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FROM THE EDITORS

Two articles selected for publication in this issue address the general concern of equal opportunities for education and the influence of politics on the management of schools. Another selected article relates to an innovative approach to leadership preparation. Yet another article focuses on the planning for differentiated instruction in K-12 classrooms.

Barry investigated the status of equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia. The findings of his study show that the country has made a remarkable progress in equalizing educational enrollment at all levels but challenges remain in gender, employment, wages and disadvantaged issues.

Walker, Morton and Goings claimed that educational organizations can use podcasts to inform current or aspiring educational leaders. The authors examined extant literature and considered 1) how post-secondary institutions can use podcasts to train aspiring school leaders and 2) how school districts can use podcasts to supplement or supplant professional development.

Ambo, Dabi and Chan explored the influence of politics on quality management practices in the secondary education in Ethiopia. The study reveals that the political enactment of the country has affected the autonomy of its educational institutions and their quality management practices. The authors recommend that the government could allow educators a free hand to plan and manage their educational business.

Lastly, Hersi and Bal examined Maryland teachers' views on their actual and desired use of differentiated instruction and the implications for professional development planning. Overall, the Maryland teachers desire to use various student-centered differentiated instructional strategies and currently employ some of these. However, the greatest difference between teachers' desired and actual practices associates with individualized planning, self-directed learning, and student autonomy.

The significance of articles in this issue discloses the fact that successful educational practices worldwide need careful planning. Planning efforts have to be assessed from time to time to see the effectiveness of the outcome for possible improvement. Educational planners need to have the courage and humbleness to acknowledge their own planning mistakes and seek for more constructive strategies to achieve the planning goals.

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February, 2021

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA: HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

ABDOURAHMANE BARRY
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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the status of equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia. Analyses of existing data show that the country has made a remarkable progress in educational enrollment at all levels (K-12 and higher education). However, challenges remain in terms of academic achievement for males, participation in the labor force and wage parity for females, and school access and retention for disadvantaged young people (ages 6-24 years old). To address these challenges and help achieve the sustainable development goals that the country envisioned in its "Vision 2030", it is imperative that all people, regardless of gender or social, and economic status, be treated fairly and given an equal opportunity to learn, work, prosper, and contribute to the development of Saudi Arabia and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Equal opportunity to gain knowledge and skills to function in a society is a precondition for equal opportunity to participate in education, employment, and national development. Equal opportunity requires fairness and impartiality. Whether in education or other fields, fairness involves making sure that circumstances related to gender, socioeconomic status, and background are not impediments preventing any individual from realizing his or her potential. In an inclusive society, everyone has equal opportunities to learn and use his or her knowledge to achieve desired goals. One vehicle through which a nation helps its people achieve desired goals is a quality education that is accessible to all. Education benefits both individuals and the society as more education is associated with a higher income, a better life, and more participation in society (Field, KucZera, & Pont, 2007). Consequently, it is vital for individuals in a country to have equal access to appropriate educational services to develop their abilities and skills without limitations due to their background or circumstances. Thus, in the past decades, expanding education and making it available to all has been a priority in many countries. However, these countries still continue to face inequalities (Rice, 2015) in areas such as school access and retention, academic achievement, employment, and income. Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate the status of equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia to understand what has been achieved and what remains to be achieved.

BACKGROUND OF THE EDUCATION EFFORT AND SUCCESS IN SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia covers 80% of the Arabian Peninsula, making it the largest country in the Middle East. The population, as of 2018, is estimated to be 33,413,660 (19,240,956 males and 14,172,704 females), among whom 20,768,627 (10,575,895 males and 10,192,732 females) are Saudi and 12,645,033 (8,665,061 males and 3,979,972 females) are non-Saudis (Saudi General Authority for Statistics, 2019).

In the early years of its founding in 1932, Saudi Arabia was a poor country. With the blessing

of Allah, Subhanahu wa ta'ala (SWT), oil was discovered in 1936 and commercial production took off in 1938 (Al-Amri, 2011). Funds generated from this natural resource helped in developing the country and opened the door to economic prosperity and a better life for its people. As is known today, Saudi Arabia is a blessed country with rich natural resources and Islamic values. Capitalizing on these resources, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in modernizing the country and improving the life of its people and others around the world.

To continue on its development path, Saudi Arabia recognizes that a knowledge-based society in which all people have equal opportunity to learn, work, and prosper must be a priority. On this point, Alabdulmenem (2019) argued that it is through education that a knowledge-based society is created; therefore, Saudi Arabia has undertaken a massive transformation in education to prepare future generations. As education is one of the pillars through which a knowledge-based society is developed, Saudi Arabia has devoted an enormous amount of resources and effort to make education available to its people. The evolution of its spending on education is a key indicator of the government's commitment to the sector. Its spending on education went from $3.1 million (1947/1975) to $21.6 million (1954/1955), $50 million (1958/1959), $78 million (1962/1963), $92 million (1966/1967), $1billion (1974/1975), and $7.31billion (1983/1984). Under the two five-year development plans of the 1990s, the spending on education jumped to $25 billion (Rugh, 2002). According to a published national review for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia entitled "Sustainable Development Goals" (Al Tuwaijri, 2018), $51.2 billion were allocated to education in 2018 (general education, higher education, and training), which constitutes the largest share of the 2018 state budget. These massive investments allowed Saudi Arabia to offer free education to its people. In addition to free schooling, until recently, higher education students were receiving monthly stipends from the government.

As a result of this vast investment and effort, the education sector has expanded and improved exponentially. Public education, which began in 1932 with 12 schools serving only 700 students was expanded to 365 schools serving 42,000 students by 1950. In 2000, it reached 4.11million students and, as of 2018, the K-12 sector counts more than 30,000 schools serving around 5,366,405 students. The higher education sector began with King Saud University, established in 1957 to accommodate the growing number of public-school graduates and help reduce the country's dependence on foreign higher education. Other universities were also established, notably King Fahd University (1963), King Abdul Aziz University (1967), and King Faisal University (1975) (Al-Amri, 2011; Rugh, 2002). As of 2018, Saudi Arabia was home to 30 state universities and numerous colleges and private higher education institutions (Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia, 2018).

Many indicators of achievements and benefits exist today to support the government's commitment to the education sector. The net registration rates at elementary, intermediate, and secondary levels are 98%, 97%, and 94% respectively. For higher education, the total enrollment rate is 69%. The literacy rate in 2013 for 15 to 24-year old was estimated at 99.22% (Al Tuwaijri, 2018).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the 21st century, an era dominated by knowledge and information technologies, human knowledge is becoming more relevant than ever. Therefore, a country must utilize all its resources (natural and human) to establish itself in this world. Consequently, all citizens, regardless of their background (gender, ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status), must have an equal opportunity to learn

and utilize their knowledge to fulfill their dreams and contribute to the development of their nations and beyond. For this reason, the aim of this study is to examine the status of equal opportunity in education and employment to understand what has been achieved and what remains to be achieved in Saudi Arabia.

This study is unique from the existing literature in the sense that despite the tremendous progress in many fronts including educational enrollment at all levels (K-12 and higher education) and economic prosperity for the majority of its people in Saudi Arabia, challenges remain in terms of academic achievement for males, participation in the labor force and wage parity for females, and school access and retention for disadvantaged young people (ages 6-24 years old). As the country aims to achieve excellence and economic prosperity for all its people through a knowledge-based society, it is essential, particularly for decision makers, to know what has been achieved, what remains to be achieved, and who are left out in the area of equal opportunity in education and employment in the country. It is hoped that this study serves as an alarm to bring attention of decision makers to these issues so that they be part of the reform agenda envisioned by the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Equal opportunity in education and employment has received considerable attention in many countries in the last half century (Field, KucZera, & Pont, 2007). The topic has been investigated using a variety of factors and considerations. Wood et al. (2011) as cited by Zhu (2018) contended that the causes behind inequality opportunities in education and outcomes, which can be extended to other inequalities too, are many " such as gender, income, socio-economic status, ethnicity, indignity, culture, religion, language, geographical location, etc." (p.772). The author further stated that different countries use a combination of these factors to judge the extent to which their systems are equitable. For the purpose of this study, however, the focus is on education (access, retention, and achievement) and employment (income and job disparities).

