

Full Length Research Paper

Challenges of teacher leadership in a Saudi school: Why are teachers not leaders?

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Teaching as a legitimate profession where teachers could practice their leadership agency as leaders has been under debate over the last two decades. The support for teachers' inclusion in the development of schools as well as their leadership is numerous and varies. There seems to be a few when it comes to teacher leadership in the Saudi context. Teachers' professional identity as a downgraded profession leads to the status of the profession of teaching as a flat career where head teachers are viewed as decision makers whereas teachers as followers. This hegemony, which is a critical issue has attributed to school culture of distrusted, undervalued and marginalised situation for teachers. This small scale study investigates how English language teachers in a Saudi school are viewed in the context of teacher leadership and the challenges that disempower them from being legitimate leaders in their profession. Specifically, the study aims to explore whether these teachers are able to practice their identity and agency as leaders in their classroom as well as the school development. Three Saudi English Language teachers were interviewed where semi-structured interviews were used to collect data; they were transcribed, coded and thematically analyzed. One of its findings is teachers recognize themselves as legitimate leaders and school culture and top-down policy are two factors that disempower them from practicing their leadership capacity.

Key words: Agency, identity, teacher leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature in education has asserted that the empowerment of teachers to take roles in their profession is a necessary need to help reform education (Msila, 2012). However, the hegemony of head teachers as the main figure leaders in schools has positioned teachers as followers of passive identities (Gunter, 2001). Thus, many teachers have to abide by the top-down only policies even though they might be against their own professional principles. This leads to a situation where teachers live a professional schizophrenia and are torn between the

institutional policies and their own pedagogical principles (Critical Issues Module Hand-outs, 2011). This is against the principle that teachers are considered to be the core professional resource and they need to be engaged in policies and decision-making especially that relates directly to their teaching issues. In this regard, education has to take into consideration the need to boost the inclusion of teachers in its policy making and school development processes by empowering them to practise their teacher leadership. This empowerment could

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happen if they are included in the daily leadership roles especially those that relate to their classrooms and the other roles that relate to the development of their schools to become successful teacher leaders (Grant, 2005).

To clarify what is meant by teacher leadership, the study utilises the definition of Harris and Muijs (2003) who define teacher leaders as “teachers who spend the majority of their time in the classroom, but take on different leadership roles at different times”. Thus, learning and teaching in the classroom can be seen as the main focus of teacher leadership. This scope and focus is based on the principles of professional development and teacher education as well as students' achievement and growth. However, teacher leadership takes other formal roles, such as subject leader, beyond the classroom teaching and learning where teachers act with empowerment to engage in the school development. What the meaning of teacher leadership entails, as the study supports, does not relate to leadership as power. Rather, it is about moving the giant and potential agency of teachers to take part in the school reform. According to Wasley (1991), teacher leadership is seen as “the ability to encourage colleagues to change, to do things they wouldn't ordinarily consider without the influence of the leader” (p.23).

However, teacher's role in many educational context, like the Saudi context, is still limited in school leadership to the daily managerial routine of the classroom which is mainly about how to teach creatively, how to be good at class management, how to evaluate students' growth and how to cope with learners' behaviour. These can be seen as classical managerial roles that do not constitute leadership as it should be. These managerial roles as well as the overload work of teachers put them in a situation of pressure and a space of limited time to think of their professional roles as teacher leaders. Troudi (2009) mentioned that teachers do not often receive the recognition they deserve for their contribution to the making of literate societies. He added that “Despite their love of teaching, teachers can be affected by their work conditions, managerial decisions, lack of support, a volatile social status and mainly a change in the nature of education in most parts of the world”. Such situation can keep teachers out of leadership roles in their profession and could lead to psychological situations where they remain as followers in their school community.

This small scale study aimed to revisit the role of English language teachers in a Saudi school and address beliefs of teachers about issues of teacher leadership in education. The study specifically looked into the practices and policies that relate to teacher leadership focusing particularly on the extent to which they feel empowered or disempowered to exercise their agency in their teaching. In order to investigate this, the study utilised the following questions:

1. Do teachers perceive themselves as a leaders in their

profession?

