

COMPARING ROLES OF HEAD TEACHERS IN DEVELOPING SCHOOLS AS LEARNING ORGANISATIONS IN THE BRITISH AND SAUDI ARABIAN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Saeed Musaid H Alzahrani

Department of Education, Leadership and Management
Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT: *The main purpose of this study was to critically compare the roles of headteachers in the Saudi Arabian and British education systems particularly in relation to fostering effective schools and developing schools as learning organisations. These aims were achieved by using a positivism quantitative approach as it was deemed most suitable for this study. Survey questionnaires were primarily used as the method of data collection and questionnaires were administered to a total of forty participants (twenty teachers and twenty headteachers) from twenty different primary schools in Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom. The findings established through this study showed that in relation to the similarities and differences in the roles that British and Saudi headteachers play towards the realisation of schools as learning organisations, a majority of headteachers in both the British and Saudi education systems proactively take up roles geared towards developing the school as a learning organisation. It was established that approximately 74% of headteachers in the Saudi education system and 90% of headteachers in the British education system proactively take up roles geared towards developing schools as learning organisations. Thus it was concluded that more headteachers in British primary schools take up roles geared towards developing schools as learning organisations than headteachers in Saudi primary schools. It is therefore recommended that headteachers especially those in the Saudi education system should be given more mandate, control and autonomy to take on roles that foster effective schools and develop schools as learning organisations.*

KEYWORDS: Headteachers, Learning Organisations, Collective Learning, Open Communication

INTRODUCTION

The role played by headteachers has been identified in numerous studies as one of the overriding factors that determines whether a school attains the status of a good school, an effective school or a learning organisation. Basically, the roles played by headteachers in leadership, management and decision making determine whether a school becomes an effective learning organisation that enables learners to realise positive outcomes (Harber & Davies 2006; Simkins, Sisum & Memon 2003; The Wallace Foundation 2012). Therefore, school outcomes are significantly hinged on the role played by headteachers in fostering effective schools and developing schools as learning organisations. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the roles

played by headteachers vary depending on the structure, goals, standards and ideologies of an education system (James et al 2006; Kurdi 2011; Rapp 2010).

In order to establish how better school outcomes can be realized, this study examines the role that primary school headteachers play towards fostering effective schools and building schools as learning organizations as the role played by headteachers is paramount in the realisation of better school outcomes. Since, headteachers' roles vary depending on the structure, goals, standards and ideologies of an education system (James et al 2006; Kurdi 2011; Rapp 2010), this study seek to critically compare the roles played by headteachers in the Saudi and British education system as far as fostering effective schools and building schools as learning organisations is concerned. The study also hopes to shed light on the different characteristics and roles that can contribute to the realisation of effective schools and schools as learning organisations (good schools) in different education contexts. It seeks to illuminate suitable educational management and leadership practices that educators or professionals from different educational contexts can use in order to foster school effectiveness and the development of schools as learning organisations. The findings established through this study will particularly provide insights to headteachers on the areas of management and leadership that they can focus on and the things that they can do in order to develop effective and successful schools. In addition, this study will provide a blueprint or a guideline that policy makers can refer to or adopt in formulating educational policies that will help improve educational practice and improve school outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

Numerous theorists and researchers have over the years examined the learning organisation concept and have come up with different perspectives on what it entails (Senge 1990; Skerlavaj, Stemberger, Skrinjar & Dimovski 2007; Lopez, Peon and Ordas 2005). Among these theorists and researchers, Peter Senge is considered to be one of the pioneers of the learning organisation concept. In 1990, Senge examined this concept in his bestselling book, "The Fifth Discipline (1990)." Following this publication, the learning organisation concept gained broad recognition. Basically, in this book, Senge introduces a model that depicts different aspects of learning organisations. His findings on the concept of learning organisations provide invaluable insights to this study particularly with regards to the characteristics or features of learning organisations.

