

# Awakening a sleeping giant in the Arabia gulf: A need for teacher leadership in hierarchical leadership structures

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## Abstract

This article introduces the concept of teacher leadership in the Saudi EFL context. Teacher leadership is a commonly used term in the western school contexts which aims to empower teachers by making them part of a decision-making stream and giving them opportunities to exercise leadership and influence colleagues, students and school administrators in a bid to improve instructional practices. As Saudi educational institutions mainly operate in rigid hierarchical structures, teachers in leadership roles have limited or no powers to influence change. Keeping in view the significant role of teacher leaders in organizational effectiveness, this paper highlights the importance of teacher leadership in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) of a Saudi Arabian university which has a typical top-down management model. It explains the nature of leadership practices in Saudi higher education institutions and how they may hinder the process of teacher leadership in EFL institutes. The paper also suggests ways that can help the top leadership to foster teacher leadership practices in the Saudi EFL context.

**Keywords:** Academic leadership, hierarchical leadership structures, teacher leadership, teacher empowerment, top-down management model

## 1 Introduction

The 21st century educational institutions face enormous demands from various stakeholders to raise their performances, enhance learning outcomes and meet global challenges. Administrators, educational leaders and teachers encounter pressure and accountability measures for their executions of roles and responsibilities that ensue organizational effectiveness. In more recent times, education systems have adopted flexible approaches to leadership practices by empowering teachers to take on leadership roles and contribute to organizational success. In this direction, teacher leadership is one of the most emerging form of educational leadership model which allows teachers to assume leadership roles, influence their peers, implement institutional policies and play a positive and active role in the operations of their schools. Since teachers possess firsthand experience of pedagogical practices, curriculum delivery and policy implementation, their role becomes vital in the process of executing plans and materializing goals in their schools. Teachers as leaders operate in roles,

such as resource providers, instructional specialists, curriculum specialists, classroom supporters, learning facilitators, professional development (PD) specialist, mentors, school team leaders, and data coaches (Harrison & Killion, 2007). These varied roles in a school context help teachers shape a new professional identity as teacher leaders. This new identity allows them to go beyond the classroom premises and have their say in institutional decisions, contribute to the development of their colleagues, influence top leadership and impact learners' performances. Despite variation in roles and functions of teacher leaders in their organization-specific responsibilities, the main goals of teacher leadership remain unchanged that are to model top-notch practices, exercise influence and promote collaborations in their schools.

The concept of teacher leadership is conspicuous in Western contexts; however, it is hardly used in Arab world in general and Saudi EFL institutes in specific. This may be due to the inherited management models being applied in schools, colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia. Although there is emphasis on teacher leadership in educational settings in various contexts, it may be difficult to realize the notion in more traditional top-down management models, such as Saudi EFL context in which teachers lack autonomy and voice in the decision-making process. Such hierarchical leadership structures with less flexible management approaches are evident in the Arab world where educational institutions are controlled through a top-down authority, restricting teachers to classrooms and limiting their leadership capacity to managerial roles. In Saudi Arabia, this rigid model leaves no space for teachers and middle-level leaders/teacher leaders to become part of the decision-making stream or give their opinions on institutional policies.

## **2 Academic Leadership in Saudi Educational Institutes**

As language instructors in Saudi Arabian university, we have had the chance of being part of a top-down management institute for ten years. What we have observed is that Saudi culture is largely the combination of Islamic (religious) and tribal values or social traditions, which influence people's beliefs and dispositions at their personal, social and professional levels. The strict social codes of the Bedouin tribes, together with historically influenced patriarchal family structures, are the key features of Saudi society. These codes influence social interaction which manifests a strong gender segregation sanctioned by the government and society. To ensure gender segregation, there are separate schools, universities and banks for women across the Kingdom (Ezzi, Teel & Izzo, 2014).

The influence of tribal Bedouin culture can be evidently found in the functioning of educational organizations that are vested in hierarchical management models. The education system in Saudi Arabia is made to support and sustain gender divisions and power relations through gender-segregated educational institutions and differentiated curriculums for male and female students. In academic institutions and professional communities, managerial and pedagogical practices are influenced by the cultural, tribal and political norms and values of Saudi society (Al Lily, 2014).

As language instructors, we have been working at the English Language Institute (ELI), which caters to the learning needs of more than 10,000 English language learners by 250 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. ELI has a traditional top-down management model which is managed by the Dean and six Vice-Deans, who oversee the administrative and academic operations in the institute. The organizational structure of the Institute reflects the Bedouin patriarchal society of Saudi Arabia as the Dean of the Institute must always be a male who is responsible for both the men's and women's campuses. The ELI is supervised by the ELI Council and Expert House whose membership is composed of the Dean, the Vice-Deans, and three guest faculty members, all Saudi nationals. The ELI Council's decisions must be approved by the university president prior to official implementation. In the middle of the hierarchy, EFL teachers are assigned leadership roles who connect the top leadership and teachers. However, these middle-level leaders who are primarily classroom teachers have no voice in the decision-making process; rather their main job is to ensure the smooth implementation of the policies. In a nutshell, these teacher leaders go by the script that comes from the top leadership and they have no right to adapt or modify it.

