Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Instructional Leadership in Omani Schools

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Abstract   The main purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of their school principals' instructional leadership (IL), and the impact gender might has on those perceptions. The Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) Thai-form of Hallinger and Lee [15] was used to collect data from 368 teachers for measuring principals' practices of instructional leadership in Omani schools. The main results suggested a moderate level of school principals' engagement in the three dimensions of instructional leadership. The lowest rated dimension was managing the Instructional Program whereas the highest rated dimension was Creating School Mission. There were significant differences in the first dimension of IL (i.e. creating a school mission) based on gender in favor of female teachers. This study contributes to the body of research on instructional leadership from the Omani cultural context.

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1. Introduction

A vast body of research on effective schools provides consistent evidence that effective leadership is the key factor for school improvement and student achievement [9]. For instance, drawing on longitudinal data derived from hundreds of schools in Chicago, a study by Bryk, and colleagues [6] concluded that the school Principalship is a significant driving force for a school to achieve high quality instruction, and thereby, to enhance student achievement.

As the leadership of school has evolved, the role of the principal has become increasingly complex and unclear [12,36]. However, Stronge, et al. [34] suggest, "Nothing in the principal's role is more important for ensuring successful student learning than effective instructional leadership" (p. 13). However, despite its importance in promoting the effectiveness of schools and serving the ultimate goal of the teaching and learning process at schools, Hallinger and Murphy [17] assert that principals do not allocate a significant portion of their time to managing the instructional activities of their schools. Likewise, Smith and Andrews [32] found the dichotomy of secondary principals acting as building managers and elementary principals spending more time on instructional management to be inaccurate.

In Oman, the educational system is centralized but there are new moves toward decentralization in the form of school-based management. The Ministry of Education has adopted SBM system with certain responsibilities devolved to pilot schools. One of the aims is to improve schools and encourage local level decision making through a policy of decentralization [26]. The Ministry of Education has taken care to develop a new school leadership that can lead school improvement in terms of school achievement. One of mechanisms to develop the role of school principals as instructional leaders in Omani schools is the newly-issued job description of Omani principals. It includes many tasks that are related to improving the instructional performance for both students and teachers [27].

Although there are many chances for school principals to have more training and more autonomy in their work, this effort has not improved school performance in terms of student achievement according to a world bank study (The World Bank study with MOE, 2012: 20) So the main aim of the current study was to determine school teachers' perceptions regarding school principals' practices of the instructional leadership dimensions, and the impact gender might has on their perceptions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Instructional Leadership: Definition and Role

Over the past two decades, instructional leadership has been one of the most popular topics in educational leadership in literature. According to Leithwood, et al. [23], instructional leadership is the most frequently mentioned educational leadership concept in North America. Also, Hallinger ([19] 221) notes that "One lasting legacy of the effective schools movement was the

institutionalization of the term instructional leadership into the vocabulary of educational administration". Within the construct of instructional leadership, many attempts have been made to define instructional leadership. However, despite the promise of instructional leadership, there is disagreement concerning its definition, conceptualization, practices, and measurement [13,17,21,33]. A major reason for these discrepancies, according to Hallinger and Murphy [17], is the absence of a clear definition for the concept. This lack of a concise definition is one of the weaknesses in the research on instructional leadership which leads to miscommunication, role conflict, and low principal evaluation ratings [33]. Ginsberg [13] and Johnson [21] assert that this miscommunication is perhaps the major obstacle for effective instructional leadership. Sheppard [31] distinguishes between "narrow" and "broad" views of instructional leadership in the literature. The narrow interpretation focuses on instructional leadership as a separate entity from management and is defined as those actions directly related to teaching and learning, observable behaviors such as classroom supervision [31]. In a broader view, instructional leadership refers to all other leadership activities and behaviors, including managerial behaviors that promote the growth of student learning in schools [8,28]. Similarly, it is broadly defined as the principal's guidance and direction of instructional improvement [11].

