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Leadership Development in Saudi Arabia: Impact of the Tatweer Programme

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the Tatweer programme on leadership development practices in Saudi Arabia. Data were collected from two schools that participated in the Tatweer programme. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants, including junior teachers, senior teachers and principals. The results indicate that the Tatweer programme supports the Saudi Ministry of Education's objective to decentralise the educational system and has contributed to enhancing the leadership skills of the participating schools. However, the Tatweer programme's selective participation system creates a significant divide between Tatweer and non-Tatweer schools, depriving the latter of this opportunity to participate in school leadership development. The findings of the study also suggest that the Tatweer programme is not widely supported by Tatweer school teachers, reducing the impact of the initiative.

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Introduction

Leadership is the process of influencing and creating a common vision based on clearly established and espoused norms and beliefs (Bush, 2007). The leading global trends in leadership preparation and development include a strive towards centralised planning and quality assurance but decentralised provision and implementation (Huber & Schneider, 2022). Formal learning is increasingly complemented by collegial support in the form of peer coaching of professional learning communities (Haiyan & Walker, 2021; Huber & Schneider, 2022), as well as mentorship and leadership experience, which help achieve socialisation and identity formation (Crow, 2006). It is recognised that context-specific and experiential learning are also critical to ensuring that leaders are effective at instituting and managing specific change in their workplaces (Aas, 2016; Daniëls et al., 2019).

Leadership development is inherently tied to the unique organisational context and seeks to empower leaders to effectively embrace the opportunities and address the challenges that it offers (Adirdag & Mujis, 2023). Leadership development in schools also involves career-long, in-service boundary work such as aspiring and existing leaders questioning their practices, engaging in meaningful self-reflection, and sharing expertise, which boosts their leadership skills and competencies (Jensen, 2022). The role of mentoring, coaching and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), to boost school

leaders' potential is also well-recognised (Harris & Jones, 2023). Existing leadership development programmes are increasingly focused on practical issues, such as leading student learning, organisational transformation, finance and budgeting, curriculum, administration, and teamwork (Lipscombe et al., 2024).

The importance of leadership development in the context of school effectiveness and educational reform can hardly be overestimated. Research establishes a direct link between leadership and organisational performance, (as reflected in teaching quality and student achievement (Harris & Jones, 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021). School leaders must continuously commit to professional development to meet national reform requirements, where expectations often conflict with daily realities (Alridge & McLure, 2024). Leadership development is important to enable and empower school leaders to balance internal and external accountability and move school practices and processes towards local goals that are nevertheless constructed within national general aims (Postholm, 2019).

Context

Within the context of Saudi Arabia, school leadership continues to face various challenges, reflecting deep-seated problems in the educational system (Ahmed & Al-Dhuwaihi, 2020; Hammad & Shah, 2018). These include the prevalent culture and norms in schools, hierarchical decision-making, rigid organisational structures, and the limited involvement of teachers in decision-making (Alqahtani et al., 2020). The Saudi educational system is also very centralised, and power is focused in the hands of principals, with teachers possessing limited decision-making leverage (Meemar, 2018). According to Algarni and Male (2015), leadership in Saudi schools is seen as the responsibility of

one individual, the principal. They add that this implies maintenance, rather than development, and management rather than leadership (Algarni & Male, 2015). Leadership development within Saudi schools, which are gender-segregated, requires changing the organisational culture in terms of teaching and learning and providing greater autonomy for educational leaders to develop pedagogical leadership (Palaiologou et al., 2015).

King Abdullah's Education Development Project, also referred to as the Tatweer project (which is translated from Arabic as "just reform"), is one of the most important steps towards modernising and improving school leadership in Saudi Arabia. Tatweer's goals align with the broader Vision 2030 – an ambitious governmental agenda seeking to modernise and diversify the Saudi economy and society and make the country more competitive on an international scale (Allmankrah, 2020). Given that Vision 2030's goal is to create a dynamic and diverse economy and generate more employment opportunities for young Saudis, educational reforms such as Tatweer play a particularly important role by aligning the educational system with actual economic needs (Abdullateef et al., 2023). Launched in 2007, the project is run independently from the Ministry of Education by the Education Development Holding Company; it aims to empower the provinces by developing province-wide development plans (Alabdulaziz, 2019; Al-Essa, 2010). The Tatweer project aims to ensure that all students of public education are equipped with the essential skills to contribute towards a progressively globalised society and to engage with the intricate and numerous challenges which globalisation generates, while preserving the principles and beliefs underpinning Saudi society (Al-Essa, 2010). The reform is seen as an attempt to introduce a less centralised model of education, which

might then provide the potential for leadership development, with greater autonomy for those leaders (Alyami, 2014). Specifically, Tatweer recommends forming so-called "Excellence Teams," which consist of the school community and external community members who are expected to work collaboratively to set individual targets and define the unique mission and vision for each school (Alyami & Floyd, 2019).

