PROBLEMS WHICH MAY CHALLENGE THE ABILITY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL HEAD TEACHERS IN THE CITY OF TABUK TO LEAD THEIR SCHOOLS PROFESSIONALLY

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the challenges which are facing head teachers of boys' secondary schools in Tabuk city in Saudi Arabia in terms of leading their school professionally. A study was conducted using a mixed methods approach, including a semi-structured interview with 10 head teachers. The other method used was a structured questionnaire survey of all secondary boys' school head teachers working in Tabuk city.

The findings are supported by a review of a wide range of literature and the researcher's personal experience of the Saudi educational context. A variety of recommendations are made based on various aspects of education discussed throughout the article. The key findings of the study were that the head teachers in secondary schools in Tabuk are facing some challenges which lead them to be unmotivated to continue their employment as head teachers, against a backdrop of a general weakness in the educational infrastructure. The recommendations concentrate principally on the need to give head teachers some autonomy in decision making to enable them to overcome their challenges. The study also explored other issues related to the Saudi educational context, such as how secondary school head teachers can become more effective leaders and managers in the current situation in which they are dominated by a centralised system.

Key words: challenges, school head teachers and leading professionally.

Introduction

Leadership is generally regarded as the key factor in making a difference to the success of schools and in promoting the learning of their students. With increasing pressure for a higher quality of secondary schools, the head teacher plays a vital role in creating an effective school environment. For example, in Uganda and across many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, head teachers are not sufficiently prepared for their role, with few professional improvement opportunities to supply individuals with the skills they require (Dejaeghere et al., 2008). Therefore, these countries face challenges within their schools to overcome these obstacles.

A number of UK researchers have focused on the idea that leadership is one of the most important aspects in determining whether an educational institution is successful or not (Riely and MacBeath, 1998; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992). However, to my knowledge, other countries such as Saudi Arabia have a lack of theoretical and experiential literature (school buildings, students, parents etc.). The reason for this could be that the Saudi educational context has failed to focus adequately on preparing head teachers, and the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has not placed enough emphasis on the head teacher's role.

The research discussed in this article was designed to answer the following questions:

- How effectively do secondary school head teachers in the city of Tabuk practise their roles and responsibilities?
- What challenges may secondary school head teachers in the city of Tabuk be faced with in regard to the school building, students and parents, teachers, educational supervision, the local community and role ambiguity?

Therefore, the main aims of this study included the following:

- To examine how effectively secondary school head teachers are carrying out their roles and responsibilities in their school.

- To identify the challenges they might be facing and which might be affecting their daily output level.

Literature review

It is important that we understand leadership and management as significant in educational institutions, as both are demanded in schools and educational institutions. Bush (2004) reveals that there has been a shift in the different definitions of management, and during the 1980s (and most of the 1990s) management was considered a broad concept, whilst in the late 90s, researchers returned to the former, narrower definitions of management. According to the National College for School Leadership NCSL (2003), "Management is policy implementation and running of current activities" (p. 10). Leadership, however, emphasises the creation of a clear vision for the school; therefore, a leader will look towards the future of the school rather than at the daily processes.

According to Alzaidi (2008), the context surrounding the headship position in Saudi Arabia has a number of features, such as a flat managerial structure and a centralised educational system. Therefore, the role of the head teacher could be considered more as that of an operational manager than that of an actual school leader. This has an effect on how they deal with the challenges they encounter in their day-to-day work.

Furthermore, Leithwood et al. (2008) put forward seven strong claims about what constitutes successful school leadership, which are considered vital in educational institutions. These include focusing on teaching pupils, responding to situations, improving learning, develop leadership capacities and distributing tasks between staff.

According to these characteristics, the quality and standard of leadership and the tasks and responsibilities of head teachers in Saudi Arabia are far from being those of successful leaders because the head teachers in Saudi have training and development needs such as Information Technology, planning skills and evaluating teachers' performance Alsharari (2010). The professional skills of Saudi heads therefore are far removed from the competencies which distinguish effective school head teachers listed in the job analysis of Jirasinghe and Lyons (1996).

With regard to the challenges facing school head teachers, these may be said to be derived from both internal and external sources. One of these challenges is presented by the school building, and there is little doubt that the quality of a school building can determine the quality of the school's environment. In other words, if the school building is of a high standard then there will be an increased probability of a high standard of teaching and learning. According to Sanoff (2001), the physical environment can be considered as the second teacher, since space has the power to organise the educational process and promote the relationship between student and classroom.