Senge (1990:3) defines a learning organisation as an organisation where the workforce continually broadens their capacity, new ideas or patterns of thinking are nurtured and people continuously engage in learning as individuals or collectively (Senge 1990:3). He observes that, a learning organisation is one that values and gains its competitive advantage from individual and collective continuous learning. Senge (1990) notes that, the basic rationale of encouraging organisational learning is that it enables organisations to become productive, adaptive and flexible. He recommends that, organisations should tap into the capacity and commitment of employees to learn at all levels (Senge 1990:3). Conversely, Skerlavaj, Stemberger, Skrinjar & Dimovski (2007: 346-367) note that the concept of learning organisations entails a combination of processes such as acquisition, dissemination, interpretation

and memorisation of information within the organisation. It is evident that, unlike Senge's (1990) definition which is broad, the definition provided by Skerlavaj et al (2007) are more specific and mainly centers on information within an organisation. Similarly, Lopez, Peon and Ordas (2005: 227-243) define the concept of learning organisations based on the acquisition and creation of knowledge within an organisation. They note that learning organisations continuously go through a dynamic process that involves acquiring, creating and integrating knowledge in order to develop capabilities and resources that will enhance their performance (Lopez et al 2005: 227-243).

According to Senge (1990), there are five key features or characteristics of learning organisations. These characteristics include; system thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision and team learning. He illustrates that system thinking is a conceptual framework that enables one to consider an organisation as a whole or an integrated unit comprising of different interrelated units (Senge 1990: 68-69). According to Senge (1990: 12) system thinking also involves developing other characteristics of organisational learning such as mental models, team learning, personal mastery and shared vision.

The second characteristic of learning organisation according to Senge (1990) is mental model. Senge observes that, "mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how people understand the world and how they take action" (Senge 1990: 8). Additionally, mental models entail the ability to allow people to express their own thinking and open themselves to being influenced by other people's thinking (Senge 1990:9). In essence, Senge suggests that in learning organisations employees are given the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions. A learning organisation is also not rigid since it accommodates and can adapt to different modes of operation.

The third characteristic of learning organisations is personal mastery. According to Senge (1990:7) personal mastery entails commitment and discipline to continuously improve oneself through learning. It also entails clarifying and broadening one's personal vision, focusing ones' energies in the right direction and gaining an objective perspective about life (1990:7). Senge further asserts that personal mastery goes beyond acquiring competencies or skills rather, it involves a synchrony between ones mental attitude, spirituality, skills, competencies, vision, goals and actions.

Team learning is another characteristic of learning organisations suggested by Senge (1990). He observes that, team learning is a process that entails developing team capacities in order to realise desired results (Senge 1990: 236). He asserts that, in order for an organisation to become effective, people's efforts must be in synchrony thus when people within an organisation learn together, they are more likely to build better knowledge and expertise within an organisation thus enhancing the effectiveness of an organisation(Senge 1990: 236).Lastly, Senge observes that, building shared vision is a crucial characteristic of learning organisations. He notes that shared vision is the capacity to have a common picture or image of the future or goals that an organisation wants to realise (Senge 1990: 9).

Besides the characteristics of learning explored by Senge (1990), other researchers and theorists have also come up with different models and perspectives that explore and analyse the characteristics of learning organisations. For instance, Mitleton-Kelly (2003:16) observes

that one of the key characteristic of a learning organisation is the ability to change mind-set or behaviour due to learning or experience gained over time. Moreover, Mitleton-Kelly notes that learning organisations have environments that promote leadership and learning at all levels. Learning organisations realise this through strong networks of peer support and relationships (Mitleton-Kelly 2003:16-18).

Similarly, Rao (2008) echoes the sentiments of Senge (1990) by arguing that some of the key characteristics of learning organisations include; shared values, team work, open communication and system thinking. Nevertheless, unlike Senge (1990), Rao considers risk taking as a common aspect of learning organisations. He notes that, managers in learning organisations demonstrate through their actions that taking risks and learning from failures are suitable qualities (Rao, 2008).