The Tatweer programme seeks to provide professional development for educational leaders, managers, and all school staff (Meemar, 2018). The programme was also designed to allow for more shared and distributed day-to-day leadership in schools (Alyami & Floyd, 2019). Almudarra (2017) and Alnasser (2019) claim that the new qualification standards brought by Tatweer were designed to ensure that only the most capable and skilled candidates can become school principals. Yet, evidence suggests that its outcomes in terms of leadership development have been moderate. Leadership styles, workload pressure, administrative climate, and personal relationships may prevent educators from pursuing professional growth (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Diaz & Cruz, 2022; Ghamrawi & Al-Jammal, 2013; Heffernan, 2021; Perrone et al., 2019). Alenezi (2016) adds that staff resistance also plays a role, with teachers contemplating leaving schools rather than fundamentally changing their practices. Much criticism has been voiced regarding the position of teachers and school administration, which has not changed significantly since the introduction of Tatweer (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2019; Elyas & Al-Ghamdi, 2018). Allmnakrah and Evers (2019) suggest that policymakers' inability to involve educators in the process of programme development has been one of the main reasons for the lack of significant progress. In contrast, Alyami and Floyd (2019) found some major breakthroughs in

distributing leadership and decision-making responsibilities in female-led schools in Saudi Arabia. This discrepancy in findings may be due to local, school-level and gender-based variations in Tatweer implementation.

Research Gap, Objectives and Questions

The Saudi government's Tatweer programme marks a distinct policy orientation toward decentralisation and leadership development, demonstrating growing policy recognition of the importance of leadership in quality education. It seeks to provide professional development for school principals, administrators, and all school staff, including teachers (Alyami & Floyd, 2019; Meemar, 2018). However, most research on the Tatweer program focuses on the technological initiatives instituted in Saudi classrooms (Alghamdi & Holland, 2020; Alturkostany & Iinuma, 2018), but the leadership development aspect is usually neglected. The available research seems to suggest that school leadership has been moderately improved with the implementation of Tatweer (Elyas & Al-Ghamdi, 2018), but evidence so far is scarce (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2019). Newer studies (Alharbi, 2021; Alnasser, 2023) about the evolution of school leadership practice in Saudi Arabia largely focus on the challenges that efficient Tatweer implementation has faced due to rigid hierarchical norms, concentrated decision-making power and lack of development incentives. A notable knowledge gap is observed in regard to Saudi educators' perceptions of Tatweer leadership development, with existing research remaining too limited and insufficient to measure the effect of the programme from their perspective (Alyami & Floyd, 2019; Ibrahem, 2022). This is a significant omission considering the fact that they are the key stakeholders and can offer unique, context-specific insight into the programme's influence.

The purpose of the present study is to expand the existing knowledge on Tatweer effects by examining educators' perceptions and experiences. Specifically, it aims to determine whether and how, in their opinion, Tatweer supports leadership development, empowers teachers, and promotes the autonomy and independence of school leaders in Saudi Arabia. In this way, the study sought to appraise whether the original idea of transforming the very core of the Saudi educational framework through the implementation of more decentralised methods of governance and by equipping teachers and principals alike with the proper tools for their career growth as leaders has been implemented in practice. The following research questions guided this study:

1. According to teachers and principals, how is leadership development pursued in boys' secondary schools in Najran, Saudi Arabia?
2. What is the role of networking and socialisation in this process?
3. Does Tatweer benefit Saudi educators by building their leadership skills, capabilities, and self-perception?
4. What challenges do Saudi educators face when participating in the Tatweer leadership development initiative, and what barriers to successful implementation does this programme face?

Theorising Leadership Preparation: Identity and Socialisation

This study used Crow's (2006) and Crow et al.'s (2017) socialisation and identity model as a theoretical framework. Understanding the context within which leadership develops and fully understanding their roles

and expectations can contribute towards developing a stronger professional identity as school leaders (Lumby & English, 2009). Therefore, in evaluating leadership development, it is important to address how the individual identities of leaders may be transformed via socialisation – a process of learning a new role, which can occur in both pre-service and in-service stages (the latter may be referred to as organisational socialisation) (Crow, 2007). Bengtson (2014) emphasises that socialisation is not a single event that occurs within a limited period. Leaders may start this process well before becoming school principals and may continue to experience it as they prepare to adopt a new role (Bengtson, 2014).

Socialisation activities provide an opportunity for teachers to transform their identity by improving their skills and capabilities, as well as their self-perception. Bush (2018) states that embracing the role of a principal includes three stages of socialisation. First, aspiring leaders need professional socialisation, defined as the process of developing a role-based identity with values, standards and symbols (Brody et al, 2010). Second, they need personal socialisation, which involves adjusting their identity from teacher to principal. Third, these leaders require a phase of organisational socialisation to learn to lead in a specific school (Bush, 2018). Heck (2003) clarifies that professional socialisation involves official preparation, where it happens, and the early stages of professional practice, whereas organisational socialisation offers the opportunity to become acquainted with the particular context where leadership is practised. Since leadership is a complex phenomenon, effective socialisation involves a role-making dimension, as opposed to a role-taking dimension, which can better prepare principals to deal with the complexity of leadership contexts

by enabling them to acquire the required characteristics to address the dynamic nature of school contexts (Lindle, 2004).