Equal Opportunity in Education

To make education available to their people, Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in general have built schools and post-secondary institutions to facilitate access to education for their growing child and youth populations. These efforts and accomplishments deserve to be recognized and appreciated. However, it is important to avoid letting the accomplishments overshadow persistent challenges in other areas, such as the quality of education in terms of access, retention, and achievement for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, Farah (2017) used TIMSS and PISA data to analyze the educational context in the MENA region. From her study, she documented that in the MENA region, students continue to drop out of school. The literature links the dropout rate to the quality of schools and excessive distance between schools and homes, which affect girls more than boys. However, according to Farah, boys are more likely to repeat grades and drop out of school than girls. The dropout rate is also attributed to the lack of accountability from parents to respect the requirement for compulsory schooling, inability of schools to make the school environment attractive to children, and the socioeconomic difficulties that some families face that force them to put their children to work. In the MENA region, about 5 million children between ages 6 and 10 and 4 million between ages 11 and 15 were out of school in 1995 and the figure was projected to increase in coming years (Akkari, 2004). Akkari (2004) further argued that those not attending formal schools are mostly the poor and those students are educated outside the formal school system. This system of education creates cultural and social gaps that

negatively affects the disadvantaged, which ultimately reduces their chances of enjoying the equal opportunities their societies have to offer. Similarly, Zhu (2018) argued that an unequal education system has negative consequences not only on the individual but also on his or her society as human potentials are being wasted.

In terms of academic achievement, students in MENA countries, Saudi Arabia included, are behind in international average achievement in comparison to the mean average of countries participating the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Along gender lines, Saudi Arabia's student achievement in TIMSS (2015) shows that male students lag their female counterparts in all subjects (math and science) and domains (knowing, applying, and reasoning) (Barry, 2019; Martin, Mullis, Foy, & Hooper, 2016). A similar trend is noted in other national assessments of students attending preparatory year programs where the females' grade point average is 2.74 out of 4 in comparison to their male counterparts average score of 2.54 (Khoshaim, 2017).

Inequality does not affect education only. Whenever it prospers, the country's economy suffers, mistrust permeates the society, and the marginalized have fewer opportunities to improve their lives and contribute to the development of their countries. In such an environment, the least fortunate suffer from isolation, indignity, and discrimination. People marginalized across economic, social, and cultural sectors do not have opportunities to contribute and benefit from their economy, society, and communities (United Nations Development Program, 2016). To prevent such inequalities, educational policy makers and employment regulators must create a level playing field to ensure that appropriate educational policies are devised to reduce inequality and give young people access to both a quality education and the labor market. Access to an appropriate education increases employment opportunities and gives young people a chance to fulfill their dreams and participate in building their nations (Mihai, Titan, & Manea, 2017). Along this line, Becker (2014) used several databases to investigate the reversal of gender differences in educational attainment in West Germany for the period from late 1970s to the early 1980s. His findings showed a positive link between women's educational achievement and educational motivation through an increase in economic benefits such as return on education relative to wages and occupational positions. These factors helped women reverse the gender differences in academic attainment. He argued, however, that despite this reversal, the gender pay gap still exists as the relationship between gender and occupation and income remained constant over the examined period.

Equal Opportunity in Employment

The Saudi Ministry of Labor (2015) has documented several challenges that remain obstacles to equal opportunity in employment in Saudi Arabia. First, there is a mismatch between education output and labor market demand. The demand is either in jobs for low-skilled workers that the Saudis are not willing to accept or jobs for highly skilled workers that Saudis do not have. In addition, Saudi nationals are reluctant to take a job in the private sector as they consider the public sector the best place to work due to the wages, benefits, job security, and flexibility. Complicating these challenges is that Saudi nationals cost more for employers in terms of wages and job benefits than expatriate workers with the same skills. Therefore, employers in the private sector rely heavily on expatriate workers.

Second, youths and women make up more than half of the unemployed Saudis. Despite progress in youth employment in recent years, Saudi Arabia is among the countries with the highest

youth unemployment (41%). However, the largest disadvantaged group in terms of employment is women. Their unemployment rate is estimated to be around 74%. With respect to the few employed females (26%), education and the public sector are the principal areas of employment opportunities. Statistics show that 74% of employed females (26%) in Saudi Arabia work in schools for girls.

Last, the concentration of employees in a few domains is another concern. Some domains such as humanities and social sciences have high concentration of employees at the expense of other domains, such as in science, technology and engineering, where there is a lack of qualified Saudi graduates to meet the labor demand (Ministry of Labor of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2015).

In addition to the above challenges, the social and economic backgrounds of children are also crucial factors that deserve to be considered when addressing social inequalities. The social background of a child does not encompass only education, income, and occupational prestige of his or her parents. It also includes the child's class in relation to others in his or her geographic location and culture (Parker, Jerrim, Schoon, & Marsh, 2016). Besides the social background, it is found that in Jordan, students with disabilities are not appropriately represented, for instance in textbooks, and the law mandating their inclusion in education gets very often ignored (Abu-Hamour, Al-Hmouz, & Aljarrah, 2019). As for a child's poverty level, Palmer (2014) cited Verhey (1995) who defined poverty as the lack of basic needs when confronted with life's demands. This in turn leads to injustice, domination, oppression, and lack of human rights.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Social justice theory is used in this study to conceptualize equal opportunity in education and employment. Social justice focuses on fairness in a good society, which helps in understanding how education systems (role of the state), the society, and people's cultural practices affect individuals and different social groups with respect to the delivery of education (Blackmore, 2013). For Calma, Baldry, Briskman, and Disney (2011, p. 2), "the concept of social justice involves finding the optimum balance between our joint responsibilities as a society and our responsibilities as individuals to contribute to a just society." The authors further explained that joint responsibilities to address inequalities, unfairness, and poverty require a fair distribution of resources, equal access to opportunities (e.g., education, employment), a fair system of law with due process, moral responsibility, workforce participation, and individual capability. Similarly, Bell (1997) argued that social justice is a combination of goal and process. On one hand, the goal focuses on the full and equitable participation of all individuals within a society. On the other, the process involves determining how to reach the goal by creating and providing an environment in which all individuals or groups of individuals within a society feel included and respected, with an opportunity, for instance, to learn, utilize their knowledge and skills, prosper, and contribute to the development of their nation without any limitation due to social considerations or circumstances.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central question guiding the study is framed as follows:

What is the status of equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia?

To help investigate this central question, three sub questions are stated.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, what is the status of equal opportunity in:

1. educational enrollment?
2. academic achievement between male and female students?
3. employment and wages based on gender, education level, and nationality?

METHODS

To investigate the status of equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia, published documents were downloaded from two main databases—the General Authority for Statistics (GAS), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and TIMSS. The GAS documents consisted of reports on student (male and female) enrollment in education (K-12 and higher education), employment, wages, and reasons for not enrolling in an educational institution. The reports contain data on eligible Saudi students enrolled in education (K-12 and higher education), participation in the labor force, and employee wages as reported in 2018. Additional GAS data include factors cited as causes for non-enrollment in education among Saudi aged 6-24. These factors are labor or work, family assistance, illness or disability, marriage and pregnancy, repeated failure of grades, non-acceptance in educational institutions, difficulty in accessing a school, and desire to delay enrollment. The researcher grouped these factors into four categories—poverty (labor or work, lack of family assistance, difficulty in accessing a school), possible poverty/social (desire to delay enrollment in education, marriage, pregnancy), possible poverty/academic inability (repeated grade failure and non-acceptance), and illness or disability and other.

TIMSS documents contain reports on student (male and female) academic achievement in math and science taught in the 8th and 4th grades covering the last three TIMSS assessments (TIMSS 2007, TIMSS 2011, and TIMSS 2015). In addition to reporting the students' academic achievement for each participating country, TIMSS published reports include students' academic achievement by gender, which is the main target data for this study.

Table 1
List of Analyzed Documents and their Sources

Document type	Author (s)	Publisher
TIMSS 2015 International Results in Mathematics	Mullis, Martin, Foy, and Hooper (2016)	TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center Boston College
TIMSS 2015 International Results in Science	Mullis, Martin, Foy, and Hooper (2016)	
TIMSS 2011 International Results in Mathematics	Mullis, Martin, Foy, Hooper, and Arora (2012)	
TIMSS 2011 International Results in Science	Martin, Mullis, Foy, Hooper, and Stanco (2012)	
TIMSS 2007 International Mathematics Report	Mullis, et al. (2007)	
TIMSS 2007 International Science Report	Martin, et al. (2007)	
Education and Training Reports (2017)	Saudi General Authority for Statistics (GAS)	Saudi General Authority for Statistics
Labor Market Data Second Quarter Reports (2018)		

The analyses of the TIMSS documents consisted of reviewing and recording group (males and females) means for each assessment (2007, 2011, and 2015) to identify trends in academic achievement between male and female students in Saudi Arabia. Students' academic achievements and achievement gaps were tabulated by grade levels (4th and 8th), subjects (math and science), year, and gender.