Generally, a successful head teacher will be able to establish a strong relationship with his or her students. McGilchrist (2004) believed there to be four core characteristics of an effective head teacher: recognising pupils' rights, having professional and high quality leadership, concentrating on pupil teaching, and having a focus on creating a learning organisation. With regard to the relationship between head teachers and students, Blair and Bourne (1998) asserted that there is a link between head teacher and students in that students should listen to and learn from the head teacher.

The relationship between head teachers and teachers will be considered successful if it is based on fair treatment and mutual trust. Yet, if there is a lack of justice, then this may lead to a weakness in confidence concerning the head teacher. In fact, it is essential that a teacher feels confident in the head teacher's ability, respects his abilities, and has an appreciation for his achievements (Crawford, 2014).

The concept of an educational supervisor was first introduced in 1987 (in the form of inspectors), but the role has changed in recent years. Cooper and Forrest (2009, p. 2) highlight the fact that supervision is a term that lends itself to different interpretations; thus, it does not necessarily mean someone looking over your shoulder all the time.

At the same time, the head teacher will encounter challenges in working with an educational supervisor, such as a lack of coordination and support between the two. Head teachers need people to listen to them (Boerema, 2011); to be shown concern for their well-being, and to be given affirmation and encouragement.

Schools can be considered as social institutions, which are created to serve the community and educate children; therefore, there should be a close link between the school and the local community. In fact, a successful head teacher will relate closely to society. Researchers have found that successful head teachers tend to establish strong relationships with local communities. For example, Lewis and Murphy (2008) from the NCSL (National College for School Leadership) focused on a link between the head teacher and culture; they found that successful head teachers create and model their schools' culture to one that suits them, in order to make improvements and changes. This result was supported by Fletcher and Burnderett (2005), who found that the main factor in a good relationship between head

teachers and their local communities was their willingness to communicate honestly and to create a culture of mutual trust and respect between them and the community.

It is obvious that Bernstein's theories (1971 and 2000) such as classification and framing are important in this paper and could be utilised as conceptual framework because it examines the power relations that operate between head teachers, supervisors and teachers.

Methodological framework

The research approach used in the study described in this paper was a mixed methods approach. Generally speaking, in social sciences there are three main research types, qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Each type has its advantages and disadvantages, and successful research may employ a combination of the two. There are two main reasons for this: firstly, to achieve the aims of the main research; and secondly, to overcome the difficulties that may appear during the course of the research.

According to Groman and Clayton (2005, p. 3), qualitative research is:

"A process of enquiry that draws data from the context in which events occur, in an attempt to describe these occurrences, as means of determining the process in which events are embedded and the perspective of those participating in the event, using induction to derive possible explanations based on observed phenomena".

Creswell et al. (2003, p. 18) defined quantitative research as that "in which the investigator primarily uses post positivist claims for developing knowledge".

Recently a third type of research methodology has appeared which is known as the mixed methods approach. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) defined mixed methods as:

"The class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study" (p. 17).

Like its two predecessors, qualitative and quantitative research, the mixed methods research methodology has its own advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were highlighted by Johnson and Christensen (2004), who stated that it has a high capability to respond precisely to the aims of the research. In addition, it results in a high level of research reliability, and the integration of the two methods strengthens the research by making it possible to overcome the weaknesses arising from using a single approach.

In the study, a structured questionnaire was used to examine the six main challenges identified through the previous literature: school building, students and parents, teachers, educational supervision, school community and the role of the head teacher. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with a sample to find out how effectively male secondary school head teachers in the city of Tabuk are practising their roles and responsibilities.

In social science research, triangulation is a process in which several data collection methods are used in order to increase the validity, accuracy and reliability of the research. Triangulation is one of the major benefits of the mixed methods approach to research. Triangulation is defined by Moran-Ellis et al. (2006) as follows:

> 'Epistemological claims concerning what more can be known about a phenomenon when the findings from the data generated by two or more methods are brought together (p.46).

In this research, triangulation was applied by using two methods of data collection. There are many benefits to methodological triangulation, as suggested by Bryman (2004) and Kelle (2001), such as limiting the bias, maximising the legitimacy, allowing for comprehensive

results and it is more precise in terms of comparing the findings from different research methods.