Gulf Literature on Leadership Preparation and Development

What constitutes effective leadership development in the Gulf countries remains unclear (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2018), as the notion of leadership faces the tension between 'Western' perspectives on school leadership and culture-specific local needs and realities (Al-Dabbagh & Assaad, 2010; Hammad and Shah, 2018; Hammad & Hallinger, 2017; Hammad & Alazmi, 2020). There is also an apparent gap in the current research on the transformation of leadership development practices. For example, a study by Hammad & Hallinger (2017) is sound and comprehensive, but is already outdated as major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing attempts at Westernising some aspects of Gulf education have brought rapid changes in the region.

Although the topic of school leadership in Saudi Arabia attracts much attention from policymakers (Alyami & Floyd, 2019; Bentahar et al., 2021; OECD, 2020) and scholars (Ahmed et al., 2022), empirical research on this issue is scarce, particularly when it comes to evaluating stakeholders' perceptions (Alharbi, 2021; Alnasser, 2023). Alharbi (2021), for instance, talks about learning opportunities in governmental schools but does not refer to Tatweer at all. Alnasser (2023) discusses how unfamiliar Saudi teachers are with the notion of leadership development but does not mention any government programmes at all. It is also known that in Saudi Arabia, the issues of identity and socialisation of principals arise from the strict centralisation of the educational system (Alghamdi & Abdullgawad, 2002; Almannie, 2015). As a consequence, the 'natural' socialisation process leads to a principal identity which complies with the

centralised and bureaucratic system and accepts that school principals and leaders can do little to change it.

More widely, leadership development in centralised educational systems, such as those in Saudi Arabia, has been subject to limited research (Bush et al, 2018). Greany (2018) states that balancing the demands of policy and practice can be challenging as the system is subject to political demands and changes, which can compromise leaders' roles and potential impacts. The development of the professional identity of school principals is problematic as they receive little or no leadership training before assuming their roles as school leaders, affecting their potential role as visionary leaders (Miqdadi et al., 2014). Inadequate or absent school leadership preparation affects the socialisation process of school principals as they are not familiar with the school's prevalent culture and the demands of the role. This may restrict the development of school improvement initiatives (Alnasser, 2019).

Karami-Akkary and Hammad (2019) point to the challenges facing Arab educational leadership and management scholars in building a culturally sensitive knowledge base. Research on school principals is needed to understand how these professionals are prepared and empowered, how effective they are at their jobs, what challenges they encounter, and how to support them (Hammad & Alazmi, 2020). Research on the Gulf states is also required to balance the existing dominance of Western-based studies and to create a corpus of knowledge that could be applied in non-Western settings (Hammad & Alazmi, 2020; Hammad & Al-Harthi, 2021). Karami-Akkary and Hammad (2019) analyse international trends but they do not account for the local cultural context. Hammad and Alazmi (2020) contribute to the existing literature through their insightful cross-analysis of three

Gulf countries but, like many other studies on the topic, engage in systematic reviews as primary data appears to be lacking. The present research aimed to address these gaps by understanding the perspectives of teachers and school leaders on how leadership is developed and implemented in Saudi schools and to what extent the Tatweer programme has provided teachers and principals with new opportunities for leadership development.

Methodology

Research Design

A dual case study design was employed in this study to provide a contrast between individual school settings, create depth, and understand leadership development without losing the individuality that single case studies provide (Adams et al., 2022; Bassey, 2012). Another benefit of employing a dual case study approach is that it provides potential for the analytical generalisation of data, thus enhancing the external validity of the results (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The selected schools are representative of the Saudi educational system and the state of the leadership development initiatives at average Saudi schools, which is why they were chosen. Specifically, school A has 25 teachers and 406 students, whereas school B also has 25 teachers and 364 students. Considering that both case study schools have the same number of teachers, cross-case comparison and analysis were much facilitated and led to more representative and generalisable findings. Furthermore, the Tatweer programme has been implemented at those schools for a period of at least three years, which allowed the researcher to study the long-term impact of this initiative upon the state of leadership development and thus gain more reliable findings which have stood the test of time. As the Tatweer programme

encompasses a wide array of schools based on geographic location, size and state of resources and leadership practices, focusing on small-to-medium-sized schools provided more in-depth findings, especially since the majority of the available literature on the subject focuses on larger institutions. Teachers at small- to medium-sized schools in Saudi Arabia do not have the same level of access to leadership training courses or opportunities. Hence, by focusing upon these two schools, the researcher was able to extract more authentic findings because the impact of the Tatweer programme upon leadership development can be studied in relative isolation from similar initiatives.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted for this study because they combine the strengths of both structured and unstructured interviews and thus transcend some of their limitations (Coleman, 2012; Scott, 2012). According to Robson and McCartan (2016), semi-structured interviews have an interview guide that is predefined but composed of open-ended questions whose sequence can be amended based on respondents' answers. Semi-structured interviews can also include probes and prompts, such as repeating the interviewee's words, outlining the main concept or communicating interest with verbal agreement (Kallio et al., 2016). Creswell (2014) states that the inclusion of an interview schedule allows the researcher to understand the respondents' answers better and to clarify potential ambiguities, especially in cases where the same idea is understood differently by the researcher and the participant. Furthermore, by offering a more flexible structure, such interviews support researchers' efforts in building rapport with the participants (Bryman, 2012).