Chawla (2006: 46) introduces a different dimension of looking at the concept of learning organisations. She notes that, learning organisations are characterised by curiosity, trust, togetherness and forgiveness. According to Chawla (2006) curiosity instills the urge to learn by asking questions, and researching and experimenting on different ways of doing things. Since experiments or projects can sometimes fail Chawla (2006:46) notes that it is crucial for an organisation to have a culture of forgiveness, so that individuals can learn from their failures and forge forward without fear of rejection or negative judgment. Furthermore, Chawla notes that togetherness is an essential characteristic of learning organisations. In order for an organisation to be considered as an effective learning organisation, a sense of togetherness or unity of purpose must be present. Nevertheless, Chawla argues that, trust among organisational members is a key prerequisite of togetherness (Chawla 2006:47).

A critical review of various relevant literatures shows that, the characteristics of learning organisations within the school context and typical organisations are essentially similar. Just like in typical organisations, the concept of learning organisations within the school context is characterised by shared values, open communication, team working, system thinking, supportive culture, continuous improvement, commitment to learning, knowledge acquisition and sharing among other features (Brandt 2003; Chawla 2006; Lopez et al 2005; Mitleton-Kelly 2003; Rao 2008; Senge 1990).

In the article, “Is this school a learning organisation”, Brandt (2003) provides ten key characteristics of schools that embody the concept of learning organisations. Generally the characteristics illustrated by Brandt (2003) in this article to some extent correspond with those provided by Chawla (2006), Lopez et al (2005), Mitleton-Kelly (2003) Rao (2008) and Senge (1990) among others. Foremost, Brandt (2003:10) notes that, schools which can be considered as learning organisations encourage adaptive behaviour through an incentive structure. In essence such schools motivate students and teachers through various forms of incentives in order to inculcate a culture of high performance. Secondly, Brandt observes that schools which can be considered as learning organisations have shared goals which are demanding but achievable (Brandt 2003:11). Moreover, according to Brandt, schools which can be considered as learning organisations comprise of members within the organisation who understand and are able to identify stages of development in the organisation (Brandt 2003:12). He further notes that these schools gather, process and respond to information. They also have an institutional process of creating new ideas and an up to date knowledge base. These schools frequently

exchange information with relevant external parties and continuously seek to refine their operations and processes (Brandt 2003:14-15). In addition, Brandt (2003:15-16) notes that, schools which can be considered as learning organisations, have supportive cultures and have systems and process put in place for obtaining feedback regarding their practices or strategies.

FINDINGS ON THE ROLE OF HEADTEACHERS IN ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

This section presents the responses provided by twenty headteachers from Saudi and British education systems regarding their roles in organisational learning. Five key aspects of learning organisations were used to identify and compare the roles of these headteachers in organisational learning. These criteria include;

- Building shared values.
- Collective learning.
- Open communication.
- Experimentation and implementation of new ideas.
- Allocation of adequate time for extra-curricular activities.

Building shared values

Building shared values through knowledge sharing and development and information sharing with networks of internal and external experts are some of the characteristics identified in this study as evident in learning organisations. In the Saudi education system 4 out of the 10 headteachers who participated in this study indicated that they “Highly Agree” that they focus on facilitating knowledge development and sharing within the school, 4 headteachers indicated that they “Agree” whereas 2 headteachers indicated that they “Disagree”. Moreover, 3 out of 10 headteachers in the Saudi education system indicated that they “Highly Agree” that their school regularly shares information with networks of internal and external experts, 5 headteachers indicated that they “Agree” whereas 2 indicated that they “Disagree”. Conversely, in the British education system, 5 headteachers indicated that they “Highly Agree” whereas 5 indicated that they “Agree” that they focus on facilitating knowledge development and sharing within the school. In relation to whether they share information with networks of internal and external experts all 10 headteachers from the British education systems indicated that that they “Highly Agree”. The graphs below highlight the responses provided by the twenty headteachers.