This study is more qualitative because the phenomenon of these challenges in Saudi context needs more intepretivism approach. However, quantitative data is required in order to support the qualitative findings. Therefore, this study employs a sequential explanatory strategy using mixed methods approach. In other words, structured questionnaires were distributed to 36 head teachers in Tabuk city first, and then semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 head teachers. While Excel programme helped me to find the quantitative data, thematic analysis was utilised for the qualitative data.

Results and Discussion

The main aim of this preliminary study was to determine how effectively secondary school head teachers carry out their role and fulfil their responsibilities, and to find out what would be the ideal role for them in their eyes. All 10 interviewed head teachers believed that some aspects of their role and responsibilities should be revised, as follows:

- Nine of the head teachers believed that the authority to transfer teachers should be delegated to the head teacher, because they are more aware of the potential of individual teachers working with them. In the current situation, the educational authority can transfer a teacher from one school to another without consulting with the head teacher; thus, ignoring the fact that a successful teacher in one school may not be successful in another. The only head teacher who disagreed with this view justified his opinion by saying, "some of the head teachers are not qualified to transfer teachers and most of the time they are biased."

- Four of the interviewed private school head teachers believed that the school morning columns for third-year classes should be abolished, and replaced by awareness and counselling programmes that would prepare them for university education.

- Many of the teachers thought that a relationship between performance management and the annual salary increment should be established, under the control of the head teacher. On the other hand, three of the interviewed head teachers argued that the application of such a system would be almost impossible, for three reasons:

    1) School and community culture.

    2) The influence of personal relations on the decision of the level of increment.

    3) Some of the head teachers are not sufficiently competent to assess teachers.

- The Saudi educational system is characterised by a high degree of centralisation and head teachers are only operational in the schools, with no share in the decision making.

Consequently, to meet the demands of providing an adequate modern education, the head teachers are asking for more freedom and autonomy in making decisions.

All 10 interviewed head teachers asked for more freedom in decision making: "*sometimes we face emergent issues and we cannot make a decision, because if we decide without obtaining permission from the education administration, we might be punished.*" This could be put into practice provided the selection of head teachers is subject to rigorous criteria.

- Duties, responsibilities and routine work should be reduced to a minimum, or at least the school should be provided with a separate administrative team, consisting of two deputy head teachers and two ICT officers.

- Under-performing teachers should be given special training sessions so they are able to develop their capabilities.

One of the head teachers commented that the overload of responsibilities and duties would compel some head teachers to perform the minimum necessary duties, regardless of the quality of the service they provided; adding that it is almost impossible to make any changes in light of the weakness of the school administrative system.

In the questionnaire data set, more than half of the head teachers felt their roles were ambiguous, as shown in the figure below. The reason for this type of problem is a lack of clarity regarding the responsibilities and scope of a head teacher's position and career. Travers and Cooper (1996) suggest that, in the workplace, a member of staff may not have an adequate amount of information to carry out a task, or may not fully understand the requirements. They also mention that there are a variety of situations which may lead to role ambiguity, such as changes in the actual requirements of the work.
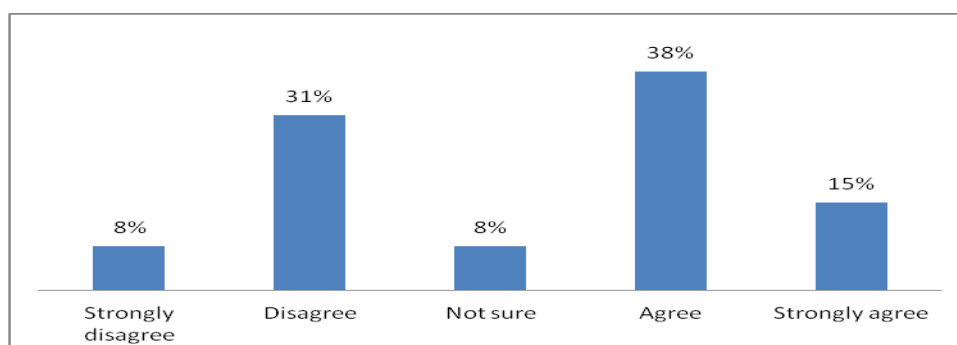
Figure 1.1 As a head teacher, I find my role ambiguous in the area of administrative issues.