To analyze the General Authority for Statistics documents, the researcher reviewed and recorded the total of students' enrollment (by gender and education level), socioeconomic factors for non-enrollment in education (by gender and factors), participation in the labor force, wages, and wage gaps (by education level, nationality, and gender).

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the analyses to show what has or has not been achieved in terms of equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia.

Equal Opportunity in Educational Enrollment

Table 2
Student Enrollment by Education Level and Gender 2017

	Level	Male	Female	Total
PK-12 Educ	Pre-primary	130,652	134,084	264,736
	Primary school	1,221,082	1,188,154	2,409,236
	Middle school	600,140	579,599	1,179,739
	High school	640,997	551,015	1,192,012
	Total (PK-12 Educ.)	2,592,871	2,452,852	5,045,723
Higher Education	Pre-University	87,631	16,087	103,718
	Bachelor's	573,110	663,818	1,236,928
	Higher Diploma	2,997	577	3,574
	Masters	10,543	7,546	18,089
	Doctorate	2,336	1,760	4,096
	Total (Higher Educ.)	676,617	689,788	1,366,405

Data source: The General Authority for Statistics (GAS), Saudi Arabia (SA)

Table 2 shows that the ratio between male and female students' enrollment in Saudi Arabia is almost equal to 1 (M/F=1.057=1 for PK-12 and M/F=0.98=1 for higher education). This result indicates evidence that males and females are enrolling in education at the same rate. This trend is noticed at all levels of education (pre-primary, primary, middle school, high school, pre-university, bachelors, higher diploma, masters, and doctorate).

Equal Opportunity in Academic Achievement Between Male and Female Students

Table 3

Saudi Arabian International Academic Achievement at the 8th and 4th Grade Levels in Math and Science by Gender and Year (2007, 2011, 2015).

		Grade Level											
		8th Grade						4th Grade					
		Math (Mean)			Science (Mean)			Math (Mean)			Science (Mean)		
Gender	Year	2007	2011	2015	2007	2011	2015	2007	2011	2015	2007	2011	2015
Male		319	387	360	383	424	368	---	402	363	---	405	352
Female		341	401	375	426	450	423	---	418	405	---	453	431
Achievement Gap		22	14	15	43	26	55*	---	16	43*	---	48	79*

Data source: Trend in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) 2007, 2011, 2015.
*. Highest achievement gap between male and female students among all TIMSS participating countries.

---. Saudi Arabia did not take part in TIMSS at the 4th grade level in 2007.

The data in table 3 show that since 2007, the year in which Saudi Arabia began taking part in the TIMSS, female students have outperformed male students in math and science at both the 8th and 4th grade levels. As these results show, female students' scores are always higher than those of male students in all assessments (2007, 2011, 2015). Furthermore, the achievement gap in math (4th grade) and science (4th and 8th grades) between males and females in Saudi Arabia was the highest among all participating countries in TIMSS2015 assessment.

Socioeconomic Factors Affecting Equal Opportunity Enrollment in Education

Table 4

Socioeconomic Factors for Non-Enrollment in Education, 2017

Reason for non-enrollment in schools	Male	Female	Total
Poverty	442,230	204,720	646,950
Possible poverty/social	40,044	242,130	282,174
Illness/disability and other	85,524	89,885	175,409
Possible poverty/academic inability	122,220	102,502	224,722
Total	690,018	639,237	1,329,255

Data source: Data compiled from the GAS, KSA.

Poverty: Labor or work, lack of family assistance, difficulty in accessing a school.
Possible poverty/social: Desire to delay enrollment in education, marriage, pregnancy.
Possible poverty/academic inability: Repeated grade failure and non-acceptance.
Illness/disability and other: Health, physical, mental, and other.

Table 4 shows that more than one million eligible Saudi (6-24-years-old) are not enrolled in education due to socioeconomic factors. Both males (690,018) and females (639,237) are affected at almost the same rate by these socioeconomic factors. However, based on category factors, more males are affected by the poverty factor, more females by the possible poverty and / or social factor, and about the same for both males and females with respect to illness/disability and possible poverty/ academic inability.

Equal Opportunity in Employment and Wages

Table 5

Participation in the Labor Force as a Percentage of Saudi Population by Nationality and Gender, 2018.

	Nationality		
Gender	Saudi	Non-Saudi	Total
Male	63.50%	93.90%	78.7%
Female	19.60%	29.00%	24.3%
Total	41.55%	61.45%	51.5%

Data source: GAS, SA, Second Quarter 2018 data

Table 5 shows that participation in the labor force is low for Saudis (41%), particularly for women (19.60%). The same trend is noticed for non-Saudis.

Table 6

Average Monthly Wages and Wage Gap (in Saudi Riyal) by Education Level, Nationality, and Gender, 2018.

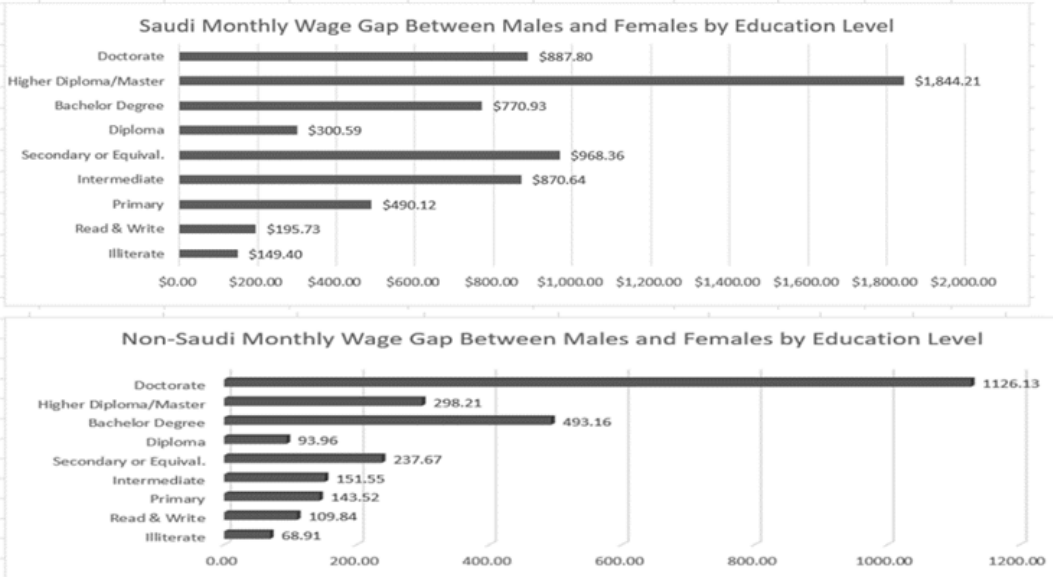
	Nationality by Gender					
Education Level	Saudi			Non-Saudi		
Gender	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Illiterate	4,640	4,079	560	1,572	1,314	258
Read and Write	5,169	4,435	734	1,850	1,438	412
Primary	5,901	4,063	1,838	2,048	1,510	538
Intermediate	7,913	4,648	3,265	2,230	1,662	568
Secondary or Equivalent	8,874	5,242	3,631	2,839	1,948	891
Diploma	10,060	8,933	1,127	4,456	4,103	352
Bachelor's Degree	13,148	10,257	2,891	8,270	6,421	1,849
Higher Diploma/Master	18,720	11,805	6,916	13,559	12,440	1,118
Doctorate	26,701	23,372	3,329	17,750	13,527	4,223

Note: Exchange rate as of June 2020: $1=SAR 3.75

Table 6 shows that both Saudi and non-Saudi males make more money than women. The highest wage gap between males and females in favor of Saudi males is at the higher diploma/ master's degree level (SAR 6,916) while for non-Saudis, it is at the doctorate level (SAR 4, 223). Figure 1 displays the monthly wage gap in dollar ($) between males and females in favor of males.