More specific definitions that attempt to define the nature of the relationship are provided by scholars such as Cuban, Leithwood, Murphy, and Hallinger. Cuban's [7] image of the principal as an instructional leader portrayed the administrator as being 'hip-deep' in instruction. This image focused on the principal's efforts to develop a vision and see it to fruition. By establishing school goals, aligning curriculum, developing a safe school environment, and supervising classroom instruction, the principal acts as an instructional leader. To sum up, one can reach the point that there is no one single understanding of instructional leadership in the literature. Yet, as a concept in general, it suggests that principals establish school-wide goals and communicate determined goals with the staff [28,37]; it requires principals to coordinate school curriculum, monitor student progress, and develop instructional strategies [17] it provides the principal with a framework to observe and evaluate teachers' instructional practice, provide feedback, and offer incentives based on teacher and student progress [17,28]; and it charges principals with the responsibility to make various professional development opportunities available to the academic staff [2,37].

Principals, as educational leaders, are expected to fulfill many roles in schools. In the research on school leadership, the principal's role as a school leader has sometimes been defined through the relationships that exist between leaders and followers. Hanny suggests that "effective principals are expected to be effective instructional leaders ... the principal must be knowledgeable about curriculum development, teacher and instructional effectiveness, clinical supervision, staff development and teacher evaluation" (p. 209). Bryce and Fullan [12] agree with this holistic view of the principal's role, however, Fullan expands this holistic definition of leadership and management to be: an active, collaborative form of leadership where the principal works "with teachers to shape the school as a workplace in relation to shared goals, teachers' collaboration, teacher learning opportunities, teacher certainty, teacher commitment, and student learning" (p. 161). In addition, Hallinger [18] explains that a principal's major role is to help provide the focus and support system to enable teachers to develop their classrooms for greater instructional effectiveness. He also affirms that instructional leadership focuses predominantly on the role of the school principal in coordinating, controlling, supervising, and developing curriculum and instruction in the school (p. 331).

According to Glanz [14] good principals today focus on instruction, because they know that doing so, more than anything else they do, directly affects student learning. Having said thiat, however, Flath cautions that although many researchers stress the importance of the instructional leadership responsibilities of the principal; the consensus in the literature regarding this issue is that it is seldom practiced. Cuban earlier proposed that school principals must fulfill three key leadership roles: political, managerial and instructional. Cuban observed that although normative rhetoric in the profession in the USA tended to elevate the instructional role of principals above others (e.g., [5,24]), descriptions of principal practice supported the view that successful principals maintain a balance between all three roles (e.g., [10]). Cuban even went further to assert that that there is a DNA in the principalship that presses occupants towards the political and managerial roles, and away from the instructional role. Similarly, Stronge [34] also found that principals spent a majority of their time performing administrative duties and asserted that principals needed to take on a different role. He calculates that 62.2% of the elementary principal's time is focused on school management issues, whereas only 6.2% of their time is focused on program issues. He adds, "A typical principal performs an enormous number of tasks each day - but only 11% relate to instructional leadership" (p. 32). More Recently, Thompson and Blackmore and Johnson [22] found that principals, regardless of school level, spent the majority of their time in administrative duties, followed by instructional leadership. Embedded in this discussion is the critical need for principals to move out of the role of building manager and into the role of leader of the learning community. Berlin, et al. [3] conclude that if schools are to progress, "the principal cannot allow daily duties to interfere with the leadership role in curriculum [and instruction]" (p. 49). Thus, principals must continue to determine how to best use their time to engage in the most essential instructional leadership tasks ([29]: 67).

2.2. Models of Instructional Leadership

In the 1970s, the concept of instructional leadership seemed ambiguous due to the lack of concrete models identifying key dimensions of instructional leadership [2]. As a consequence of the awareness that instructional leadership was not conceptualized properly, and of the lack of evidence concerning its influence on student learning, researchers started developing various models and corresponding questionnaires that later brought about substantial scholarly attention and investment in the field of instructional leadership. Some prominent examples of those models are: A. Bossert et al's. [4] framework, in