The secondary school head teachers acknowledged the existence of a wide range of pressures at their schools, from several sources, especially those at the core of internal and external transactions. The majority of secondary school head teachers felt that there were many pressures in their roles which would challenge and hinder them from fulfilling their tasks. In fact, one head teacher remarked that "the main challenge comes from the education administration; every day they send many circulars and orders to head teachers, which generate a great deal of pressure and then leads to reducing production." This is illustrated in the bar chart below (Fig. 1.2):
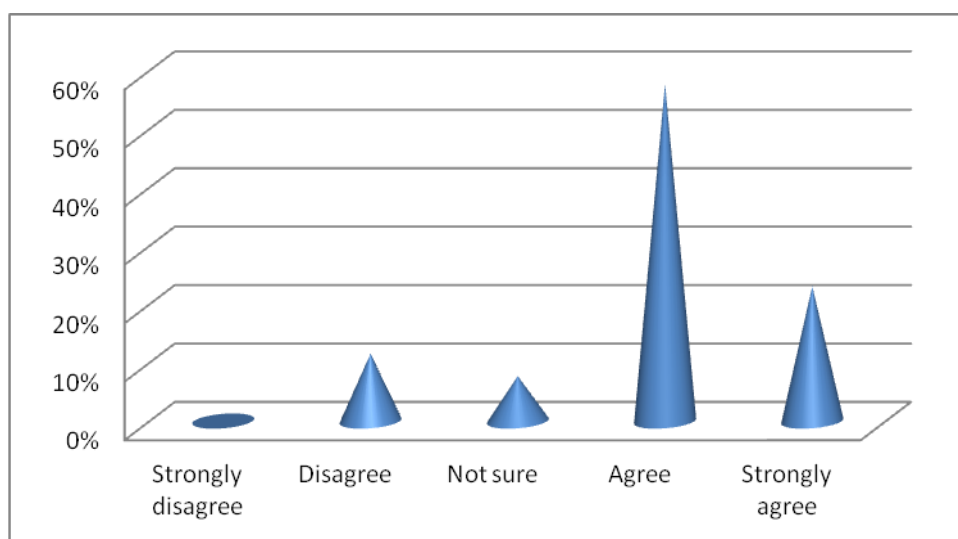
Figure 1.2 There are many pressures in my roles, which cause reduced productivity in managing the school

The head teachers in Tabuk city felt that there was some conflict in their roles which affected their ability to lead the school. They also said that their level of job satisfaction is affected by the ambiguity of the role, and they felt that the amount of experience a head teacher has plays

an important role in enabling him to manage the ambiguity of the role of school head teacher. This could be a result of the people-centred management approach, as found by Day et al. (2001). In other words, they use their knowledge, values and beliefs in order to manage their daily work.

Regarding the school building challenge, approximately 80% of the head teachers agreed that there is a lack of support and finance to improve school buildings. There was also a question regarding who is responsible for developing these buildings and how these improvements can be tackled. One head teacher commented that "*we are sometimes paying to clean the school from our accounts, and the education administration in Tabuk city does not care to ask about that.*" It should be pointed out here that the responsibility for financing and supporting the school building actually lies with the education administration. The job description of head teachers in Tabuk thus appears to emphasise tasks that should be low priority, instead of the development of administrative skills, the professional development of teachers and the raising of students' achievement as stated by Day et al. (2001).

The reason for this significant gap between head teachers of schools in government-owned and rented buildings may lie in the nature of the school building at private schools. In fact, in rental buildings there is not enough space to conduct school activities, as there are small classrooms and other small rooms for the management.

The relationship between schools and students' parents is another important issue when seeking to deliver the best type of education, and there are various reasons why schools should strengthen the home-school relationship. Firstly, owing to a lack of time and resources, educators are unable to do everything at once. Secondly, when parents, who are also community members, work more closely with educators, they can become valuable

assets. Finally, because parents have the strongest personal investment in what schools do, they have the greatest motivation to be more involved (Dodd and Konazl, 2002).

In the study under discussion here, half of the head teachers in Tabuk city agreed that there is some reluctance on the part of students' parents to become involved in school activities. One of the private head teachers commented, "*We found in our school some reluctance, because students' parents believe that they come to the school to show their sons' aggression problems, their achievement level. However, some of them believe that the main aim of the meetings is to [get them to] pay some money to support the school.*"

Most of the head teachers believe that students' parents do not participate in school meetings, which can be related to many different reasons, such as parents' knowledge, their negative view of this type of meeting, and their culture. These are important issues as mentioned by (Crawford, 2014).