Figure 1

Average Monthly Wage Gap (in dollars) in Favor of Males by Education Level and Nationality, 2018



DISCUSSION

As stated in the main research question, the aim of this descriptive study was to investigate equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia. This section of the study discusses the results, which are divided into four parts—equal opportunity in enrollment (PK-higher education), academic achievement (math and science), socioeconomic status affecting enrollment in education (poverty, social and academic factors, and disability), and equal opportunity in employment (nationality and gender).

Regarding equal opportunity to enroll in education, Saudi Arabia's progress is excellent. The enrollment ratio between male and female students is about equal (*M/F=1.057=1* for PK-12 and *M/F=0.98=1* for higher education). This result demonstrates equal opportunity in educational enrollment between male and female students. This result, supported by other findings in the literature (Tawaijri, 2018), shows that the registration rate at different levels (98% for elementary, 97% for intermediate, 94% for secondary, and 69% for higher education) is comparable to that of advanced countries. This achievement should be maintained or even improved but the focus should shift from quantity to quality.

In terms of academic achievement, the result shows that in Saudi Arabia, females outperformed males in math and science in TIMSS assessments (2007, 2011, 2015). This finding is in line with findings in existing literature in Saudi Arabia, which documents that females outperformed males in math and science (Anderson, 2012; Barry, 2019; Martin, Mullis, Foy, & Hooper, 2016), and the national assessments with students attending preparatory year programs (Khoshaim, 2017).

Based on these findings and the literature, one can assert that males are at a disadvantage in terms of academic achievement.

Regarding the socioeconomic factors affecting non-enrollment in education, despite the progress in this area, according to the findings, more than a million eligible Saudis between the ages of 6 and 24 are not enrolled in education. The cited factors for non-enrollment in education include labor or work, lack of family assistance, difficulty in accessing schools, marriage, pregnancy, illness or disability, repeated grade failure, nonacceptance to educational institutions, and desire to delay enrollment. These socioeconomic factors noted in the context of Saudi Arabia confirm other findings in MENA countries, where similar causes are cited (Akkari, 2004). The author asserted that in 1995 about five million children between ages 6 and 10 and four million between ages 11 and 15 were not in school and these children were mostly the poor.

With respect to employment and wages, the findings show a disparity in wages and participation in the labor force. Women constitute the largest disadvantaged group, with an employment rate estimated at around 26%. Furthermore, these 26% employed women serve mostly in education (girls' schools) and this sector is the principal employer for women in the country. As supported in the literature (Becker, 2014; Field, KucZera, & Pont, 2007), the higher the education level, the higher the income (i.e., monthly wages). However, females having the same education level as males receive lower monthly wages than their male counterparts. The wage gap is noted at all levels of education. These findings confirm the challenges the Saudi Ministry of Labor (2015) noted as obstacles to equal opportunity in employment in Saudi Arabia. These obstacles include a mismatch between education output and labor market demand, low employment of youths and, particularly, women, and concentration of employees in a few domains (e.g., humanities and social sciences at the expense of other domains).

CONCLUSION

What can be concluded about the status of equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia is that the country has made tremendous progress on many fronts, including expanding education and making it available to its people. The combination of policies, resources, and efforts has led to a net registration rate at elementary, intermediate, secondary, and higher education of 98%, 97%, 94% and 69%, respectively. Moreover, both males and females are enrolling at a comparable rate. In terms of educational enrollment, except for a few people disadvantaged by socioeconomic factors, an equal opportunity to enroll in education at various levels (elementary, middle school, high school, and higher education) is given to both males and females. However, inequalities remain in academic achievement, participation in the labor force and monthly wages between males and females. International and national assessments show that females' academic achievements are always higher than those of males. With this regard, males are at a disadvantage. As for females, despite being high academic achievers, they have fewer opportunities to participate in the labor force. Their participation is still around 26% and their employment opportunities are limited to few sectors, such as education and other public services. Moreover, females' monthly wages are always lower than males' monthly wages, even if the males and females have the same education and qualifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

In light of these findings, three recommendations for policy and practice are suggested to improve equal opportunity in education and employment in Saudi Arabia. The first recommendation is to maintain and improve what has been achieved to date. Enrollment in education (98%, 97%, 94%; and 69%) at all levels (elementary, intermediate, secondary, and higher) is comparable to that of advanced nations. Furthermore, both males and females are enrolling at the same rate. The pressing need now is to maintain the quantity but focus more on quality. As this study has shown, in Saudi Arabia, females are outperforming males in international assessments in math, science, and their domains. The same trend in favor of females exists in national assessments. Consequently, the males' persistent poor academic achievement deserves a concerted effort at the national, regional, district, and school levels to identify factors causing male students to fall behind. Responsibilities need to be situated to understand whether or not these causes are at the classroom level (teacher, teaching methods), school and school district level (leaders, leadership approach, resources), national level (policies, resources), or society level (culture, beliefs, values).

The second recommendation concerns the approximately one million of eligible Saudis ages 6-24 who are not enrolled in school due to socioeconomic factors such as labor or work, lack of family assistance, difficulty in accessing a school, marriage, pregnancy, illness or disability, repeated grade failure, nonacceptance to educational institutions, and desire to delay enrollment. It is hoped that the outstanding achievements in educational enrollment of most Saudis does not overshadow the pressing needs of disadvantaged groups. A combination of possibilities is suggested to address these issues. First, the lack of accountability from parents to respect the requirement of compulsory schooling must be addressed to prevent students from leaving the education system. Second, the schools and their leaders, in addition to making the school environment attractive to students, need a monitoring system that updates daily, weekly, or monthly. This system can be synced at the local, regional, and national levels so that students at risk of leaving the school system can be identified and supported before they actually leave the system. The more these disadvantaged people stay out of school, the higher the risk of their not coming back, and the lesser chance they have to break out of the cycle in which they are living, improve their lives and those of their children, and contribute to the development of their nation. Third, a separate assistance program (financial, material, social) is needed for people ages 6-24 who are not enrolled in education. If resources are limited to address socioeconomic factors to keep or bring them back into the regular school system, alternative or flexible educational programs (e.g., part-time classes such as once or twice a week, weekend classes, hybrid or online classes) must be created to enable them to get their education while they are living their daily lives.

The last recommendation concerns equal opportunity in employment and wages. Females in Saudi Arabia are high academic achievers, but their participation in the labor force is extremely low (26%) in comparison to their male counterparts (78.7%). An initial step to address this inequality is to open the door of employment for women in other domains rather than limiting their employment opportunities to a few domains, such as education (e.g., girls' schools, public services). In the technology era, it is possible to make such changes without harming the core values of the nation or its people. On the wage disparity between males and females in favor of males (e.g., $887.80 for a doctorate degree, $1,844.21 for a master's or higher diploma degree, $770.93 for a bachelor's degree), it is recommended to have a national pay scale policy that requires employers to provide equal pay to all their employees having the same education and qualification for the

service performed, regardless of gender and/or other social considerations. For such a policy to work, employers must be held accountable and action rather than just a policy on paper is needed.

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CREATING A NEW PARADIGM: UTILIZING PODCASTS TO TRAIN ASPIRING AND CURRENT SCHOOL LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly school districts and post-secondary institutions are integrating technology into the classroom. This includes providing fully online (FO), mixed mode (MM), and F2F (face to face) learning experiences. While educational institutions have adopted various platforms, podcasts have not gained popularity as a learning tool for current or aspiring school leaders. This is important considering the costs associated with professional development and college courses for school districts and post-secondary institutions. Podcasts have become a popular platform to learn about various topics while driving, walking, or attending other events. Annually millions of podcasts are downloaded which deconstruct pertinent issues. Thus, considering how educational organizations can use podcasts to inform current or aspiring educational leaders is critical. For this reason, the authors examined extant literature and considered the following 1) How post-secondary institutions can use podcasts to train aspiring school leaders and 2) How school districts can use podcasts to supplement or supplant professional development. The article includes actionable steps educational organizations can take to meet the needs of mobile learners.

INTRODUCTION

School leaders encounter daily challenges that require their time and planning. This includes meetings, assemblies, teacher evaluations, discipline referrals, lunch duty, and after school events among other responsibilities (Tobin, 2014). The consistent demands can be taxing and limit their ability to commit to important activities including professional development. Additionally, teachers and other school-based staff have to navigate similar challenges, which could impede long-term professional goals including becoming a school administrator. Ensuring current and aspiring school leaders can dedicate time to develop their skills is vital. For this reason, post-secondary institutions and school districts must develop new pathways that allow educators to strengthen their understanding of assessment, community relationships, finance, leadership, mentorship, and pedagogy (Reiss, 2015; Villegas, 2015). While colleges and districts frequently utilize face to face (F2F) meetings to share information with educational leaders, it is time for a paradigm shift (Walker & Sullivan, 2020). The challenges from COVID-19 will necessitate dramatic changes in the way we share information. Consequently, identifying new mediums for school leaders is important during these uncertain times.