2. Are pre-service preparatory programs providing teachers with teacher leadership knowledge?

3. Are in-service programs providing teachers with teacher leadership knowledge?

4. How do teachers professionally develop themselves as teacher leaders?

Contextual background and current practice

Public education in Saudi Arabia has witnessed a dramatic change towards the goal of improvement in all its fundamental factors which relate to school buildings, curricula, students and teachers. To exemplify the change towards the development and improvement of its output, King Abdullah project, which is one of the projects to reform education system in Saudi Arabia, is established recently to ensure the success in the development of public education and support its stakeholders to lead the future of the nation. The focus of the project is to contribute to the development of the teachers and head teachers, and to develop the existing curriculum to improve the level of its students. However, it is worth mentioning that more efforts are required to develop the aims of the project to deal with educational leadership as an important subject and field to improve the quality of teachers as leaders in Saudi Arabia, let alone discuss leadership aspects that relate to teachers (Alabaas, 2010). To this end, head teachers can be seen as the main figures that the Ministry of Education depend on them for the reform of its schools. These head teachers see themselves as the mere responsible agents in the school who have their power from top-down policy and practises this with their followers, the teachers (Drummond and Al-Anazi, 1997).

In practice, working in public education as a teacher for two years, head of English language supervision for five years and then as the manager of teachers' affairs for four years, this helps to researcher to have a thoughtful consideration and a contextual image about the issue of teacher leadership. Issues of top down approaches where teachers are seen not as profession builders are prevailing. This makes teachers become dependent on their head teachers and supervisors to be their expert for materials, development need, approaches and strict guidelines where step by step programmes are tailored. Every teacher is also shaped to be similar to others regardless of contextual differences prevalent amongst these. The author used to know that language theories, strategies, principles, policies and concepts are the product of expertise which could be stable, rigid, ahistorical and decontextualized. Moreover, the books of applied linguistics and education are thought to be of paramount and influential work in the mainstreams. These books were thought to lead to the success in the processes of teaching, learning, policy making,

leadership, curriculum building and teachers' development. In addition, that applied linguistics topics cover all the language related theories and concepts. The author's previous thoughts were framed by language imperialism (Phillipson's ELT tenets, 1992), the hidden ideologies of language theories and policies, and the closed boxed arena where he and other teachers neglect the importance of locality; he treated his context as a global decontextualized one that posed the foreign culture hidden in the theories and policies of language methods and methodologies. We teachers tend to depend merely on head teachers and senior supervisors to develop our teaching styles and strategies. We see ourselves as illegitimate members in our profession and looked down upon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that effective teaching practice could be the result of empowering teachers to function as autonomous professionals, being confident and proud of of the teaching profession (Ware and Kitsantas, 2007). By empowering them as leaders, teacher leadership can help reform movement of teaching and learning, "keep good teachers in education and entice new teachers into the profession. By introducing these new paradigms, the teaching profession will become a truly rewarding experience" (Msila, 2012, p: 106). Literature has also revealed that when teachers practise their agency as they are leaders in their classrooms, they motivate their learners and can be more responsible for their teaching practices instead of waiting for top-down decisions to lead them. Therefore, empowering teachers to strengthen their agency and voice as they work with each other and their students is important to improve their leadership instead of "controlling the quality of their teaching through rigid measures of accountability which can create sites of contention for teachers" (Sawyer, 2001, p.14).

To begin with, the last two decades witnessed radical changes on teacher leadership as a debatable topic (Little, 2003). It has been developed over time to go through three stages or waves (Silva et al., 2000). The first stage described teacher leadership and related its role to the hierarchy within the school and treats the notion as close to the teaching role. Therefore, supervisors and head teachers are the typical model as leaders in their fields (Pounder, 2006). This can be seen as authoritarian style where senior leaders lead teachers as mere followers who are dependent on their top-down policies (Frymier, 1987). In its second stage, teacher leadership began by giving teachers some roles, but they are related to their teaching functions such as team leaders and curriculum developers. Although this stage recognises teachers' roles as the aforementioned ones, it caps them to the low level of leadership which is mainly

managerial work. In the third stage, the concept of leadership in relation to teachers' role begins to theorise about teachers' leadership capabilities, their legitimacy as professional who build up their professionalism, teaching practices and their abilities to contribute to the improvement of their school by engaging them to enhance the educational process. Thus, according to the notion of teacher leadership in the third wave, teachers as leaders "help redesign schools, mentor their colleagues, engage in problem solving at the school level, and provide professional growth activities for colleagues" (Silva et al., 2000, P:5).