With regard to the relationship between head teacher and teacher, this should be firm and strong in order to face any challenges that might appear. This relationship can be developed through visiting teachers in their classes, conducting meetings outside the school, and trying to solve teachers' problems. Another key question concerned visits by other head teachers. Most of the head teachers in the study agreed that two visits per term was sufficient.

There are various factors that should be taken into account when considering the relationship between head teachers and teachers, such as:

- Continuing to work with teachers to qualify them and improve their professional and personal development.

- Attaching importance to talented teachers, through detection, development and strengthening of their capacities.

- Considering individual differences between teachers.

- Focusing on the positive and not exclusively on the negative points in order to correct teachers.

- Appreciating and praising teachers' success, and providing incentives morally and financially in order to strength the relationship and communication between the head teachers and teachers.

With respect to challenges coming from supervision teams, most of the secondary school head teachers agreed that there was no motivation or support for their work, as shown in the following figure:
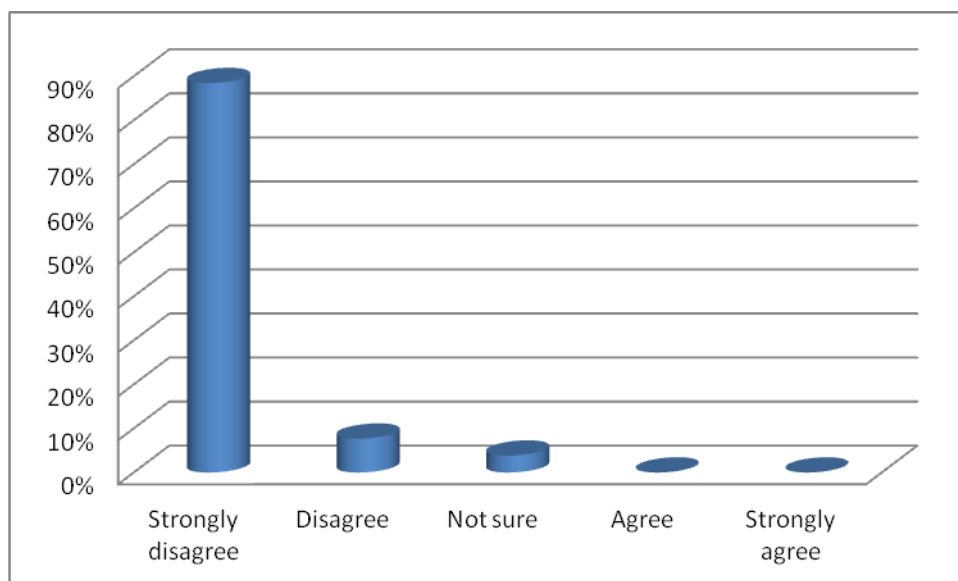
Figure 1.3 There are incentives from the educational administration to promote successful head teachers

The two main causes of this situation are related to the bureaucracy and centralised system in Saudi education, as mentioned by Alzaidi (2008). One of the interviewed head teachers of a private school claimed that "*the aim of all the meetings with the educational administrator and educational supervisors is to give circulars, orders and guidance; so before the meeting starts we know the aims of the meeting.*" Moreover, he also claimed that this type of meeting is considered routine. This bureaucratic model is an important challenge that affects the head teachers' motivation, engagement in professional development and their emotions. Crawford (2009) states that "stress may be seen as a negative aspect of emotions", and that is what was found in this study in terms of the weak relationships between the heads and the supervisors. Bush (2014) suggests that emotional leadership could be a viable alternative to the bureaucratic model. This study also found that there is an absence of purposeful cooperation between the heads and the supervisors. Although many researchers avoid using Bernstein's theories as a theoretical framework owing to their complexity, in current research into educational issues his theories are frequently used (Cause, 2010). This study applied Bernstein's theories (1971 and 2000) to examine the power relations that operate between head teachers and supervisors, classification and framing in schools and the impact these can have on the head teachers' perceptions of their role and relationships with supervisors and ministry officials. Cause (2010, cited in Bernstein, 1971) claims that "*the interactions, boundaries, timing, place, pacing, selection and organization of elements within these message systems greatly impact on the school environment*" (Cause, 2010, p. 6). Taking into account Bernstein's concept of classification and the poor relationship between the head teacher and supervisor identified as a challenge in this study, it can be said that the classification in Tabuk city is weak, because the boundaries (the level of communication) between the head teacher and the supervisors are unclear. The power relations that exist behind the communication in pedagogic relationships, however, play a crucial role in framing

the school in terms of the degree of the head teacher's autonomy with relation to the supervisor. This finding is in line with Alzaidi (2008), who found that the lack of autonomy is linked to the centralised nature of the education system in Saudi Arabia and that it is an important aspect of self-esteem in Maslow's theory (Maslow, 1954). Generally speaking, it may be that head teachers in Tabuk are preoccupied with procedural matters because they possess little power to make formal decisions about major school adjustments or policy reforms.