For instance, over the last several years podcasts have become popular with various age groups (Peiser, 2019). Annually millions of podcasts are downloaded on various topics including education, music, politics, sports, gardening, travel, and other important issues. Last year was a watershed moment for podcasters. According to Peiser (2019) “More than half the people in the

United States have listened to one, and nearly one out of three people listens to at least one podcast every month. Last year (2018), it was more like one in four" (para 2). The exponential growth of podcasts can be linked to several factors including 1) easy access; 2) increases in popular podcasts (e.g., celebrities, social media influences); 3) consumer control (podcasts can be accessed at any time and 4) and word of mouth (Huffman, 2017). While the platform has continued to grow, there is limited analyses on the impact it can have on learning opportunities for practitioners, specifically current or aspiring school leaders seeking to develop their skills.

While researchers have pointed to the effectiveness of podcasts as a learning tool (Kidd, 2011), this medium is not often explored in the literature on school leader professional development. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore how institutions of higher education and school districts can use podcasts as a professional development tool. To situate our discussion, we first explain the context that necessitates that school leaders use podcasts as a professional development medium. Second, we use the literature on the impact of podcasts on students' learning and engagement as the scholarly foundation for the use of podcasts. We then turn our attention to exploring how podcasts can be beneficial to support aspiring school leaders' application of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL; National Policy Board for Education, 2015) and current school leaders' professional development. In addition, we provide implications and recommendations for school leadership preparation programs and school districts who seek to add podcasts to their curricula and professional development offerings. Lastly, because of the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, considering podcasts as a tool for current and future leaders becomes critically important.

THE SCHOOL LEADER REALITY: THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Identifying alternatives including podcasts can alleviate time and cost restrictions for school districts throughout the country. Periodically school leaders must travel to professional development (PD) sessions sponsored by the school district, which can create logistical problems. This includes travel time to and from the training location, ensuring someone (e.g., assistant principal, dean, etc.) monitors the school, and delaying projects and other responsibilities.

School leaders have busy schedules, which includes communicating with colleagues after work hours. Further, they are expected to complete district tasks including budgets and teacher assessments while managing student behaviors (Findlay, 2015). The daily requirements leave little time to engage in activities that may improve their productivity. Having limited time to receive professional development is detrimental to their growth as leaders because they do not have the opportunity to interact with other practitioners. Frequently F2F meetings with district leaders and staff are one day events with no or limited follow up (Lavigne, et al., 2016). The inconsistency does not support the needs of veteran administrators struggling to adjust to new requirements or recently appointed administrators trying to understand district mandates. Unfortunately, the challenges are consistent in school districts throughout the nation. While podcasts cannot address every problem, they do offer an alternative that will give leaders more time and the opportunity to revisit a topic when it is convenient. This is particularly important considering the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic presents. In addition, districts would save money and time by cutting various costs (e.g., speaker fees and planning).

Saving costs by utilizing podcasts as a tool would also be beneficial for post-secondary institutions. For graduate students enrolled in Master's and Doctoral programs, faculty could

tape podcasts and upload to platforms including Moodle, Canvas, and Blackboard. For aspiring administrators, they would have the flexibility to dedicate time to studying, completing work tasks (e.g., lesson plans and budgets), and collaborating with classmates on important projects. While some colleges offer an array of F2F, FO (fully online), and MM (mixed-mode) classes; committing to integrating podcasts could save money by lowering overall costs for heating, electricity, dedicated classroom space, and faculty. Moreover, the podcasts would meet the needs of learners with diverse learning styles including those with varying exceptionalities. For some colleges embracing this new idea could be difficult. However, the shift is consistent with technological changes in our society that have created mobile learners. College administrators that fail to adapt to the "new normal" could find their school closing or experiencing a decrease in enrollment because of escalating costs and students seeking more convenient learning opportunities.

USING A NEW MEDIUM FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The idea of utilizing technology including podcasts to share information with students/professionals has existed for some time (Bongey et al., 2006). However, this has occurred primarily with undergraduate students. While a few studies have examined how podcasts impact graduate and professional students the limited focus on aspiring or current school leaders has created a gap in the research (Lawlor & Donnelly, 2010; Lin et al., 2015). For this reason, identifying alternative learning opportunities for school leaders is important. Rarely do they have the time to leave their school for several hours to attend professional development (PD) sessions. Podcasts are a viable option considering their popularity, convenience, and low cost. Some of the research on podcasts including the impact on learning, accessibility, and student engagement suggests that they are an ideal option to supplant or supplement current PD (Fronek et al., 2016). For this reason, in the subsections below we focus on the literature that has examined the impact of podcasts on college students' learning. We use this research as a foundation highlighting the need for podcasts for aspiring and current school leaders.

Impact on Learning

Researchers suggest that podcasts have led to a positive impact on student learning. For example, a study conducted by Wathne and Brodahl (2017) developed 46 podcasts for a course, which enrolled math teachers. The researchers used video podcasts to determine how they impacted teacher's perceptions of learning. The findings determined that teachers could easily deconstruct the materials and found the format helpful. This is noteworthy because districts could develop audio and/or video podcasts depending on the content and overall costs. Further, it would allow district leaders to integrate other options into the podcast including synchronous or asynchronous discussions.

In another study of undergraduate students, Evans (2008) investigated the effectiveness of podcasts and how they impacted learning. The students from the study believed that using podcasts was a more effective tool compared to textbooks. Evans suggested that students were "more receptive to podcast material than material delivered in the more of a revision lecture or from the textbook" (p. 496). Evans' findings illuminated the benefits of alternative forms of delivery in contrast to traditional approaches. The author continued, "The results suggest that students find podcasts to be efficient, effective, engaging and easily received learning tools" (p. 497). Ensuring classroom materials are easy to understand and recognize the learning styles of students is critical.

Fouz-Gonzalez's (2019) study utilized podcasts for students that were primarily Spanish speakers. The students were in their second year learning how to speak English. Fouz-Gonzalez (2019) determined, "The results show that the instruction had a positive impact on the

participants' perception of English." (p. 163) While there was not a statistically significant difference between the groups examined, the study "offers empirical evidence that the podcast-based approach adopted here can help adult FL learners improve their pronunciation of aspects that are fossilized in their interlanguage" (p. 165). Overall, the findings indicate that podcasts can benefit various groups including language learners in their quest to understand new information. This is important for educational leaders because they represent various ethnic, racial, and language backgrounds that could benefit from a non-traditional approach to learning.

Accessibility

While professional development is sometimes touted for the impact on learning, the reality is that school leaders have minimal time to engage in these activities because of their busy schedules. To augment their professional development, school districts often provide professional development that is tailored to the unique realities of leading schools in that district. As previously noted, school leaders frequently encounter a dilemma balancing school-based requirements with district professional development meetings. While professional development can be beneficial, districts rarely have the funding to offer consistent training and assessment throughout the school year (Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Thus, offering podcasts as an alternative could ensure administrators can revisit key topics. Although podcasts offer leaders the opportunity to deconstruct information when it is convenient, researchers including Drew (2017) examined the length (minutes) of podcasts. After reviewing various podcasts Drew determined that podcasts below 15 minutes were more beneficial compared to podcasts longer than 30 minutes. This suggests that shorter podcasts could enhance learning in contrast to longer podcasts.

Fernandez et al.'s (2009) longitudinal study of a mixed mode (MM) undergraduate class used 13 podcasts. After completing the course, students filled out evaluations. The authors explained that, "A very important feature of podcasting was its 'accessibility'. Many students suggested that one of the most interesting characteristics of podcasting was that they could listen at any time and in the most convenient location" (p. 389). The study highlights why podcasts can be a useful tool to disseminate information. Moreover, the findings are critical considering the time restraints school leaders encounter. Often, they do not have the flexibility to leave their school or dedicate time to non-school related activities. Another study by Özkan and Güler (2018) of pre-service teachers mirrors Fernandez et al.'s (2009) findings. Participants in Özkan and Güler study indicated that podcasts have several benefits, "they expressed that podcasts can serve as an easily accessible and economical tool for the mobile learners of today" (p. 135). Overall podcasts provide learning opportunities throughout the day that traditional F2F sessions cannot offer.