However, these three stages do not mean the end of teacher leadership waves. Pounder (2007) linked teacher leadership with transformational leadership in his four wave concept. He named this as the fourth wave which is transformational classroom leadership. In this wave, teacher leadership enhances the empowerment of teachers and improves their quality. This is achieved where teachers can improve their self-confidence, increase their knowledge and improve their attitude towards their teaching. This leads to empowering teachers to be responsible for their teaching and their students' learning. Furthermore, teacher leadership can be seen as an essential tool to education reform. Teachers as leaders can contribute to the success of the school to "guide fellow teachers as well as the school at large toward higher standards of achievement and individual responsibility for school reform" (Silva et al., 2000). This is because they are the front line professionals who know classroom issues, school's culture and the issues that relate to teaching as a legitimate profession and to them as legitimate leaders. This can be achieved by "acknowledging their expertise and contributions and providing opportunities for growth" (York-Barr and Duke, 2004). Another visible result of teacher leadership on the overall success of the school is the professional development of teachers themselves. This can be assured when "teachers actively pursue leadership opportunities, their lives are enriched and energized, and their knowledge and skills in teaching increase dramatically, leading to increased confidence and a stronger commitment to teaching. Professional growth also occurs as the result of collaboration with peers, assisting other teachers, working with administrators, and being exposed to new ideas" (Bath, 2001). Not only the teacher as a leader can help himself, but also he can provide help for head teachers when they are engaged as leaders in their profession. This can help them to lead the school development and reduce the pressure on the leadership of the school as well by reducing the principal's workload. For example, Barth (ibid) asserted that "When teachers lead, principals extend their own capacity". Thus, the situations "under which teachers work are often set up in such a way as to deny teachers a sense of efficacy, success, and self-worth. There is often too much isolation

and surviving on one's own" (Terry, 2002). The view of agency adopted in this study emphasises the importance of the social settings in which teaching takes place. This indicates that teachers are not working alone in the teaching context, but rather they affect and get affected by the school culture (Toohey, 2007). The societal context of teaching illustrates that the way teachers implement policy in the classroom is not influenced only by policy itself, or by curricula and their supporting materials, but also by the context in which their teaching takes place, their beliefs and attitudes towards pedagogy, as well as their political and personal ideologies.

Teachers' recognition and beliefs about leadership roles can be structured during their university study. These preparatory programs contribute to the shaping of the graduates' beliefs with knowledge of methodologies and theories to manage their profession which is teaching. However, few of them have the depth and breadth of teacher leadership, especially in its third wave concept. Thus, pre-service programmes in Saudi Arabia focused on technical pedagogy rather than practical ones that discover the agenda and sociocultural factors. Moreover, few introduce graduates to critical pedagogy of teaching (Alabaas, 2010). In addition to this, in-service programmes for teacher education affect beliefs of teachers as the real practitioners in their profession. Most of these programmes were of theoretical and mechanical origin which deals with the managerial work of head teachers and they neglect the teacher leadership areas (Fullan, 1993). Moreover, the daily head teachers' practices of leadership in their school and their focus observation also affect teachers' beliefs about good leadership practices. This in hand with the top down managerial visits that are done by supervisors affect teachers' beliefs negatively since supervisors tend to be authoritative during their visits (Alabaas, 2010).

The small scale study

This small scale study aims to gain an in-depth insight about teachers' beliefs and roles in teaching and learning processes. Aiming to explore the roles of teachers as legitimate leaders to practise their identity and agency, this study was informed by the interpretivist paradigm. The study seeks to understand and explore beliefs of the participants, and the researcher' role is to interact with them to reach the meaning, "knowledge is viewed as subjective reality and socially constructed" (Cohen et al., 2000; p:36). Based on the data collected and findings, suggestions for change will be developed.

METHOD

The study utilised the semi-structured interview as the main method to collect the data. This method yields in-depth responses from the interviewees (Silverman, 2006). In the pre-interviews, questions of

the interview were piloted to evaluate the clarity of the questions and how they are related to the research objectives. Shortly after the Saudi teachers were selected as indicated earlier, a one-hour semi-structured interview was conducted with each of them individually. Objectives of the study were introduced to the interviewees and were assured that the data collected would be used only for this research and their names will not be used for project (they will be given pseudonyms). Finally, interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and returned back to the interviewees for reviewing, amending or adding new ideas.

Participants

The participants are three Saudi teachers who took part in the study. They have been chosen based on two reasons: purposiveness and accessibility (Cohen et al., 2000; Silverman, 2006). They are male English teachers in a Saudi public school where teachers that have been teaching for more than five years were chosen in order to gain a better perspective over the changes with regards to teacher leadership issues. They were assured of the ethical consideration about their participation in the study. For example, they are given pseudonym names which are: Ali, Ahmed and Khalid. Other ethical issues such as permission to record the interview and a consent letter have been acknowledged with the participants. The interviewees were also informed that they will attain a copy of the research so that they can be assured that their standpoints were not altered.