which they identified instructional management as the interaction of three components: principal management behavior, school climate, and instructional organization; B. Hallinger and Murphy's [17] Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) model which identified three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and creating a positive school climate, and were theorized to encompass 11 functions that principals engaged in to represent instructional leadership; C. Murphy's [28] which is based on four dimensions: developing mission and goals, managing the educational production function, promoting academic learning climate, and developing a supportive work environment of instructional leadership, and was later developed and broken down into sixteen different behaviors; D. Petterson's model constituted by various dimensions: providing a sense of vision to the school, Supporting classroom instruction, and engaging others in the process of instructional improvement; E. Weber's [37] model identified five essential domains of instructional leadership: defining the mission, managing curriculum and instruction, promoting a positive learning climate, observing and improving instruction, and assessing the instructional program; F. McEwan's [25] model that viewed instructional leadership more as collective behaviors shared among the principal and teachers than as behaviors carried out exclusively by the principal; G. the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)red among the p which is based on a large international survey instrument called the Teaching and Learning Instrument Survey (TALIS), and it defines instructional leadership through three major functions: management of school goals, instructional management, and direct supervision of instruction creates slightly different categories of instructional leadership; and most recently, H. Hallinger and Lee's [15] model, that is a revised version of the Thai-form of Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), in which Hallinger and Lee made some modifications to the PIMRS instrument to reduce the number of items from fifty to twenty.

As this research is based on the revised version of Hallinger and Murphy's PIMRS model, it is therefore, important to highlight this model in the following section.

2.3. Hallinger's (PIMRS) Model of Instructional Leadership

Concurrent with the research being conducted by Bossert et al. [4], Hallinger and Murphy [17] proposed a complementary model for defining and measuring the instructional leadership role of the principal. This became popularly known as the PIMRS framework after the associated instrument (that is, the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale). The PIMRS model proposed three dimensions in the instructional leadership role of the principal: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate [17]. These broad dimensions were further delineated into 11 instructional leadership functions.

Two functions, framing the school's goals and communicating the school's goals, comprised the dimension, defining the school's mission. These functions concern the principal's role in working with staff to ensure

that the school has a clear mission and that the mission is focused on the academic progress of its students. While this dimension does not assume that the principal defines the school's mission alone, it does propose that the principal is responsible for ensuring that such a mission exists and is communicated widely to the school's stakeholders [15].

Managing the instructional program focuses on the role of the principal in 'managing the technical core' of the school. This dimension incorporates three leadership functions: supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress. Although these instructional leadership responsibilities must be shared with teachers and other school administrators, the framework assumes that coordination and control of the academic program of the school remains a key leadership responsibility of the principal.

Promoting a positive school learning climate is broader in scope and intent than the second dimension, and overlaps with facets of transformational leadership frameworks [18,23]. It includes several functions: protecting instructional time; promoting10 professional development; maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, and providing incentives for learning. Through enactment of these functions, successful principals create an 'academic press' and a culture that fosters and rewards continuous learning and improvement.

Following Hallinger and Murphy's [17] model of instructional leadership, the PIMRS is used in the current study to determine teachers' perceptions of their principals' instructional leadership behaviors in all the educational directorates and governorate of the Sultanate of Oman. The theoretical framework, which proposes three dimensions of instructional leadership, is based on ensuring that the school's mission is defined, managing the overall instructional program, and encouraging a constructive learning environment [15]. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that instructional leadership refers to the practices and behaviors of principals who clearly communicate, plan, seek to influence, provide guidance, and encourage teachers and students in efforts to improve and enhance programs related to teaching and learning. This includes ensuring successful implementation of educational reform, and means that an instructional leader is always actively involved in the constant challenges of education.

2.4. Instructional Leadership in the Omani Context

Although Cuban's [7] analysis that was earlier mentioned in the principal's role as an instructional leader was explicitly oriented to the American Principalship, it provides a relevant frame for our exploration of instructional leadership in Oman. Oman's education system has traditionally given the greatest weight to the managerial and political dimensions of the principal's role. Omani principals were considered as civil servants who function as line managers within the hierarchy of a highly centralized, national system of education [38]. The Ministry of Education officials have historically viewed the principal as a locally situated guardian of the nation's education policies as well as its cultural values [30]. Thus,

principals have traditionally been cast as implementers of government policy, rather than as initiators, innovators, or leaders [1].