Student Engagement

Perhaps the most important aspect of podcasts is that the topics peak student's interest. This leads to individuals accessing the information when it is convenient. Ensuring students have access to information has long-term benefits. For instance, Hew (2009) examined studies that focused on podcasts effectiveness in K-12 and higher education settings. The results from student surveys suggested that podcasts can improve student learning. Creating opportunities to enhance student's

understanding of course content is vital. Additionally, McGarr's (2009) literature review of podcasts at post-secondary institutions found that allowing students to develop their own podcasts could be helpful. According to the author, "Use of this student generated content can also facilitate peer learning and contribute to a supportive and constructive class environment" (p. 317). The report highlights the important role student centered activities, including podcasts, can have on student engagement.

The growth of technology has created opportunities for school districts to cut costs, meet the needs of mobile learners, and limit school leaders time away from campus. While podcasts cannot solve every challenge, they do present new ways to engage administrators seeking to develop their skills. Considering the fiscal challenges some districts encounter, identifying innovative approaches to educating their workforce would have a long-term impact on spending and training. For this reason, district officials and post-secondary institutions must adopt new or evolving platforms that make leader's learning opportunities seamless.

TRAINING A NEW CADRE OF SCHOOL LEADERS

Podcasts should be used by post-secondary institutions to train aspiring school leaders, and by school districts to supplement or supplant professional development for current and aspiring leaders. As discussed previously, this currently under-utilized mode of sharing information has implications for educational leaders including positively impacting learning, providing additional avenues for access, and improved student engagement.

Traditional Institutional Modes of Preparing Future Leaders

Current modes of preparing new school leaders and providing professional development to support in-service leaders includes fully online (FO), mixed mode (MM), and face to face (F2F). For instance, during FO courses, work is assigned and submitted according to a set timeline. These learning opportunities offer asynchronous sessions through various digital platforms. Of the three modes of delivery, FO has the least time constraints. Participants in fully online classes are able to determine when they complete the assigned activities around their personal schedule. Only synchronous meetings, if offered, need to be planned in conjunction with the instructor.

For MM courses, online activities and scheduled in person meetings are offered periodically throughout the course. Similar to FO, MM allows the learners to schedule online activities around their own schedules while the instructor dictates the timing of synchronous sessions. By contrast, F2F learning opportunities, the most restrictive as it relates to time, frequently centers the learning experience around the instructor. All of these teaching modes contain time components that can impact preparing current or aspiring school leaders.

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) notes that, "a historic shift is happening in the field of educational leadership…. holding education leaders accountable for the academic success and personal well-being of every student" (2018, p. 1). This shift in philosophy centers on the understanding that school leaders are required to do more than simply "manage school finances, maintain a spotless and safe building, and keep the busses running on time" (NPBEA, 2018, p. 1). By contrast, school leaders are charged with the task of assuring that students are better prepared for post-secondary pursuits including college, careers, and life (NPBEA, 2018). With this in mind NPBEA published a set of research-based standards to guide educational leaders in their quest to improve student-learning outcomes and provide equitable opportunities.

These standards, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 (PSEL), served as the foundation for developing the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, which clarify expectations of performance for early career school leaders. As of 2018, some version of PSEL or NELPS have been adopted by school leadership accreditation entities in nearly all-50 states and the District of Columbia (Education Commission of the States, 2018). As a result, PSEL standards are the heart of preservice leadership training programs and in-service professional development offerings.

Using Podcasts to Train Aspiring Leaders

Understanding that PSEL standards will play an integral role in the certification of pre-service leaders and their evaluations as in-service leaders has been a catalyst for considering innovative ways of addressing these standards. This includes focusing on PSEL standards in leadership preparation programs through the use of podcasts. While traditional methods of instructional delivery support observation and evaluation of the standards, podcasts provide access to in-depth discussions detailing real-life experiences gained from the implementation of the standards. Utilizing podcasts in this manner diversifies leadership perspectives available to students before they enter the profession. For example, instructors would be able to assign podcasts of moderated discussions between practicing school leaders as they describe how they have developed, advocated, and enacted a shared mission, vision, and core values from different contexts (e.g., rural, suburban, or urban; elementary, middle, or high school; or diverse community, faculty, or student populations).

Another example involves future leaders being charged with creating their own informational podcasts discussing the professional capacity of school personnel. Possible student products would include but are not limited to 1) discussions between hiring managers surrounding effective practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse faculty and staff; 2) interviews of practicing school leaders being questioned regarding difficulties, developing capacity, and opportunities for teacher leadership; and 3) compilations of oral histories reflecting on how leaders have maintained their own learning and effectiveness while sustaining a healthy work-life balance.

Overall, the examples can further school leaders' understanding of PSEL standards. For instance, example three aligns with Standard 1 (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) by making available diverse cross-sections of practical applications of missions, visions, and core values in K-12 settings. In addition, example two addresses Standard 6 (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) by placing students in the field alongside leadership professionals for the purpose of deconstructing the processes utilized in managing school personnel. Moreover, the podcasts developed in the second example provide benefits including increasing student engagement (McGarr, 2009), and building the library of resources available to future leaders. Both examples strengthen leaders' understanding of various experiences.

Sharing experiences and information gained through podcasts can be utilized for more than just minor issues. Podcasts can also serve as points of connection between learners and environments beyond their own. This should include intentional discussions about diverse (racially, culturally, linguistically, geographically, etc.) environments and their influences on leadership decisions and student outcomes. Such discussions can prove helpful in developing empathy, a characteristic necessary to move towards cultural responsiveness (Carter, 2009; Warren, 2017). For example, focusing on empathy can precipitate meaningful interactions with leaders from various backgrounds to discuss the importance of compassion for people that are often *othered* (Carter,

2009). Notably, these interactions and paradigmatic shifts are not guaranteed by the use of podcasts. Yet they can be a catalyst for such transitions (Gay, 2013; Warren, 2017). It is important to note that these conversations have implications for leaders who are assigned administrative roles in culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse environments.

Utilizing podcasts to enhance the experiences of preservice leaders has implications for the profession. These implications include providing learners with a more diverse set of leadership perspectives, providing meaningful opportunities to develop empathy for others, and increased student engagement.

Using Podcasts to Supplement Professional Development for In-service Leaders

After proposing the use of podcasts as an avenue for students to actively interact with PSEL standards in leadership training programs, the next logical step is to imagine similar integrations for the professional development of in-service leaders. Utilizing podcasts to supplement, or replace, traditional modes of delivering professional development (FO, MM, and F2F) has implications related to diverse perspectives, development of empathy, and student (learner) engagement. Additional implications include providing in-service learning opportunities that center discussions and activities around a common point, the podcast, and the reduction of prohibitive time restrictions surrounding scheduling professional development for leaders.

Providing meaningful professional development for in-service leaders is a constant challenge for school districts. Thus, podcasts can address topics centered on PSEL standards and other topics in contrast to traditional professional development. In large school districts, leaders could be assigned a period of time (1- 2 weeks) to listen to podcasts about a specific topic. At the end of the assigned period the leaders would get together, F2F or FO, to discuss the podcasts and how the content has influenced their leadership decisions and student outcomes. Smaller districts in collaboration with surrounding districts can use this same strategy. For example, a smaller district working alongside other districts could share resources for professional development and promote problem solving.

One of the implications for integrating podcasts into professional development for school leaders is the potential for relief from time constraints, which require planning large blocks of time. As mentioned above, podcasts can be listened to over a specific period; allowing school leaders to listen to the podcasts at their own convenience and preventing them from having to schedule time away from the campus to participate in lengthy F2F lectures. With this flexibility, and the added benefit of audio only content, leaders can listen to the assigned material from nearly anywhere. More importantly, podcasts can be listened to while completing other mundane tasks (e.g., driving to and from work, tending to chores, working in the yard, etc.). Overall, podcasts for professional development can decrease the amount of time leaders leave campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There are numerous challenges to adopting and integrating podcasts into post-secondary institutions and school districts curriculums. Previous sections provided practical examples of podcasts being used to support the learning of school leaders. The following section provides recommendations for troubleshooting some of the obstacles to integrating podcasts into leadership-training curriculums including how to assess knowledge and ways to secure resources.