Limitations of the study

The study, however, is not without any limitations. For example, there is paucity in the literature on issues of teacher leadership in the Saudi educational context. Another limitation was doing Skype interviews due to geographical reasons and time limit. Although it is acceptable to use Skype as a way for collecting data, it might have produced in-depth ideas if it were done face to face. In addition, the data were interpreted by only one researcher making the analysis of the data subjective; while having the data looked at by different researchers would have given the analysis more trustworthiness. The triangulation of analysis by many interpreters (researchers) and the triangulation of methods could be better for the research to yield more data with assurance of trustworthiness and credibility.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

By analysing the data using thematic analysis which " offers an accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analysing qualitative data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, P:3), a large number of themes emerged such as teachers as legitimate leaders, disempowerment of teachers, management and leadership, responsibility of teachers in the school and weaknesses of teacher's education programmes. However, due to the limited scope of this study, only the major themes that reoccurred in the data most frequently were analysed. The data clearly indicate that the teachers viewed themselves as legitimate leaders by showing their desire to contribute to the leadership of the school.

Teachers as legitimate leaders

The study findings reveal that teachers in this study view

themselves as legitimate leaders who believe that head teachers should engage them in different opportunities to participate in school leadership processes and the general school development plans. Moreover, they show their eagerness to be involved in the school developmental plans and strategic actions, especially those which may affect teachers' work, their classroom and teaching issues. This is clear in the following quotes:

Ali: *"I think that it is very crucial for me to be a teacher leader. I believe that if I do not try to be a leader, others will take control; I mean head teacher and my English supervisor"*.

Hassan: *"I view myself as a leader in my subject and with my students. Even if head teacher acts authoritarian, he cannot force me to apply his instruction in my classroom. You know it is my privacy and power"*.

Khalid: *"teachers always are able to demonstrate their abilities without any power on them. It is my identity as a teacher to say and react in my teaching styles, curriculum and the discipline of my students in my classrooms"*.

All the participants recognize themselves as legitimate leaders. They indicated that their agency, voice and identity are of paramount to their practices and the practices of others such as head teachers and supervisors. However, they did not indicate the opportunities that they feel they can practise their leadership inside and beyond their classrooms. Here, it is advisable for head teachers and supervisors to engage teachers with them at a professional level instead of dealing with them as passive agent by positioning them as followers of passive identities (Gunter, 2001). This awareness by teachers to their agency and identity as they are legitimate leaders needs to be recognised senior leaders. If not, these might have negative impacts on the process of teaching and learning and might lead to professional schizophrenia from the side of teachers (Murphy, 1990). In order not to reach this level of leadership disempowerment, distributed leadership, teacher leadership is one of its faces, might lead to a better situation as Harris (2003) asserted that "The literature on teacher leadership suggests that distributing leadership to teachers may contribute to building professional learning communities within and between schools" (p.313).

Teachers' disempowerment

The data revealed that teachers have been disempowered to practise their leadership as legitimate leaders although they view themselves as teacher leaders with potential agency. They indicated that the top-down strategy is prevailing in their teaching context. For example, Ali mentioned that:

"We lack voices on the main issues that relate to our teaching. We are forced to apply and follow the teacher's guide book, this is only one example. We were always watched by our head teachers".

This is also indicated by Khalid who contends that:

"Unfortunately teachers don't have any saying in their profession. This is because the system just recognises us as employees which are to follow the instruction. They do not believe in us".

Hassan also sees that many factors are impeding their leadership practices. According to him *"authoritarian head teachers, ignorance of the system, top down policies, overloaded work hours and weaknesses of training courses put us as teachers in a weaker position to control our classes let alone practise our full leadership power"*.