As the Ministry of Education of the Sultanate of Oman makes the shift to a decentralized structure, it recognizes that its school administrators require new leadership skills in order to make the necessary changes. Implementing decentralization requires a shift in principals' work and thus their professional identity. "By building the leadership capacity of principals as leaders at the school level, (Oman's) Ministry of Education officials hope to strengthen the principals' ability to implement school reforms for the 21st century" ([38]: 6). Since then, the Ministry of Education has been highly concerned about school leadership as a major influence on student learning. This is noticeably evident through the Ministry's care of school leadership that is represented in many aspects, such as the method of selecting and training school principals and the tasks and responsibilities entrusted to them, which were stated and published in the section related to the functions and responsibilities of the administrative and teaching faculties in the general directorate of public schools. Tasks and responsibilities that are related to the role of school principal in instructional leadership include: 1. supervising a number of areas that are crucial for the success of student teaching and learning process, such as: the annual plan of school curriculum, the fulfillment of students' educational and instructional needs, the implementation of remedial programs with senior teachers, and the establishment of educational activities inside and outside the school which; 2. participating in the planning and implementation of professional development programs, and in the supervisory visits for teaching faculty and its related professions; 3. constantly working to strengthen the links and relations between school and its community; and 4. activating the role of the school as an educational community service in serving the educational and instructional process in the school [27].

As for the criteria of selecting school principals in the Sultanate of Oman, the MoE has issued guidelines for selecting in-service administrative and supervisory bodies [27]. Those include a number of criteria designed to support the role of school principal as an instructional leader, and therefore maintain instructional leadership as an essential component in school principal's selection. Among those criteria mentioned in the Directory of selecting in-service administrative and supervisory faculties [27] is the candidate's experience in the field of teaching, which makes the principal able to understand instructional curriculum and to prepare annual and daily plans. In addition to this, is the criterion related to participation in seminars and lectures, and carrying out scientific research that is believed to support his/her leadership role in improving student learning. Moreover, the criteria stress the candidate's discipline in work and social relationships with members of the school community, and his/her abilities in communication and the use of technology in the workplace, and his/her focus on improving the learning environment for students [27].

3. Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of Omani School Teachers of their principals' instructional leadership based on the shortened form of the PIMRS?
- To what extent, if any, are there significant differences between Male & Female Teachers regarding their perceptions of principals' instructional leadership?

4. Research Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a quantitative approach is implemented using descriptive statistical analysis to address the previous research questions. In this section, we explain our methodology in terms of research sample and data collection.

4.1. Population and Sample

The population of this study includes governmental school teachers in Oman (N= 55343). Table 1 shows description of the study population and sample. We surveyed a convenient sample of 368 teachers during the 2013-2014 school years. 53.3 per cent of teachers were male and 46.7 per cent were female.

Table 1. Population and sample description

Population of study*			Sample of study		
Male	female	Total	Male	female	Total
19384	35959	55343	196	172	368

* Source: [27].

4.2. Data Collection Instrument

For the purpose of this study, a quantitative approach was employed, using The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) [17]. The researchers employed the PIMRS-Thai Form which represent a shortened version of the PIMRS [15]. The shortened version of PIMRS-Thai Form was adapted and modified in accordance with the objectives of this study to measure the level of instructional leadership among principals when implementing changes from the perspective of teachers.

For Omani participants, the shortened version of the PIMRS-Thai form (20 items) was translated into Arabic language. This Arabic version was constructed in the same format as the English version, and was given to some language experts for back translation. A corrected final version of the questionnaire was administered to a group of school teachers in Oman; the (PIMRS) provides perceptions of the staff relating to specific practices observed about the behaviors of school principal with regard to three dimensions: Creating a School Mission, Managing the Instructional Program, and Developing a Positive School Learning Climate The questionnaire used

a 5-point Likert scale [15], for teachers to report the frequency of instructional leadership practices engaged in by a principal by marking 1 (Never) through 5 (Always).

The items of the survey are categorized into 3 representative sets:
- Items 1-5 focus on the principal role in Creating a School Mission
- Items 6-11 focus on the principal role in managing the instructional program

- Items 12-20 determine the participants' perceptions in regards to the principal role in developing a Positive School Learning Climate [15].

The internal consistency of the variables was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. Table 2 illustrates the results of internal consistency analysis, in the Arabic version of the questionnaire:

Table 2. Internal Consistency Analysis for (PIMRS)

Subscales PIMRS Subscales	Cronbach's alpha	1	2	3
Creating a School Mission	0.824	1		
Managing the Instructional Program	0.835	.785**	1	
Developing a Positive School Learning Climate	0.877	.767**	.815**	1
One Factor Solution	0.939	.892**	.929**	.952**

5. Results and Discussion

In response to the first research question (i.e. what are the perceptions of Omani School Teachers of their principals' instructional leadership based on the shortened form of the PIMRS ?)