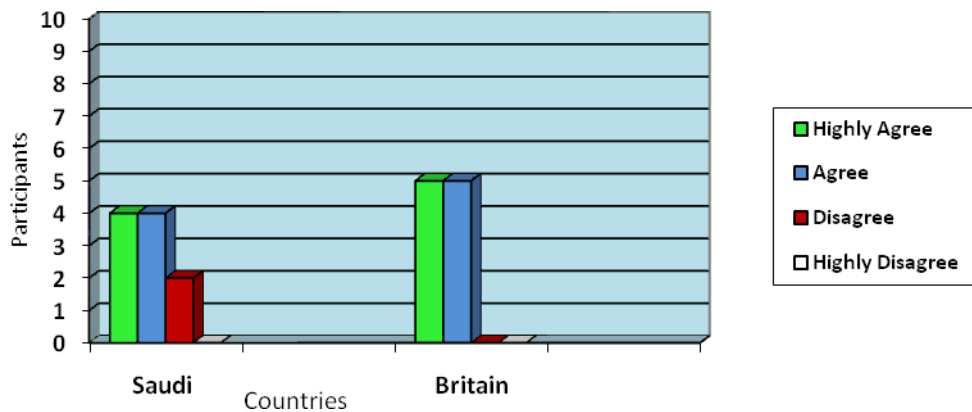


Figure 1: Facilitating knowledge development and sharing

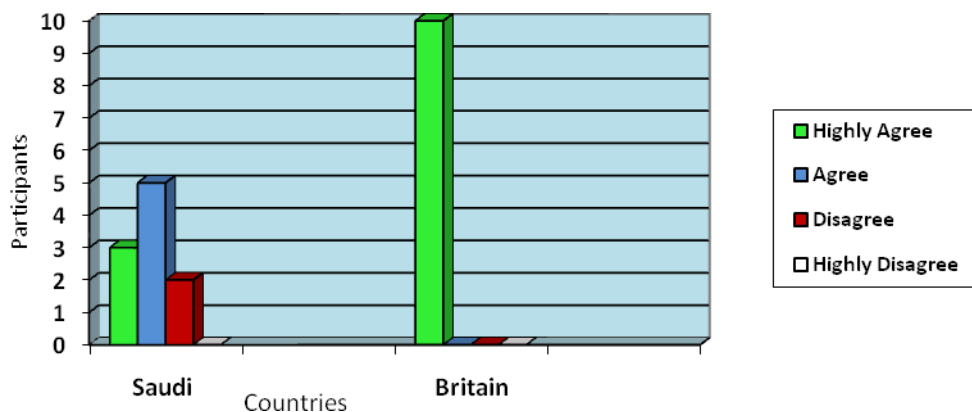


Figure 2: Sharing information with networks of internal and external experts

Based on the responses provided by the headteachers who participated in this study, it is apparent that in the Saudi education system, a significant number of headteachers embark on building shared values. 80 % of the headteachers who participated in this study provided an affirmative response that their role involved facilitating knowledge development and sharing and sharing of information with networks of internal and external experts.

The responses provided also show that most headteachers in the British education system embark on building shared values. 100% of the headteachers who participated in this study provided an affirmative response that their role involved facilitating knowledge development and sharing as well as the sharing of information with networks of internal and external experts.

Collective learning

Collective learning is one of the characteristics of learning organisations identified in this study. Regular staff training and development is a practice geared towards promoting collective learning within the school. In the Saudi education system, 3 out of the 10 headteachers who participated in this study indicated that they “Highly Agree” that they regularly facilitate staff training and development, 4 indicated that they “Agree” whereas 3 indicated that they “Disagree”. Conversely, in the British education system 4 out of 10 headteachers indicated that they “Highly Agree” that they regularly facilitate regular staff training and development, 5

headteachers indicated that they “Agree” whereas 1 indicated “Disagree”. The graph below summarises these findings.