The interviews were designed based on the existing literature and formulated research questions of this paper. They were all open-

ended, crafted under broader categories that the researcher aimed to explore at the beginning, such as "leadership development" and the "Tatweer programme". The semi-structured design allowed the researcher to follow up on new leads from respondents or to skip some questions if the interview flow allowed the researcher to do so. Each interview started with an introduction that gathered basic information from the respondent relevant to their role and experience at the school. It also provided a contextual understanding of why the interview is being conducted and what types of questions will be addressed. In addition, the first few questions sought to establish participants' understanding of leadership development and their perceptions of skills and capabilities required from school leaders. Then, the interview moved to more specific questions, such as "Do you know about 'Tatweer programmes'? If yes, what do you think about the role of 'Tatweer programmes' in developing school leaders?" and "How have your identity and role changed as a result of your transition from a teacher to a school head?" Thus, the interview guide helped collect contextually-specific data rooted in participants' personal experiences of leadership development as part of Tatweer initiatives.

Sampling

Two secondary schools were purposively chosen as case studies based on their participation in the Tatweer programme and because they were accessible to the researcher. Fourteen male participants were chosen through purposive sampling as most suitable for providing insightful data to answer the research questions (Saunders et al., 2012). The sampling process prioritised individuals with first-hand experience of the Tatweer training for school leadership, and the samples include both senior and junior teachers. In each school, the researcher selected the principal, three senior teachers, and three junior

teachers in order to delve into more diverse perspectives. The teachers chosen to participate in the study taught three disciplines central to the curriculum in Saudi Arabia: Arabic language, English language and mathematics. There is a widely shared perception in Saudi Arabia that teachers in languages and mathematics prefer the teaching profession over other career paths and are the most likely to remain and grow in these roles and, consequently, be interested in pursuing career and leadership development (Almulla, 2020; Hogg et al., 2023).

The inclusion criteria for the study were that each participant had at least two years' experience working as a teacher in Najran and was employed as either a junior or senior teacher or as a principal in one of the two case study Tatweer schools. The principals had the longest tenure on average, with the longest-serving one having 17 years (school B), whereas school A's principal had 10 years of experience. The senior teachers had served between 10-20 years in their positions, while the junior ones had served from 2 to 4 years. The justification for including senior and junior teachers in the sample was to assess if there are differences in their responses based on their different experiences of working in schools. While senior teachers had more opportunities to participate in leadership development interventions than junior teachers, the latter had an equally important role in this study. Their insights provided information about the recent and contemporary practices for leadership development in Saudi Arabia. The inclusion of these three groups also helps to triangulate their views about the nature of leadership in their schools.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in Arabic because it is the participants' native language, and they needed to be able to express their thoughts with ease. The raw data were translated into English and were cleaned

to avoid any repetitive or irrelevant information. The answers to the structured questions were collected in a manner easy for comparison. In contrast, the more unstructured data (responses to follow-up or new questions) were compiled together so that it could also be coded and either connected to the predetermined topics or planned out to uncover new ones.

Data Analysis

The collected data were manually coded (Basit, 2003), which consisted of the identification of key themes and patterns from the text, which were assigned specific codes. During the initial iteration, the researcher made use of note-taking and visual indicators next to collected raw data in order to highlight specific occurrences of common words. Using the inductive approach, repetitive keywords and phrases were given a specific label or code, such as "challenges", "barriers", "limitations" or "growth", "development", or "improvement". Following multiple iterations, multiple codes were grouped into broad themes; e.g., "mentoring", "learning opportunities", "informal communication" and "collaboration" were grouped into the high-level topic of "networking and socialisation". Some final examples of the broader themes include: leadership development in education, networking and socialisation, training and learning, all within the framework of the Tatweer programme. The researcher first analysed each school individually in order to identify key themes, patterns, and unique factors explaining the school leadership development. Following this, a comparative approach was used to systematically examine similarities and differences between the two case study schools. This involved coding the data from each case and organising it into categories. Throughout the process, careful attention was paid to both convergent and divergent findings, which allowed for a

nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study. This iterative method enabled the researcher to draw robust conclusions by triangulating evidence from multiple data sources.

The researcher's positionality as an insider affected the methodological choices and processes, so it is essential to make it explicit to increase the transparency of the study (Bukamal, 2022; Collins & McNulty, 2020). To begin with, the topic was selected because the researcher is a former school leader in the city of Najran, Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the researcher's insider status allowed them to immerse more easily within the community and context of the research topic (Wilson et al., 2022). The researcher's positionality as an insider also affected the choice of boys-only schools as the focus of the study, as the researcher had easier access to these schools than girls-only schools. While the insider status comes with certain advantages, it may also result in bias, so the researcher was careful to recruit participants with different backgrounds and professional histories to ensure that the findings reflect a variety of leadership development experiences that vary from those of the author (Yip, 2024). The researcher's insider status also resulted in some participants being more guarded when sharing their thoughts, complaints, and opinions, for fear that their negative opinions would be known to mutual acquaintances in the same professional networks. In some cases, interviewees assumed that the researcher had insider knowledge and thus did not elaborate further or presumably omitted important information. These challenges required a particularly sensitive approach to interviewing and the need to encourage interviewees to elicit detailed responses (Yip, 2024).