To address this question, Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics for all responses of (368) teachers on the three dimensions of The PIMRS. Participants responded to 20 statements on the PIMRS (short form) based on their level of agreement (1 = *Almost Never*, 2 = *Seldom*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *Frequently*, 5 *Almost Always*). Mean scores were calculated for the overall response and for each dimension of the PIMRS questionnaire.

Table 3. Questionnaire Overall and Dimension Mean Scores.

All Responses	Overall	Creating a School Mission	Managing the Instructional Program	Developing a Positive School Learning Climate
Mean	3.50	3.60	3.47	3.48
SD	0.78	0.82	0.86	0.83

N= 368.

Table 3 contains the overall questionnaire mean scores and individual dimension mean scores by all respondents participating in the study. Based on the compilation of means for all respondents to the questionnaire, the overall mean score is (M=3.50). Table 3 displays mean scores for individual dimension ranging from the lowest rated dimension (M=3.47) for 'Managing the Instructional Program' to the highest rated dimension (M=3.60) for 'Creating School Mission'. Table 3 shows that the Omani teachers gave medium mean scores overall and in all three dimensions of the questionnaire. This finding is in fact consistent with a number of studies conducted in the area of instructional leadership such as Poovatanikul, Taraseina, and Hallinger & Lee [15,16]. For example, Hallinger & Lee [15] found that the overall profile of 1195 primary

and secondary school principals suggested a moderate level of engagement in two dimensions: 'Creating a School Mission' and 'Developing a Positive School Learning Climate', and a lower level of activity on the dimension: 'Managing the Instructional Program'. Moreover, in a more recent study by Hallinger & Lee [16], Thai principals placed significantly greater emphasis on their role in defining school mission and promoting a positive school learning climate than to managing instructional program. Finding of the current study are significant because they indicate that school teachers in Oman, feel that their school principals need more training to acquire the skills of instructional leadership.

To address the second question, SPSS software was utilized to perform T-Test, the findings reported in Table 4.

Table 4. T-tests for PIMRS by Gender

PIMRS Dimensions	Male teachers		Female teachers		T- Value	Df	P
	M	SD	M	SD			
Creating a School Mission	3.52	0.79	3.69	0.85	-2.00	366	0.04**
Managing the Instructional Program	3.42	0.81	3.53	0.92	-1.28	366	0.20
Developing a Positive School Learning Climate	3.45	0.75	3.50	0.91	-0.59	366	0.56

Note: ** Significant at 0.01.

Table 4 shows that the (T) value is statistically significant in only the first dimension 'Creating a School Mission' in favor of female teachers, while there were no statistically significant differences between male and female teachers regarding the second and third

dimensions 'Managing the Instructional Program' and 'Developing a Positive School Learning Climate' of the PIMRS. This finding ppartially consistent with a historical trend of research findings which suggest that female

principal's trend, on average, to be more active instructional leaders ([20], p.140).

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore Omani teachers' perceptions of their principals' instructional leadership practices, and examine the impact of gender on these perceptions. The statistical analysis of the data revealed that the teachers perceived a moderate level of instructional leadership as practiced by their principals. The results also indicated that the most practiced dimension of instructional leadership as perceived by the teachers was "Creating a school mission", while the least practiced dimension was "Managing the instructional program". Statistically significant differences were found between male and female teachers regarding their perceptions of the level of instructional leadership in only one dimension (Creating a school mission). The differences were in favor of female teachers.

The findings of this study indicate the need for Omani principals to be trained in instructional leadership, especially in the field of managing instructional programs in their schools. This is particularly important when we consider the current initiatives taken by the Ministry of Education to develop the education system and improve its quality. Prominent among these initiatives is the growing emphasis placed on decentralization and the consequent interest in developing new leadership skills required to achieve this goal at the school level. Developing Omani principals' instructional leadership skills is at the heart of this move. Acquiring such skills is expected to enable the principals to implement school reforms related to improving students' learning environment, thus leading to the ultimate goal of enhancing the learning of Omani students.

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