In an organization, which practices top-down leadership, collaboration at individual and group level becomes a challenging task. For instance, a deep-rooted top-down management model leads to a bureaucracy that impacts middle-level leadership in the Institute. The teacher leaders' jobs become mechanical and robotic in nature which mainly aim to ensure control and accountability in the institute. As a result, they face resentment from fellow teachers while implementing institutional procedures. The bureaucratic form of leadership practice at the top level aims to achieve organizational objectives through a managerialism that compromises middle-level leaders' or teacher leaders' autonomy, professional support and their right to have a say in professional matters of their institutions. Consequently, teacher leaders find it hard to bridge the gap between top management and fellow teachers.

### 3. The Establishment of the Academic Leadership Centre (ALC)

The Higher Education Ministry of Saudi Arabia has taken various steps to improve the quality of education in state-owned universities across the kingdom. The establishment of ALC is one giant step in this direction. Al-Swailem and Elliott (2013) state that, in light of the variety of challenges faced by the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia, academic leadership plays a crucial role in achieving the stated aims and objectives of the ministry. Due to this pivotal role, academic leadership is supported through leadership development and training programmes at the universities. For this purpose, the ALC offers advice to academic leaders and develops the leadership skills and competence essential for leadership roles in state owned universities. However, there is a serious lack of empirical research on its achievements and contributions to academic leadership development, which could be a researcher's future endeavour.

ALC aims to be a leading organization in the region for leadership development in higher education institutions. It offers a range of professional training workshops and development programmes to institutional leaders and administrators to assist them with their leadership roles in higher education institutions across the kingdom (Al-Swailem & Elliott, 2013). ALC has five main goals:

1. *To contribute to the development and spread of a leadership culture that fosters innovation, success and excellence*
2. *To advance effective leadership behaviours and practices through services and programmes on matters of higher education leadership and management*
3. *To assist in decision-making through information and diagnostic assessments of the state of leadership and management*
4. *To facilitate leadership development and succession planning in higher education institutions*
5. *To be responsive to the evolving and changing leadership challenges and needs of the stakeholders (Al-Swailem & Elliott, 2013, p. 44.)*

Al-Swailem and Elliott (2013) explain that ALC conducts research projects focusing on leadership practices in Saudi universities. It organises conferences and symposia and offers participants an opportunity to share experiences, discuss leadership practices and exchange knowledge and information on leadership theories. Furthermore, the centre has established a professional network of internationally recognised experts, educators, trainers and partner institutions. These shared practices aim to provide top-notch professional assistance and

learning opportunities to further improve leadership practices. Despite the research efforts, studies on leadership development are scarce or probably not published in peer-reviewed journals. Although not referring to its key achievements so far, Al-Swailem and Elliott (2013) consider the ALC a promising project that will help in developing models of academic leadership development in Saudi Arabia.

However, ALC solely focuses on top leadership, i.e. presidents, vice presidents, deans, vice deans and non-academic administrators, and it completely disregards the crucial role middle-level leaders or teacher leaders play in the success of a higher education institute.

#### **4 The Nature of Teacher Leadership in Saudi EFL Institutes**

Teacher leadership is a novel concept in the Saudi EFL context and probably an inappropriate construct to be used in such hierarchical settings, as teacher leadership fosters collegiality, autonomy and professional support, largely missing in Saudi institutions. Despite being a non-existent notion in Saudi educational institutions in general and EFL institutes in specific, the leadership roles assigned to teachers show many similarities to those found in the US school context. The two kinds of teacher leadership roles, instructional and operational or (institutional) are mostly based on the teacher leaders' pedagogical expertise and credibility as ELT professionals, thus largely falling into the second wave of teacher leadership (Silva et al., 2000). In these roles teacher leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practices, particularly within their respective groups at the ELI. While heavy administrative workload and stern accountability measures restrict teacher leaders to more managerial roles, their leadership roles allow them to work collaboratively within their own groups. Collaboration stems from the tasks assigned to the group members who rely on each other to produce the expected outcomes and meet the expectations of the top management. The interdependency of teacher leaders can be accounted as the third wave of teacher leadership (Silva et al., 2000), which includes collaboration among the teacher leaders as a way of enhancing educational practices. This collectivism is also due to the teacher leaders' awareness of the inherited professional challenges of the bureaucratic structures of the ELI, which compel them to work together and cope with them professionally. However, despite the restrictions inherent in a system with a hierarchical leadership model, it has the effect of positively

influencing the teacher leaders' efficacy, which helps them with their planning and implementation of the institutional policies.