With regard to the association between the head teacher and the local community, there appears to be a significant gap between school culture and local community culture. Four of the head teachers in this study, who represent both private and government schools, said that many students' parents, as one of the main community elements, do not visit their school. Thus, the relationship between schools and the local community can be said to be a weakness.

The culture within a school is another concept explored in this study. Durrant and Holden (2006) drew attention to the definition of school culture, portraying school culture as a given owing to the strong relationships in a school. On the other hand, Hoy and Miskel (1996) have a different perspective on school culture; they believe that effective schools have strong cultures with the following elements:

- Shared values and a consensus.
- Distinctive rituals that embody widely shared beliefs.
- The principal as a hero.
- A balance between tradition and innovation, and between control and autonomy.

In summary, this research produced six main findings in relation to the challenges facing secondary school head teachers in Tabuk. The first major result, which concerns the role of the head teacher, suggests that secondary school head teachers who work in government schools feel overloaded in their role and responsibilities, and more so than head teachers working in private schools. As shown by Wise and Bush (1999), who mentioned that additional responsibilities lead to the possibility of overload. With regard to role ambiguity, there is a lack of understanding regarding the role of the head teacher in Tabuk, especially among head teachers with less than 15 years' experience.

The second major finding was that there is a shortage of financial resources for school buildings provided by the Tabuk education administration, which sometimes causes a number of challenges if head teachers are thinking of conducting certain activities. One of the main problems is that there is not enough room for students to carry out their activities, a challenge that was observed more in schools in rental buildings than in government schools.

The third major finding emphasised the fact that there is some reluctance on the part of students' parents to visit or become engaged with the school, or indeed to ask about their child's progress. It was found that students' parents do not participate effectively in school council meetings; in other words, students' parents do not ask about their children. Harris (2002) pointed out that head teachers should communicate with staff, students and parents in order to develop their visions and values. In this study, it appeared that this was presenting a challenge to the head teachers in Tabuk, which had led to a lack of connection between them and the parents.

The fourth major finding relates to the lack of incentives given by the education administration in Tabuk to promote successful head teachers. Although there is a sufficient

number of visits from educational supervisors and various meetings with the education administrators, there is no opportunity for head teachers to discuss or change any decisions. Thus, the majority of head teachers feel subordinated and frustrated.

The fifth major finding was concerned with the relationship between the local community and the school; a significant gap was found between the culture of the school and the culture of the local community. However, in this study, almost all the head teachers agreed that the head teachers were responsible for managing the school's external relations (Francis, 1998).

The last finding shows that one of the main causes of head teachers' frustration is that the head teacher believe that education administration in the city considers that a successful head teacher is one who is able to save any ailing or underperforming school, regardless of the surrounding circumstances. Therefore, most of the head teachers would allow themselves to be considered as traditional head teachers, so as to avoid being transferred to another school. This was confirmed by seven of the head teachers, who were frustrated with their position for the following reasons:

> ➢ The position and recognition of able and industrious head teachers, and those who are incompetent or under-performing, is considered the same.
> ➢ There is a lack of motivation and support when attempting to overcome school problems.
> ➢ There is no difference in salary between a head teacher and teachers.

Since the various challenges discussed above are derived from both inside and outside the schools, it could be claimed that the finding corresponds with Day et al. (2001), who propose a people-centred model of leadership called 'value-led contingency leadership'. In other words, heads use their values to lead the community because there is no official preparation

programmes for the position of headship. This study discussed in this article also

demonstrated that there are no clear solutions to situations which include within them so

many factors, and that successful leadership is driven by individual and collective value

systems rather than by institutional, bureaucratic or managerial concerns. The heads in Tabuk

were thus concerned more with cultural than with structural change because of their value-led

approach guided by personal experience, as mentioned by Day et al. (2001).

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