2) A quantitative study could be conducted using an online survey to collect data from a much larger sample of female principals in the two nations included in this study as well as other Arab nations. The findings of this study, as well as other supporting research, could be utilized to design a survey with discrete response choices. These responses could then be tested for correlation to demographic factors regarding both the school context (rural, suburban, or urban; school size, and school configuration) and principal characteristics such as years of experience in education and as a principal.

(3) Both of the prior studies recommended could also be conducted with a sample of male and female principals so that differences and similarities in responses could be analyzed by gender.

(4) As discussed earlier, the study described here did not overtly ask participants of their experiences in a gendered context. A similar study could be conducted that overtly utilizes a feminist epistemology and probes the responsibilities, challenges, and response to those challenges as women who hold the position of school principal. Such a study might provide much greater insight into perceptions of how gender shapes the expectations and behaviors of female school leaders in traditionally male-dominated Arab nations.

(5) A qualitative study that focused on the influence of Islamic beliefs on the leadership practices of both female and male principals in Arab nations could provide insight as to the religious and philosophical impact on school leadership and perhaps the educational system of the countries included.

Because of the rather limited amount of research that has been conducted and published regarding Saudi and Qatari principals, the research suggested here is but the tip of the iceberg. There are also many aspects of the findings identified in this study that could be further studied to better understand the systems of education, the principalship, and the experiences of female principals in Arab nations. Other foci such as leadership styles, systems of teacher supervision and evaluation, and perceptions of teachers regarding female school leadership are also worthy of investigation.

While there is much yet to be known and understood regarding what being a female principal in an Arab nation looks and feel like, the context of female leadership in general as well as specifically in schools continues to evolve as does the reform of educational systems in Arab nations and around the world. This research has added to the understanding of what being a female school leader in Saudi Arabia and Qatar encompasses for the participants in this study, and other female school leaders in these nations may find similarities to their own experiences. While recognizing the time commitment and plethora of responsibilities that these principals identified, as well as the obstacles they felt impeded their ability to lead positive school improvement regarding educational quality and student achievement, the principals who were given voice in this study offered heart-felt advice to those aspiring to become principals in the future. It is hoped that the findings of this study will encourage and empower Arab female educators to become school leaders, armed with a greater awareness of what the position entails and how to prepare for the challenges associated with school leadership.

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