## 5. Fostering Teacher Leadership in Saudi EFL Institutes

Teacher leaders are reform agents who play a significant part in the process of policy implementation and organisational effectiveness, thus their leadership roles need to be recognised in hierarchical leadership structures, such as Saudi EFL institutes. To meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and achieve Vision 2030, the Higher Education Ministry of Saudi Arabia should awake the sleeping giant of teacher leadership in universities. As teacher leadership is not a known concept in this context and other terms, such as lead manager, academic coordinator are frequently used terms, I reckon the term teacher leadership will have implications for top management and teachers as it represents autonomy and ownership. Teachers leaders will take interest in their roles and help in influencing their colleagues and top leadership more positively. The leadership roles will become a means of improving their practices and developing their leadership skills and knowledge, a model that is synonymous to experiential learning.

The Saudi EFL context does not offer many opportunities to teachers to learn and develop their leadership skills. Middle-level leaders in academic roles often rely on their informal contextual learning, past experiences and reflective strategies. As a government policy, the ALC mainly focuses on top management, and teacher leaders are largely ignored, hence, the need for more context-specific training arises. Formal professional learning opportunities will support EFL teachers to become effective teacher leaders while working in higher education institutes.

Working in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is a common way of improving professional practice. However, due to the dominant bureaucratic structures and lack of participatory leadership practices at the ELI, teachers often fail to work in PLCs. Similarly, there is a sheer absence of formal PLCs in the EFL institutes; however, individuals taking responsibility for their own learning organize informal PLCs and work collaboratively to achieve organizational goals. Furthermore, interaction with other group members helps them improve their contextual and professional knowledge. Consulting senior colleagues and discussing issues in a collegial environment raise awareness of social, contextual and professional matters. As contextual knowledge is an important aspect of effective teacher

leadership, EFL teacher leaders from non-Arab contexts can acquire it through teamwork within the groups. Their acute awareness of the culture, people and the context will lead to their effectiveness as EFL teacher leaders.

As the ALC ignores the development of middle-level leaders or teacher leaders in higher education institutes and there is a lack of professional development opportunities, the few workshops offered to the EFL teacher leaders at the ELI are often generic, infrequent, non-context specific and thus ineffective. The trainers often lack contextual knowledge as imported materials, theories and practices contradict the ground realities of the Saudi EFL context. Hence, it is important for the top management to consider the professional development of EFL teacher leaders as an ongoing process to ensure sustained professional learning. Since leadership is a context-specific phenomenon, the local context, socio-cultural values and political norms should be taken into consideration by the trainers while preparing training material. The PD activities should be targeting the capacity building of the EFL teacher leaders, rather than exposing them to generic management theories. As novice and experienced teacher leaders often have different professional and academic backgrounds, their needs also vary, the trainers' continuous engagement with the context and with the trainees can help them understand the trainees' needs and assess the effectiveness of their PD courses and other formal activities.

To consider teacher leadership as an integral part of the ELI, top leadership should provide EFL teacher leaders with the opportunity to engage in learning experiences and transform the Institute into a learning organization. It should also create an environment of collegiality and collaboration among the teachers and teacher leaders to create more leadership opportunities. Finally, top leadership should support teacher leaders by incorporating the process of change into the professional development programmes. As ALC mainly trains top tier educational leaders in the EFL institutes, it should incorporate courses that involve teacher leadership development.

The facilitation and professional support from the top management may lead to more autonomous practices and add value to the work of teacher leaders in EFL institutes. Thus, top leadership can be a bit more flexible by allowing teacher leaders to have their say in the policy matters and become part of the decision-making process. They should recognise that the people in the organization are its source of greatest value and the key to its effectiveness. They should

create an environment of trust and appreciation as they are the foundation of effective relationships and therefore, significant for effective institutions.

## 6. Conclusion

Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia reflect the social, cultural and religious structures of its society that influence leadership practices at the top and middle-levels. In EFL institutes, it offers a unique and complex context for leadership which possesses the characteristics of the three teacher leadership waves by Silva, et al. (2000), commonly found in the US schools. In the Saudi EFL context, the managerial or operational leadership roles in hierarchical management model represent the first teacher leadership wave, whereas instructional leadership roles based on the EFL teachers' expertise are indicative of second leadership wave. The third wave is reflected in the teacher leaders' endeavor to work collaboratively in their respective units and groups. As EFL teacher leaders play a significant role in the integration of EFL institutes, more research is needed to awake the sleeping giant and explore to understand how teacher leadership practices impact learning and teaching in EFL institutes and what factors can further improve teacher leadership in Saudi higher education institutes and other countries in the Arabian Gulf.

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