Evaluation

At first glance assessing aspiring and current leaders after they listen to podcasts appears challenging. Current scholarship and leadership preparation materials illuminated some suggestions to guide the evaluation processes. Glickman et al. (2018) compiled a list of 15 characteristics of successful professional development. Focusing on the latter portion of this list which includes "(12) follow-up to support application of learning; 13) ongoing, data-based program assessment; 14) continuous professional development that becomes a part of the school culture; and 15) development of leadership capacity" (pp. 327-328) provides some insight into meaningful ways of evaluating both pre-service and in-service leaders after listening to selected podcasts.

Evaluation of aspiring leaders could be addressed in numerous ways. For instance, knowledge gained from the podcasts could be assessed through traditional tests. However, formal assessments do not consistently capture the complexity of leadership decisions. Instead, assessments should provide opportunities for learners to apply what they learned. For this reason, learners should be asked to apply what was ascertained from the podcasts to their places of employment. This type of assessment supports learning and impacts leadership capacity.

Current school leaders should be assessed in the same ways as aspiring leaders, simply with different expectations and outcomes. Because these leaders are already practicing in the profession, their evidence of learning is evaluated through changes in leadership behaviors as evidenced by assessments like 360 evaluations, and implementation and continuation of data-informed leadership practices.

Resources

Finding podcasts to support leadership training in post-secondary institutions and school districts should be addressed collaboratively. Educational leadership faculty and district level leaders should be working together with regional educational service centers to identify specific areas of need based on PSEL standards. Questions asked in this leadership needs assessment should include:

1. Which areas of PSEL standards are graduates of leadership preparation programs performing well?
2. Which areas of PSEL standards are graduates of leadership preparation programs struggling to perform?
3. Which areas of PSEL standards do current school leaders need the most support?
4. Which areas of PSEL standards do current school leaders need the least support?

These questions, and others, provide data for educational leadership faculty and district level professional development specialists to use in identifying which standards need to be addressed through podcasts.

The second part of the collaboration focuses on securing quality podcasts to address the specified PSEL standards. Shouldering the cost of purchasing or developing quality podcasts should be a collaborative effort between those benefitting from their use: post-secondary institutions, school districts, and regional educational resource centers. Negotiations should include how much each entity will dedicate to build a library of podcasts focused on leadership development and what current skills and resources are available to begin recording purposeful podcasts. The collaborative approach provides opportunities for multiple districts to benefit from the purchase of podcasts. It also provides a diverse spectrum of leaders to participate in the development of the podcasts.

CONCLUSION

At the time of writing this article, our world is in the middle of unprecedented times with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, a number of our nation's school districts, and colleges and universities have closed for the foreseeable future. While this has drastically impacted the way teaching and learning is conducted, it does underscore the necessity for using podcasts as professional development tool for both aspiring and current school leaders. Our hope is that during this time leaders are still able to have access to professional development. There are many ways podcasts can serve as a platform for leaders to hear from veterans about how they are leading their schools during the pandemic. Although we do not know when schools will reopen, we do know that our leaders must be prepared to lead in a new era. We believe it is critical that higher education professionals who prepare future educational leaders integrate podcasts into the curriculum, so they see podcasts as a viable option.

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STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL INFLUENCES ON QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the deterioration of education quality catches on global attention in both policy and practice. The main purpose of this study was to explore the influence of politics on quality management practices in the secondary education of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR) of Ethiopia. This study utilized a multi-case study design with a purposive sampling technique to draw data from experts from the Ministry, regional education bureau, zonal education department, and woreda education offices. To that end, 18 experts were recruited to participate in interviews. The data gathered from interviewees were analyzed using NVivo 8 version combined with thematic data analysis procedures. The study revealed that the political practices of the country have been affecting the internal administration of the education system in three areas: by nominating educational managers at different levels, by forming One-to-Five Networks at different echelons, and by offering the mandates to avoid dropout and repetition. The study concluded that politics influenced the autonomy of educational institutions and their quality management practices in secondary education. Thus, the government should revisit its practices on education and allow educators manage their educational administration and organization business.

INTRODUCTION

The successes of quality management reforms are highly dependent on the will and commitment of the politics of a given country (Bigham & Ray, 2012; Devi, 2017; Kasuga, 2019; Levy, Cameron, Hoadley, & Naidoo, 2018). In supporting this, Bruns and Schneider (2016) stated that education reform is "a highly charged and politicized process; what gets implemented—and its impact—depends as much or more on the politics of the reform process as the technical design of the reform" (p. 5). Furthermore, in low-income countries with inadequate state capacity, the highest demand for knowledgeable and skillful human power comes from the state itself (Das, Biswas, & Roy, 2015; Hickey & Hossain, 2019). Various low-income countries lack the human capital to staff at the state level (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007; Osuji, 2011). In this sense, the provision of education has implications for quality and its management when Harding and Stasavage (2014) stated "in an environment of weak state capacity, democracy may prompt the government to increase education access, but not educational inputs" (p. 230). In one way or another, politics is affecting the attainment of educational goals (Ekpiken & Ifere, 2015; Hickey & Hossain, 2019).

The Ethiopian education management hierarchy follows from the top to the bottom—the federal ministry, the regional governments, the zone administrations, the woreda (district) management, and schools. The country has been engaging in Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that can facilitate the

Ethiopian path towards Middle-Income Countries by 2030 (MoE, 2015) since the date the country adopted these international commitments. Recognizing the value of education in realizing these goals, Ethiopia has given much emphasis to the expansion of the education systems at all levels by establishing the five rolling Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs) (Mc Cormac, 2012; Verwimp, 1999; World Bank, 2013). Due to ESDPs implementations, the number of schools, teachers, and students tremendously increased at all levels. From 2005 to 2017, secondary schools were established, 6253 teachers were recruited and 123,535 students were enrolled (MoE, 2010, 2017). Despite such enormous expansion of education at all levels, the quality issue is a point of public outcries and discussions among educational stakeholders in Ethiopia (Amare et al. 2006; Derebssa, 2006; Tekeste, 2006).

As a reaction to public worries and concerns about quality education, the MoE and international development partners (World Bank) endorsed the General Education Quality Improvement Packages (GEQIP I & II) since 2008 (MoE, 2008). Besides, various intervention mechanisms such as student-centered and continuous assessment were established, in-service principals and teachers training was provided, and instructional satellite TV programs were beamed to improve student achievement (MoE, 2015). However, student achievement in these years have not improved as per the goals of GEQIP and educational interventions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Ethiopia has been spending about 20 percent of her national budget on education since 2000 (Ministry of Education (MoE) & Education Strategy Center (ESC), 2018; World Bank, 2013, 2016). Furthermore, Ethiopia allocated 145 billion Ethiopian birr for ESDP V (MoE & ESC, 2018). Besides, 25000 principals and supervisors have been given training on how to lead the teaching and learning processes (MoE, 2015). Despite all these backbreaking activities to manage the quality of education, student achievement was still unacceptably low. For instance, in the years 2014-2017, the majority of students who took University Entrance Examinations (UEE) scored below standard (National Education Assessment and Examinations Agency, 2019). Besides, the World Bank (2013) also reported that student achievement at the secondary school level was and also high school graduates lack the necessary skills to join the world of work. Similarly, student result in the 2014 National Learning Assessment (NLA) also echoes the prevalence of students' low academic achievement.

Studies on the reasons for poor student achievement have resulted in different findings. Major reasons for student low achievement were lack of inputs (Amare et al. 2006; Belay & Melaku, 2019; Derebssa, 2006; Fekede & Massimiliano, 2012; Melaku, 2019; MoE, 2015; Mulu, 2012) and ineffectiveness of school leadership (Dawit, 2018; Dimo, 2017; Dimo, Tekaligne, & Wubayehu, 2017; Kemal, 2016). Other reasons include the lack of teacher and student motivation and commitment to the teaching and learning process (Abebe, 2015; Dagne & Beshir, 2019; Engida & Zeytu, 2017; Giertz, 2016; MoE & ESC, 2018; Mulugeta, 2014). However, the influence of politics on quality management practices in Ethiopia has not been studied. Besides, the political analysis of education is scanty (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2011; Gift & Wibbels, 2014) especially in low-income countries (Bruns & Schneider 2016; Kingdon et al. 2014; Nicolai et al. 2014; Wales, Magee, & Nicolai, 2016). The insufficient findings in this academic gap has prompted the researchers to conduct a study on the political influence on education quality management.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Major Research Question:
How do political practices influence quality management practices in secondary education of Southern, Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region of Ethiopia?