Teachers assert that top down policies, the marginalisation by headteachers disempower them as being active agent in their profession. Moreover, the overload timetable and teaching hours let them have no time for leadership activities by having many responsibilities, which hinder them to practise their leadership. Moreover, resistance from colleagues and head teachers can be seen as another factor that might be seen as an obstacle for teachers to show their leadership abilities to the community of the school. In addition, teachers are controlled in their classes which in turn put them in a "weaker position" and become "bored, resentful, and unhappy by focusing merely on tests and raising students' scores rather than taking on leadership responsibilities" (Barth, 2001). Thus, head teachers can be seen as authoritarian people who have pressure on their teaches as followers to stress them to practise what they ask them to do regardless of their abilities, agency and qualifications to act on their owns. For examples, teachers might not be able to express their voice on the issues such as the choice of their teaching methodologies, building their materials and the structure of their exams. This can lead to a situation where teachers lose their autonomy which in turn might affect their desire and creativity to contribute to their leadership abilities and the development of their school. In most cases, this situation could have negative impacts on teachers who "have little or no say in scheduling, class placement, how specialists are assigned, decisions on hiring new teachers, and, perhaps most telling at ground level, the preparation of budgets and materials" (ibid). Conversely, teachers act beyond their capacity if they are treated as leaders and insiders of the education process. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) asserted that "When given opportunities to lead, teachers can influence school reform efforts. Waking this sleeping giant of teacher leadership has unlimited potential in making a real difference in the pace

and depth of school change” p: 216.

Weaknesses of teacher’s education programmes

Teachers are treated as unprofessional by ignoring them from leadership practices especially when they lack material of supports for their teacher leadership. The support that teachers need can be described as the education they receive in their preparatory programmes in universities and the in-service ones. This is indicated in the following quotes by the participants:

Ali: *“I remembered what the university introduced to us in regards to teacher education. I can say nothing was introduced in relation to teacher leadership except class management and theories of teaching, I mean theory based knowledge”.*

Hassan: *“the programmes that are introduced to us are top-down and we are chosen to attend in a random basis. I think they are merely about teaching styles, lesson preparation and the stuff of learning theories”.*

Khalid: *“frankly speaking, our training programmes were done by non-specialists. They did not consult us or engage us in choosing them. They are one size fits all”.*

Thus, pre-service and in-service programmes need to take into consideration the big picture about education and the need to think about the professional and cultural agenda of teacher education. Teachers need practical knowledge about current issues that relate to public education to empower their knowledge of leadership opportunities and practices. Here, the programmes of teacher development might consider the potential capacity, the professional identity and agency of teachers by providing them “opportunities to grow and lead while remaining in the classroom” (Frank, 2011).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Teachers can be engaged as leaders in decision-making since they are fundamental resources for the effective leadership of the school. Thus, teacher education models, as Handler (2010) asserted that need to be “adjusted to provide pre-service educators adequate knowledge of theory and critical pedagogy such that these teachers may understand the situation at the deeper level necessary to make decisions beyond the classroom level”. In a nutshell, teacher preparation programs should offer their attendees the thorough courses that would provide depth and breadth understanding of educational provision. This calls the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia to encourage and support training programmes and other in-service teachers’

development. In addition, treating teachers as legitimate leaders can be seen important since the awareness of the teachers in regard to their agency and identity is high as the study revealed, the Ministry of Education can cope with this demand by recognising them as legitimate and offer them opportunities that lead them to be engaged in the educational reform in their classrooms and beyond that to reach the curriculum building, their teacher education and teaching practices, just to name a few. The study also suggests engaging head teachers and teachers to take part in research and studies that relate to this essential area for teachers’ development because there are few educational researches on teacher leadership issues in Saudi Arabia

Conclusion

Focusing on the complexity of teacher leadership situation in Saudi Arabia, it is not reasonable to just deal with this issue as a problematic and an area that lacks more research to deal with it. Instead, we need to challenge this topic area and study the practices of teachers as legitimate figures who can contribute to their immediate profession as the front line professional. Thus, if teachers are to be engaged to practise their leadership roles, they should have both the depth and breadth in their understanding of education as a whole process. This can be done through their teacher preparation programmes with careful consideration of both content and criteria. In this case, we can ensure that they have the depth of knowledge that is a prerequisite for their teaching and is required to fulfil that role as effective leaders. Support for this might begin in their graduate preparation programs and continue through professional development training in-session programmes. Finally, it is hoped that the findings of this study could contribute to the reform of the Saudi Arabian education by raising the awareness of its decision makers to rethink about their valuable teachers as legitimate and provide them the opportunities to help with the overall reform that is intended and planned by the numerous projects that have been implanted by the Ministry of Education. It is further hoped that the head teacher could realise the potentials that their teachers have in the school and inside the classrooms. This can achieve the reform and take over many responsibilities that can be done by teachers to share the pressures with the school head teacher.

To this end, it is recommended further research to study this issue in depth by overcoming the limitations that this study could not avoid because of time and resources.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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