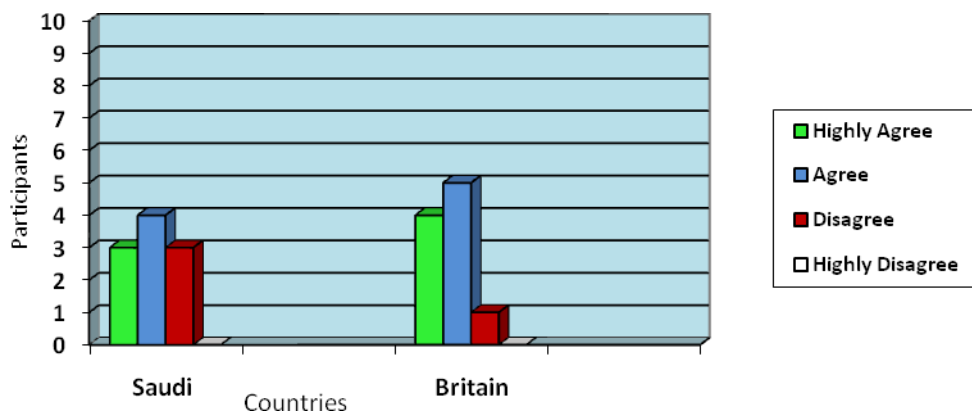


Figure 3: Collective learning

70% of the headteachers from the Saudi education system who participated in this study provided an affirmative response. These findings show that a significant number of headteachers in the Saudi education system take up the role of facilitating collective learning by regularly facilitating staff training and development. On the other hand, in the British education system, 90% of the headteachers provided an affirmative response. This shows that most headteachers in British primary schools facilitate staff training and development thus promoting collective learning.

Open Communication

Open communication is also identified in this study as a characteristic of learning organisations. It involves paying attention and taking into account different views during staff and school meetings. In the Saudi education systems, 4 out of 10 headteachers indicated that they “Highly Agree” that they pay attention and take into account different views expressed during staff and school meetings, 3 indicated that they “Agree”, 1 indicated “Disagree” whereas 2 indicated “Highly Disagree”. In the British education system, 5 out of 10 headteachers indicated “Highly Agree”, 4 indicated “Agree” whereas 1 headteacher indicated “Disagree.” The graph below summarises these findings.

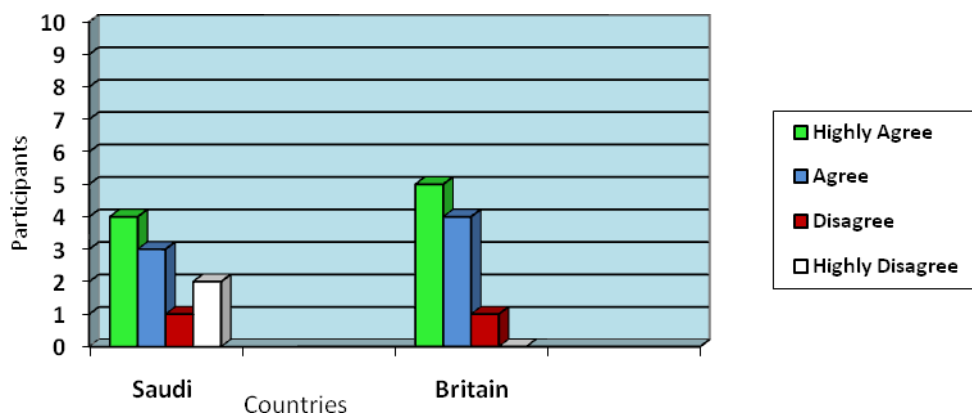


Figure 4: Open Communication

Evidently, 70% of headteachers from the Saudi education system indicated that they pay attention and take into account different views during staff and school meetings. In the British education system, there was a 90% affirmative response regarding this issue. This shows that a considerable number of headteachers in both the Saudi and British education system play the role of facilitating open communication between, the school, its staff, parents and other stakeholders.

Experimentation and implementation of new ideas

5 out of 10 headteachers in the Saudi education system indicated “Highly Agree” that they encourage their staff to be open to alternative ways of getting work done, 3 indicated “Agree” whereas 2 indicated “Disagree”. In the British education system, 3 headteachers indicated that they “Highly Agree”, 5 indicated “Agree” whereas 2 indicated “Disagree”. The graph below summarises these findings.