Findings

Findings from the two case-study schools are presented separately. Cross-case analysis will follow in the discussion section.

School A

School A participants who were familiar with the Tatweer programme positively evaluated the initiative and believed that the programme played a role in their personal and professional development. Some senior teachers from school A participated in different training and development opportunities that Tatweer has provided, and they argued that the Tatweer initiative offered a solid foundation for their professional development. Participant A1 states that *"Tatweer is a great project for developing schools and school principals".*

While the participants welcomed Tatweer and expressed their interest in the programme, only two participants, both senior teachers, had participated in the leadership development aspects of the programme. They cited aspects such as curriculum development, advocacy, leadership styles, and creating the school vision as being covered in their leadership development but mentioned nothing about teamwork or decision-making. It appears that the Tatweer programme lacks the desired outreach across teaching levels in terms of leadership development. This lack of outreach is vividly seen in participants' lack of awareness. Some participants were unfamiliar with the leadership development components of the Tatweer programme, suggesting that this component has not had a significant impact on many senior and junior teachers. Participant A2, for example, expressed a critical view of the Tatweer programme, highlighting that he was not fully familiar with the leadership development programmes that were carried out under Tatweer auspices and dismissing it as *"just a cliché, not based on*

any reliable studies," questioning its value and purpose. The comments from Participant A4 also suggest that Tatweer lacks visibility and may be limited to a select few schools. Although it was promoted as a means of leadership development in Saudi Arabia, most senior teacher participants were unaware of this dimension of the Tatweer programme despite their school being involved in the programme for three years.

The participants also believed that Tatweer became an umbrella programme under which multiple different initiatives were promoted, with leadership development receiving limited attention. Participant A2, for example, stated:

> *There are only one or two courses concerned with leadership development as a concept rather than with the development of school principals. Such courses are lacking, to tell the truth…. The main focus should be the development of school principals and teachers (A2).*

When discussing Tatweer, most participants recognised the programme's contribution to aspects other than leadership development, which further demonstrates that the primary focus of Tatweer is not perceived to be developing school leaders.

Participant A3, the principal of the school, criticised Tatweer's diminished funding, noting that it decreased the programme's effectiveness in regard to leadership preparation. He observes that Tatweer is not different from the other programmes that the Ministry championed in the past, which *"start strong and then weaken until they fade and end,"* leaving many aspiring educators without proper long-term support as they climb the leadership ladder. Participants A2 and A4 also raised concerns about the programme's long-term

sustainability, with A2 emphasising that the Tatweer programme, like many other Ministry-approved initiatives, often lacks a clear plan for how school leaders must be developed. According to A4, this results in teachers having no clear understanding of what they need to do to become leaders in their schools, *"what specific efforts need to be made in the long-run, what training and professional development to pursue."*

Participants expressed concern that the Tatweer selection process is not fully transparent and merit-based, which adversely affects teachers' willingness to pursue leadership development. Participant A4 critiqued the selection process for leadership training and subsequent distribution of posts, suggesting that in some cases, *"nominations are made by nepotism,"* leading to unqualified individuals being chosen for leadership roles. He also recommended that "younger teachers should be selected as school principals," implying that the leadership appointments prioritise established leaders over young ones. Interviews revealed that the selection process of Tatweer was not fair, leaving teachers without valuable professional development support and demotivating them from pursuing leadership development.

While some participants saw potential in the initiative, others criticised its implementation, sustainability, and relevance. School A participants still prioritised their self-development initiative over the training and development opportunities that Tatweer has provided. Participant A4 also further suggested that there was a heavy demand for teachers and school leaders to implement Tatweer programmes. He noted that both he and the school principal were doing *"everything humanly possible to implement the programmes,"* but they had only been able to complete about 60-70% of the required tasks due to time constraints. The expectation that already overburdened teachers and

principals should manage additional training responsibilities under Tatweer was another identified flaw in the programme's design and an indication that *'many of the programmes approved by the Ministry start strong and then weaken until they fade and end'* as A1 noted. Participant A4 suggested that non-teaching staff should deliver these courses, allowing teachers and principals to focus on their core responsibilities without being overwhelmed. Overall, the participants from school A had a strong belief that Tatweer can support leadership development practice in the school. Still, they recommended that the programme be significantly transformed to reduce its administrative burdens and to encourage more proactive participation from teachers.

School B

The Tatweer programme was generally well-received by school B participants for its ambition to modernise leadership development, but it also faced criticism regarding its implementation and long-term effectiveness. Participant B3 praised the programme for the way in which it *"attempts to change our mindset and our habits of work"* and *"connect us with other aspiring leaders."* In turn, B2 remarked that the programme was *"slowly developed"* and also *"implemented step by step, probably because it's difficult to force a new mindset"*. The experiences in change management provided through Tatweer were evaluated positively, as B2 and B7 believed that Tatweer had helped them to develop their leadership and managerial skills.