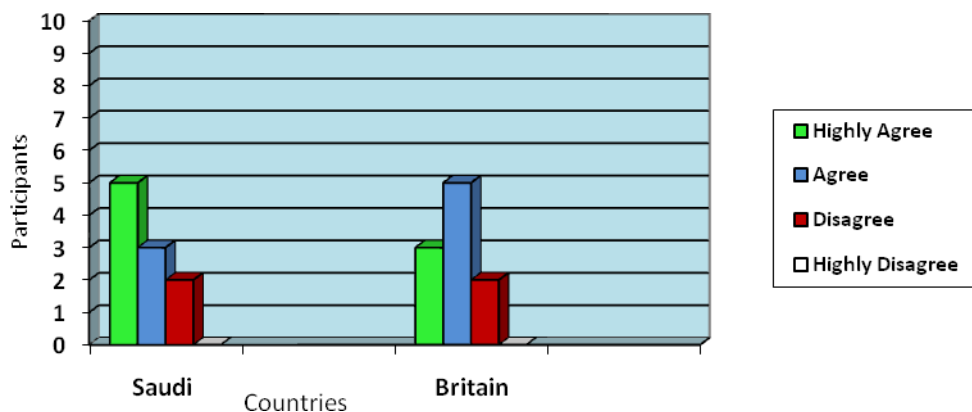


Figure 5: Experimentation and implementation of new ideas

In both the Saudi and British education system there was an 80% affirmative response from the headteachers that their role entails encouraging staff to experiment or implement new ideas. This shows that in both education systems most headteachers encourage experimentation of new ideas.

Allocation of adequate time for extra-curricular activities

In relations to whether the twenty headteachers who participated in this study allocate adequate time for extra-curricular activities, such as sports, debates and school trips, 4 out of 10 headteachers from the Saudi education system indicated that they “Highly Agree”, 3 indicated that they “Agree” whereas 3 indicated “Disagree”. In the British education system, 4 out of 10 headteachers indicated that they “Highly Agree”, 5 indicated “Agree” whereas 1 headteacher indicated “Disagree”. The graph below summarises these findings.

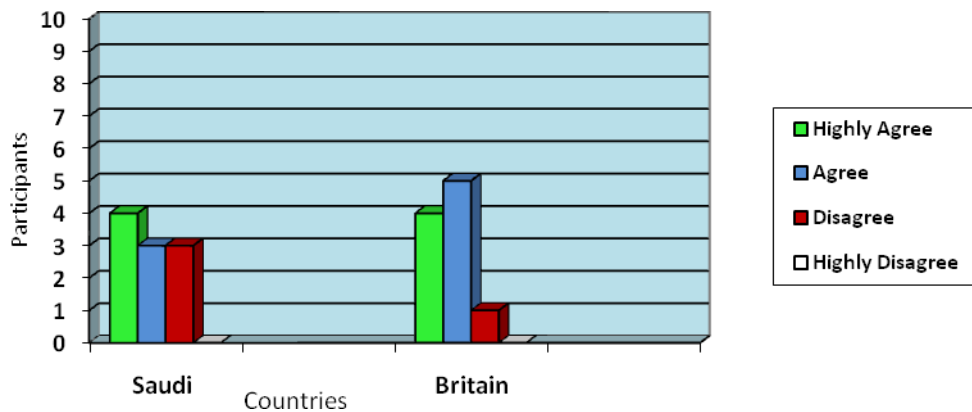


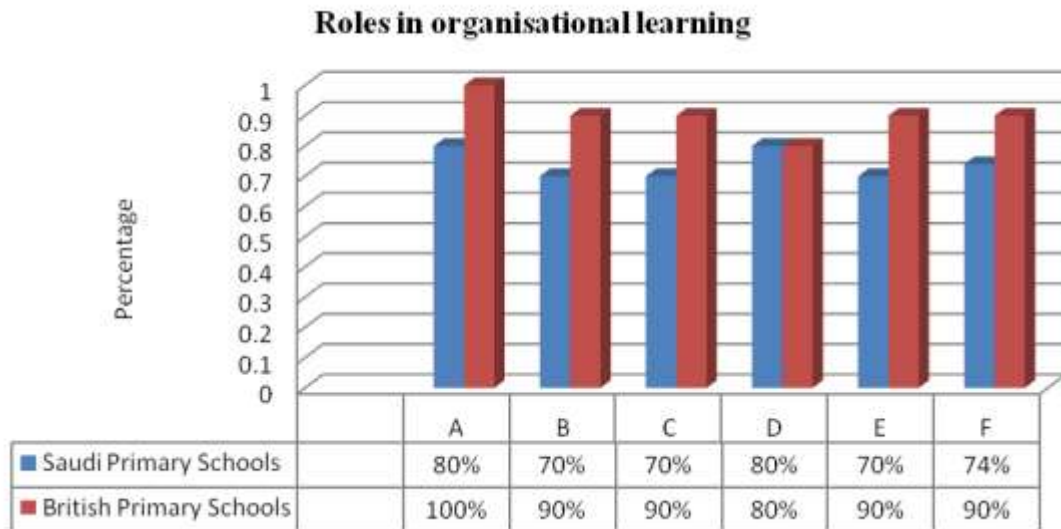
Figure 6: Allocation of adequate time for extra-curricular activities

There was a 70% affirmative response from headteachers in the Saudi education systems whereas in the British education system, there was a 90% affirmative response. Despite the disparity, this shows that most headteachers in these education systems allocate adequate time for extra-curricular activities.

RESULT DISCUSSION AND COMPARISON OF SAUDI AND BRITISH HEADTEACHER ROLE IN DEVELOPING SCHOOL AS LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

A considerable number of literatures examined in this study depict the notion of learning organisations as one that is multi-dimensional in nature (Brandt 2003; Chawla 2006; Lopez et al 2005; Mitleton-Kelly 2003; Rao 2008; Senge 1990). In reference to models of learning organisations developed by Rao (2008), Senge (1990) and Brandt (2003), five key characteristics of learning organisations were identified. These characteristics include; collective learning, open communication, experimentation and implementation of new ideas, allocation of adequate time for extra-curricular activities and shared values. These characteristics were used as criteria for comparing the roles that headteachers in the Saudi and British education systems play in facilitating organisational learning.

The graph below (Figure 7) represents the percentage of headteachers in both the British and Saudi education systems who take up roles in building learning organisations based on the five characteristics of learning organisations identified in this study.

**Key:**

- | | |
|----------|---|
| A | <i>Building shared values by facilitating knowledge development and sharing</i> |
| B | <i>Promoting collective learning by facilitating regular staff training and development sessions/ programs.</i> |
| C | <i>Encouraging open communication by paying attention and take into account different views expressed during staff and school meetings.</i> |
| D | <i>Encouraging experimentation and implementation of new ideas.</i> |
| E | <i>Allocating adequate time for extra-curricular activities.</i> |
| F | <i>Total Average</i> |

Figure 7: Headteachers' role in learning organisations

Data presented in (Figure 7), clearly shows that in both the British and Saudi education systems, a majority of headteachers proactively take up roles geared towards developing the school as a learning organisation. The findings of this study show that approximately 74% of headteachers in the Saudi education system and 90% of headteachers in the British education system proactively take up roles geared towards developing schools as learning organisations. Nonetheless, there seems to be a disparity of 24% between the overall number of headteachers in the British and Saudi education system who take up roles that develop schools as learning organisations. Although a majority of headteachers in the British (100%) and Saudi education (70%) systems focus on building shared values by facilitating knowledge development and sharing, there are 20% more headteachers in British primary schools than in Saudi primary schools who take up this role. Similarly, when it comes promoting collective learning by facilitating regular staff training and development sessions/ programs, encouraging open communication by paying attention and take into account different views expressed during staff and school meetings and allocating adequate time for extra-curricular activities, there are 20% more headteachers in British primary schools than in Saudi primary schools who take up these roles.

The findings of this study on the role that headteachers in the British education system play in developing schools as learning organisations significantly corresponds with the findings

previously depicted in literature. According to James et al (2006) headteachers in the British education system, assume a dual role in the school environment. They are not only expected to provide educational and curriculum leadership but they are also expected to be professional managers. In essence, headteachers' role within the British education system entails steering the vision and goals of the school by continuously communicating the school priorities, motivating and influencing the values and beliefs of pupils, teachers, workers and stakeholders in a manner that is consistent with the school's targets (The Department of Education and Skills 2004: 6). Furthermore, Rapp (2010:336-337) notes that headteachers' role in the British education system entails overseeing school processes and practices that facilitate learning and continuous improvement of the school.