The principal (B4) has the most extensive knowledge of the programme, and he argued that it is *"the first step on our journey to developing a modern educational system that would be on a par with global standards"*. He was particularly well-disposed towards the idea of creating professional communities within schools; he believed that forging bonds between school principals and teachers facilitated

professional socialisation and the construction of leadership identities among aspiring educational leaders. B4, and two younger teachers (B1 and B5) also applauded the programme's attempt to instil values such as autonomy, creativity, trust and open communication, as well as enhancing self-motivation and decision-making capabilities, all of which are crucial for leadership identify formation. B6 also noted feeling *"closer to those making the decisions [...] I felt more empowered than before because I was directly speaking with my superior and could raise my problems [...] or voice my ideas".*

The positive effects of adopting the Tatweer programme on leadership development were also highlighted by B1, B6 and B2. B1 and B6, both junior members of the teacher team, liked the modernising ideas of the programme and emphasised how it could potentially make them better leaders, equipped to contribute to the goals of Vision 2030. B6 particularly appreciated that Tatweer *"promotes the idea that leaders should be raised through everyday practice, communication, observation and reflection,"* which aligns with the ideas of socialisation theory. B6 highlighted that they valued the approach whereby school teachers are motivated to strive for excellence through ongoing learning and be more vocal in expressing their ideas, which challenges the traditional distribution of duties within schools. According to B1 who shared this belief, *"when you choose an innovative approach, you always need leaders as the early adopters,"* adding that Tatweer promotes a sense of openness and creativity in young leaders. B6 praised the spirit of openness and cooperation that lay at the core of Tatweer's ideology and believed that *"working as a team, as a school, would not damage our leadership capabilities, but instead would allow us to learn from one another and strive together".*

Participants also reported some negative aspects of the Tatweer programme, including the lack of expected leadership development.

B2 and B3 remembered being involved in teacher training workshops as part of the programme, but *"there was this expectation that there would be a structure and continuity to the training, and then at one point, they suddenly stopped" (B3).* Some respondents also criticised the programme for not being very useful in practice. B4, for example, mentioned that the programme *"not always aligned with what school leaders have to deal with on a daily basis"*, adding that it was more theory-oriented than teachers would like. Similarly, B1 was very enthusiastic about the programme, having read about it before joining the school, but he was not very enthusiastic about its application:

> *It seems to me that the government and the schools are unable to practice what they preach. I am sure that the programme's potential is huge, but what I have seen is pieces of it scattered here and there, with no clear or coordinated plan for how teachers move to become leaders (B1).*

B2 argued that this reform was already outdated - *"not in its ideas, but in the way it is sent to us from the top"*. He proposed that the programme should be coordinated with all relevant stakeholders, all types of schools, involving teachers who had experience of Tatweer and were able to *"comment on its weaknesses and how these could be addressed"*. Nevertheless, most participants felt that the programme was fundamental in advancing their personal development goals and in providing them with leadership development opportunities they would not have accessed in other ways.

Some participants reported that the selection criteria for formal leadership programmes were not clearly understood, due to a lack of communication from the Ministry. B3 specifically said that:

> *The Ministry - and even many, many schools - are so out of touch with how we think and why we think this way. Actually, I believe that they don't understand the role of teachers as much as they misunderstand the role of leaders. And the bad news is that they're supposed to set examples for us as leaders [...] in their own right (B3)*

B2 believed that the criteria encompassed the level of professional and/or academic competence alongside formal qualifications and CVs. Still, he was unsure whether these were the primary benchmarks for selection. B7 also talked about *"amassed academic and professional experience"* as a very important factor when selecting potential participants for leadership development programmes. Other respondents, including B1 and B6, discussed terms such as *"creative leadership projects"* (B1) and *"openness to self-development" (B6)*, which suggested an emphasis on creativity and open-mindedness in leaders, as opposed to formal credentials.

Discussion

Data analysis led to the identification of three broad themes pertaining to both settings: (1) perceived effectiveness of Tatweer, (2) challenges and cultural considerations in Tatweer implementation and (3) identity and socialisation. They are discussed below.

Perceived effectiveness of Tatweer

Most participants in the two Tatweer schools expressed positive opinions of the initiative, noting its value in improving structure and processes at both schools, as well as expanding leadership development opportunities. Some of the interviewees from both schools were rather optimistic regarding the Tatweer effects, reporting that they felt empowered by the modernisation of school processes

(including those related to leadership development). These findings are supported by Aslam and Rawal (2019), who claim that providing autonomy and a clear purpose, fostering mastery of skills, and relatedness (or engagement) positively impact educators' motivation to excel in their job. These also foster a feeling of decision-making empowerment in individuals as well as belief in the meaningfulness of their role and work, which prepares them to be better and more effective leaders (Aslam & Rawal, 2019). The findings also align with a study of Tatweer's impacts in girls-only schools in Saudi Arabia, where this initiative led to increased motivation and empowerment among teachers (Alyami & Floyd, 2019).

However, there was a general sense among the participants that leadership development efforts under Tatweer could benefit from major improvements. Increased awareness about the programme is needed, as many educators seem to be unfamiliar with the concept and purposes of the programme, even when their schools are part of it. Moreover, school administrations were not unaware of the leadership training opportunities and often participated in Tatweer, or utilised Tatweer funds, for modernising classrooms and infrastructure, rather than investing in teachers' leadership development. These findings are consistent with the argument of Lukacs (2015), and Al-Shibani (2015), who ascribe the limited impact of the Tatweer project to policymakers' tendency of ignoring teachers' voices and being deaf to their day-to-day needs and leadership aspirations. Levinson et al. (2013) also reiterated that Saudi teachers are mostly seen as passive vessels instructed by reform planners on the exact steps to transform the school system without a proper understanding of those efforts or a commitment to them. Thus, the findings of this research seem to indicate that the Tatweer initiative has not been largely successful in

creating a sense of decentralised power structure where leadership development can thrive, which aligns with conclusions from existing studies (Meemar, 2018).

Teachers and principals participating in this study often described Tatweer as overly ambitious, implemented in a piecemeal fashion, or no longer relevant to their leadership development needs. As a result, educators preferred training created by their school rather than that provided in a top-down manner. These findings reiterate the criticism in previously published research (Alharbi, 2021; Alnasser, 2023). Some Tatweer participants lost their enthusiasm for the programme, which implies that it might be outdated and needs to be reformed or replaced – an idea shared by some scholars as well (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2019). The programme was not perceived to have been implemented holistically and does not focus as much on leadership development as had been initially marketed, which leads to educators' disenchantment and dissatisfaction with a lack of a coordinated plan and structure. Previous research confirms that a lack of a clear plan or strategy, coordinated with principals and teachers before being implemented, negatively impacts their perceptions and their motivation (Alyami, 2014). Moreover, some of the challenges identified more than ten years ago by Wiseman et al. (2013), such as the disconnect between the Tatweer's teaching reform goals and available resources and training, as well as the lack of organisational and community legitimacy, persist to this day.

Challenges and cultural considerations in Tatweer implementation

Some participants complained about the Westernised nature of the planned programmes, which were perceived not to be consistent with Saudi culture. As Almoaibed and Keating (2025) and Mirghani (2020) also note, transferring foreign methodologies and strategies to an

entirely different cultural context, if not adapted or transformed to fit the Saudi context, may be unsuccessful. Care should be taken when applying them to a different culture, as this may result in a dysfunctional environment for students and teachers (G-Mrabet, 2012). Similarly, Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod (2019) argue that GGC states such as Saudi Arabia need to move away from uncritical educational borrowing and adapt borrowed approaches more sensitively to incorporate important cultural elements. These findings are of strategic importance for educational leadership development in Saudi Arabia, as leaders must balance authentic Arabic values with the country's pursuit of modernisation and globalisation, while also addressing the need for educational quality that is culturally relevant.

Some participants also recognised the bureaucratic burdens, which were not always in line with the leadership development strategy espoused by Tatweer, although the programme supposedly aims at granting greater autonomy to teachers. As noted by AlKarni (2009), principals feel overburdened by administrative work, which does not provide them with sufficient time to support educational leadership programmes. Despite the professed autonomy underpinning Tatweer, the Saudi educational system remains highly bureaucratic, and this limits the powers of principals to foster decentralisation and autonomous decision-making at their schools. This, in turn, leads to greater disenchantment with Tatweer and similar reforms that have followed its implementation, as espoused by Alsalih (2010).

The study identified the presence of favouritism and the lack of transparency in applying the selection criteria for Tatweer participation as another major challenge. These findings support the conclusions of the OECD (2020) report, which portrayed the Saudi educational system as creating inequalities among schools. This can

negatively influence leadership development opportunities and practices, as high-performing schools are selected more often than their low-performing counterparts for evaluation and training (OECD, 2020). This culture of favouritism between schools may reduce employee motivation to commit to leadership development and increase withdrawal and turnover rates, as also found by Diaz and Cruz (2022).

Identity and socialisation

The findings from the two schools support some aspects of the identity and socialisation theory. Specifically, the theory posits that anticipatory, professional and organisational socialisation is vital to creating a positive and influential identity of the school leader (Crow, 2006; Crow et al., 2017). In the case studies, school A provides evidence for this argument as it emphasises how networking and adjusting to the organisational culture shape the identity-creation process and influence both teachers and principals. In the case of school B, informal mentorship initiatives conducted by senior leaders and teachers to enhance learning for younger staff successfully build leadership skills through socialisation. Since the Tatweer framework emphasises professional growth, especially leadership development, through formal and informal networking, training and learning opportunities, it is highly likely that the positive changes experienced by current and aspiring leaders at both schools have been impacted by Tatweer's core message and purpose.

In a similar manner, at both schools, peer networking and support facilitated leadership transitions and produced more learning opportunities, which is aligned with the theory (Coppe, 2024; Robertson, 2017). In other words, networking helped build mutual trust within the school, whereas open communication and open-loop

feedback strengthened leadership development, similar to how contextual learning helps create a leader's identity (Brauckmann et al., 2020). In line with the theoretical findings (Ho & Kang, 2022), some hierarchical barriers can hinder younger staff members at school B from communicating with and challenging authority figures, which in turn prevents them from becoming more effective leaders. At school A, there was a noted lack of organisational support for leadership transfers and development, which also reduced their efficiency and growth (Huber & Pruitt, 2024). This is one of the key challenges that Tatweer was created to address - namely, providing support for leadership identity-creation and contextual learning within schools. These examples demonstrate that, despite the influence of Tatweer, both schools have made notable progress in decentralisation and leadership development; however, they still need to address inherent cultural and organisational barriers.