Generally, the findings established by James et al (2006), Rapp (2010) and the Department of Education and Skills (2004:6) are consistent with the findings established in this study in the sense that they highlight the role of headteachers in the British education system in light of the characteristics of learning organisations envisioned in this study with reference to model developed by Rao (2008), Senge (1990) and Brandt (2003). Basically, in order for headteachers to build shared values and facilitate collective learning, open communication, experimentation and implementation of new ideas they have to continuously communicate and steer the vision goals and priorities of the school by motivating and influencing the values and beliefs of pupils, teachers, workers and stakeholders in a manner that is consistent with the school's targets (The Department of Education and Skills 2004: 6).

On the other hand, the findings established in this study on the role that headteachers in the Saudi education system play in fostering organisational learning somewhat does not correspond with the findings and sentiments of Aqil (2005) and Kurdi (2011). Aqil (2005:204) observes that due to the highly centralised nature of the Saudi education system, the role of headteachers in Saudi is highly constrained by the bureaucratic nature of the education system (Aqil 2005:204). As a result, their control or autonomy in aspects of day to day running of the school's affairs is constrained as the school is effectively run through instructions delivered from the central government. Similarly, Kurdi (2011:19) notes that, in practice, headteachers in the Saudi education system lack the autonomy and flexibility to perform leadership roles and are mainly restricted to administrative tasks. The findings established in this study contradicts the sentiments of Aqil (2005) and Kurdi (2011) by showing that a majority (74%) of headteachers in the Saudi education system proactively take up leadership roles geared towards developing schools as learning organisations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings established in this study regarding the role of headteachers in developing schools as learning organisations, it is evident that there are significant similarities between the roles played by headteachers in the Saudi and British education systems. However, it is evident that more headteachers in British primary schools take up roles geared towards developing schools as learning organisations than headteachers in Saudi primary schools.

In relation to the similarities and differences in the roles that British and Saudi headteachers play towards the realisation of schools as learning organisations, this study also established that in both the British and Saudi education systems a majority of headteachers proactively take up

roles geared towards developing the school as a learning organisation. It was established that approximately 74% of headteachers in the Saudi education system and 90% of headteachers in the British education system proactively take up roles geared towards developing schools as learning organisations. Nonetheless, the findings of this study showed a disparity of 24% between the overall number of headteachers in the British and Saudi education system who take up roles that develop schools as learning organisations. Thus it was concluded that more headteachers in British primary schools take up roles geared towards developing schools as learning organisations than headteachers in Saudi primary schools.

However, it was established that more headteachers in British schools seemed to take on roles geared towards building effective schools and learning organisations than in Saudi schools. This study also showed that there are 10% more headteachers in Saudi schools who take up the role of motivating and supporting students than in the British education system. These findings suggest that as compared to the roles played by headteachers in Saudi, the role of primary school headteachers in the British education system involves less contact or relation with students. This can be attributed to the fact that headteacher's role in British schools mainly revolves around educational and curriculum leadership, overseeing and managing school activities and the development and management of external relations between the school and stakeholders.

On the other hand, it was established that there are more similarities than difference in the roles played by headteachers in these two systems when it comes to fostering effective schools and developing schools as learning organisations. These findings suggest that although a majority of headteachers in the Saudi education system take up roles aimed at developing effective schools (80%) and learning organizations (74%) the positive outcomes realised in schools in Saudi are less (43.7%) than those realised in British schools (92.5%) as far as embodying the characteristics of good schools is concerned. This shows that there are some underlying problems within the Saudi educative system and it is observed that inadequate local education authorities in Saudi Arabia deter the head teacher's aspiration and hinders their initiatives to make changes. This in turn frustrates headteachers causing them to give up on their change initiatives. As a result, the role of most headteachers in Saudi Arabian primary schools is not effective in developing effective schools and schools as learning organisations. Therefore, this study recommends that headteachers especially those in the Saudi education system should be given more guidance, control and autonomy to take on roles that foster effective schools and develop schools as learning organizations.

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