The findings also challenge some of the narratives expressed in the academic literature on the subject of leadership identity and socialisation. In particular, the theory emphasises organisational structures but does not account for the power of the school community (Crow, 2006; Crow et al., 2017), whereas at school A, the leaders were well-acquainted with the local community and its culture. This, in turn, helped them to adapt and grow as leaders, possibly as much as professional socialisation does. In addition, existing research does not present in great depth the differences and opposition between traditional and modern leadership (Jerdborg, 2022; Polat et al., 2019). However, at school B, this was one of the most dynamic processes which shaped the leadership identities of younger teachers despite the power of hierarchical dominance and the traditional culture of power. This goes beyond the limitations of socialisation as a process and hints

that hierarchical dynamics and generational differences also play a critical role in creating and shaping new leaders (Polat et al., 2019; Ruiz et al., 2021). This is one of the most important barriers that hinders more in-depth implementation of the Tatweer programme - the cultural obstacles to decentralisation in a structure built upon hierarchical and rigid power dynamics. Consequently, this might imply that Tatweer's impact upon leadership development will likely remain limited until this aspect has been addressed in its scope and implementation.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine how leadership development is currently pursued in selected boys' secondary schools in Najran, Saudi Arabia, what role networking and socialisation play in this process and whether educators benefit from it through enhanced leadership skills, capabilities, and self-perception. It also aimed to identify challenges that Saudi educators face when participating in the Tatweer leadership development initiative. The findings indicate that the Tatweer programme expanded leadership development opportunities while also enriching educators' understanding of the different leadership styles that could be applied in the classroom and beyond, developing their problem-solving and decision-making capacities and facilitating collaboration and knowledge transfer. Yet, senior teachers were more involved in the programme than junior teachers; they were not only adequately briefed about the programme's scope and the opportunities but also motivated to think 'outside the box' and introduce new approaches to teaching and learning. Tatweer schools' principals considered the programme to be an important instrument for leadership empowerment, and for facilitating the creation of professional communities in schools, while also recognising that the

programme encouraged the professional socialisation of teachers and the exchange of good practices.

Leadership development opportunities provided under the auspices of the Tatweer programme seem to be patchy, incomplete, and available only for certain schools. There are concerns that the schools participating in the programme are chosen haphazardly and perhaps also in a manner that was not transparent to everyone. The findings also show that leadership development training conducted within the Tatweer programme focuses mostly on developing participants' subject-specific knowledge rather than developing leadership skills. There are also concerns that leadership development is marginalised compared to other initiatives, such as those focusing on technological upgrades.

Limitations

The Saudi education system is gender-segregated, so the findings from this study of leadership development in boys' schools cannot be generalised to all schools. Further interview-based research in girls' schools would be required to examine leadership development for Saudi Arabian female teachers.

The research focused on Tatweer schools, so the findings cannot be generalised to other public schools or to the many international schools operating in Saudi Arabia. A further limitation relates to the case-study methodology, which provides in-depth analysis of leadership development in the targeted schools, but the findings cannot be generalised to all schools. Survey research would be required to address this gap.

Recommendations

Several reforms are proposed to improve the outreach and impact of Tatweer. Policymakers and principals should consider how they can popularise the current opportunities for leadership development for teachers. Increasing awareness among junior and senior teachers is likely to spur their interest and help training managers to identify training needs. Possible strategies that can be used include organising professional development days and seminars in the schools and creating online resources for the popularisation of Tatweer and other school leadership development programmes. Involving teachers in co-designing and delivering leadership development courses will create opportunities for teachers' engagement with the leadership development curriculum, enhancing the outreach of such programmes. Selection criteria for schools and individual participants should also be made transparent and should enforce equality. The same is true for addressing nepotism claims in the appointment of principals – this process should be made meritocratic to build leaders' legitimacy. Schools must design and disseminate clear selection criteria known to every teacher so that all appointment and promotion decisions are transparent.

The Saudi Ministry of Education should collaborate with both principals and with a wider decision-making group, including teachers, in order to develop incentives for participants to join in leadership development initiatives of their own volition. These types of incentives could take the form of extrinsic ones, such as performance-based bonuses or salary increases, or more intrinsic ones, such as self-development and future career growth. This, in turn, could motivate teachers to remain and grow in their current career path if they believe in the potential that they will achieve both financially and

professionally. Towards this end, the Ministry should properly allocate budgets for leadership development and aim to create an organisational culture of continuous achievement, learning and growth. Additionally, splitting up Tatweer into several programmes, each with a separate budget, personnel and resources, would help the Ministry of Education to develop more focused initiatives for leadership development. Finally, differentiating between Tatweer initiatives can help to ensure that enough resources are spent on leadership activities. Ultimately, prioritising leadership development within the Tatweer programme is essential for fostering a well-rounded educational environment that empowers both educators and students.

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