Research Sub-Questions:

1. In what way does a political assignment of educational leaders affect quality management practices of secondary education in Ethiopia?
2. What is the effect of the One-to-Five Networks implementation on quality management practices of secondary education in Ethiopia?
3. What is the effect of the mandate to avoid dropouts and repetitions on quality management practices in secondary education in Ethiopia?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study adds theoretical and practical knowledge to the dearth of literature on how politics influences the quality management of secondary education. From the theoretical instances, this study will bridge the research gap in the area of political practices on quality management in secondary education. Practically, the study will offer pertinent and timely information about political influences on quality management challenges for policymakers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politics

Politics is the process by which some people try to influence formally or informally the actions of others (Joseph, 2015). Supporting this, Young, Levin, and Wallin (2007) labelled the term politics as a procedure accepted by a certain society to manipulate how the power, wealth, status, and honor are shared among members of the society. Based on these general definitions of politics, one can contemplate that politics involves the power of people to have more domination in decision-making than others. Furthermore, politics is inevitable. Ramsey (2006) stated, "wherever there is the power to be had, resources to be divided, recognition to be earned, or influence to be brokered, there is politics" (p. 79). The author continued to state there was always politics wherever there were followers and leaders. Thus, the intention of politics can have a positive or negative effect on the quality of education and its management.

The Relationship between Politics and Education

The goals of education are derived from the ruling party. Ozurumba and Ebuara (2014) stated, "In the philosophy of education, the content of education is expressed in curriculum, syllabuses, and textbooks which have tended to reflect the dominant ideologies and policy outcome of government in power" (p. 196). Policy planning and its implementation are determined by political context (Davi, 2017). Moreover, political will and commitment affect political action and its effects on social policy (Michael, 2009). Strengthening the above, Unchendu (2004) stated that the politics of education included multifaceted interactions surrounded by different interest groups, policymakers, politicians, researchers, educationists, and officials. He further added that, at all levels of educational hierarchy, these practitioners need educational organizations to assist in achieving these specific goals.

Education is a powerful tool to create political power, to maintain the consensus on political power, to enhance individuals' potentials, and to introduce and socialize individuals with the system of politics. The effectiveness of the political party system is partly based on the effectiveness of education policy (Bigham & Ray, 2012; Devi, 2017; Kayode, Oluwafemi, & Victor, 2012). This is due to the intentionally planned education system that contributes to the function of the political system. Government policy controls the education system and it is there to serve a function of politics. Hence, politics determines the type of education citizens need and the type of education, in turn, reflects the competency of politicians. Therefore, educational policies are not free of politics (Bigham & Ray, 2012; Devi, 2017).

Furthermore, the system of government in Sub-Saharan African countries grants power and an education ladder that permits and perpetuates inept leadership or management. Due to this, educational reforms have failed and will continue to fail since the following two practices continue. First, incapable leaders and managers are involved in the solution of educational problems in the absence of knowing the real problems, and second, inexperienced and inept managers bring the desired change by using similar solution repeatedly and anticipate unique outcomes (Kayode, Oluwafemi, & Victor, 2012).

Quality Education

Different scholars define the word quality differently. For example, some scholars define quality as multidimensional (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002), relative (Harvey & Green, 1993), dynamic (Adams, 1997), very abstract (Scott, 1994), and slippery (Pfeffer & Coot, 1991) concepts. However, in most countries, two major quality elements underlie their education policies—improving students' cognitive development and enhancing learners' social or emotional development (Sifuna & Sawamura, 2010; UNESCO, 2004). In this study, quality education is defined as practices education systems undergo to ensure every individual's capacity to survive his/her environment (UNICEF, 2006).

Quality Management in Education

Different scholars define the term quality assurance differently. Goetsch and Davis (2005) argued that quality management involved all the "Organization's policies, procedures, plans, resources, processes, and delineation of responsibility and authority, all deliberately aimed at achieving product or service quality levels consistent with customer satisfaction and the organization's objectives" (p. 174). Consistent with the above, Woodhouse (1999) defined quality assurance as "… policies, attitudes, actions, and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced" (p. 30). In quality management literature, terms such as quality assurance, quality management, quality assessment, quality enhancement, quality development, and quality improvement have been used interchangeably (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Hopkin & Lee, 2001). The crux of these meanings is guaranteeing and improving student achievement through institutional efforts (Belwati, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A multiple case study design was employed in this exploration. Since this study investigated issues related to the practitioners' perceptions of political influences on the management of educational quality at different levels of education, the aforementioned design was appropriate.

Moreover, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) stated that "It is important in case of studies for events and situations to be allowed to speak for themselves, rather than to be largely interpreted, evaluated, or judged by the researcher" (p. 257). A multiple case study was chosen because it is strong in presenting reality (Creswell, 2007), helped depict different opinions on a similar issue (Yin, 2009), and supported researchers to conclude the results and develop a theory (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Sample and Sampling Technique

In this study, the researchers asked the heads of the Ministry, the SNNPR and the Sheka, Kaffa, and Bench-Maji zones to recommend research participants who were professionally committed with a minimum of five years of working experience in their current positions. As a result, 4 experts from the Ministry, 3 from the SNNPR, and 3 from Sheka, Kaffa, and Bench-Maji zones were recruited by purposive sampling technique as research participants. Moreover, the researchers asked the heads of Woreda Education Offices to locate committed and responsible experts with five years of working experience to be involved in the study. As a result, eight experts from Masha, Andracha, Sheko, Decha, Gimbo, and Chena Woreda Education Offices were selected as research participants. The following table summarizes the background information of the participants. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Background Information of Participants

Management Level	Age	Sex	Education Qualification	Years in Current Position	Total Years of Experience	Assigned Code
Ministry of Education	45	M	First-degree	7	20	MOEE-1
	54	M	Second-degree	5	30	MOEE-2
	41	M	Second-degree	6	18	MOEE-3
	50	M	First-degree	5	26	MOEE-4
Regional Education Bureau	52	M	First-degree	7	28	REBE-1
	46	M	First-degree	12	25	REBE-2
	44	M	Second-degree	6	19	REBE-3
Zone Education Department	37	M	First-degree	8	18	ZEDE-1
	43	M	First-degree	6	22	ZEDE-2
	59	M	Second-degree	7	40	ZEDE-3
Woreda Education Office	39	M	First-degree	6	19	WEOE-1
	32	M	First-degree	8	17	WEOE-2
	30	M	First-degree	5	8	WEOE-3
	42	M	First-degree	8	23	WEOE-4
	48	M	First-degree	6	26	WEOE-5
	36	M	First-degree	10	16	WEOE-6
	42	M	First-degree	5	19	WEOE-7
	49	M	Second-degree	5	30	WEOE-8

Data Collection

Interviews with research participants were employed as the method to collect data in this study. The contents of the interview involve how experts from different hierarchy perceive political influence, in what aspect politics influence them, and the effect of this influence on their roles in performing their duties. Before using the interview instrument, five relevant experts from the field were invited to review the contents of the interviews. Their comments and recommendations for improving the contents, formats, and the language of the interview instrument were incorporated in the final version of the interview guides. An approximately 40 minute interview was conducted with each of the experts from the Ministry to woreda offices. The process of interviewing was audio recorded to help the researchers minimize the loss of information during the interview processes.

Data Analysis Technique

For clarity, an in-depth interview was conducted in Amharic (Ethiopian National language). Initially, the recorded data were transcribed into Amharic in printed copies given to all the interviewees to verify the accuracy of their responses. In this study, for qualitative analysis, the software NVivo 8 was employed. The data analysis procedure followed the six staged approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the transcribed Amharic version was translated into English by using language experts. In the second stage, the transcribed data were imported into the NVivo 8 program. The process of coding was done on NVivo while the researchers listened to recordings and transcriptions when necessary. In stage three, to identify the themes across data sets, the researchers read and reread the coded nodes on NVivo. Then all nodes with similar ideas were merged to form themes. As a result, 12 themes were noted. In the fourth stage, some primary codes created main themes, while others produced sub-themes. Stage five involved the process of identifying the nature and the essence of each theme and determining what part of the data each theme captured. In the final stage, the resulting themes were aligned with the research questions and direct quotes were cited as supporting evidence.

RESULTS

As a result of data analysis, three major themes emerged: political assignment of educational leaders, One-to-Five Networks, and the mandate to avoid dropouts and repetitions. Under each theme, the responses of experts from the Ministry of education, region education bureau, zone education departments, and woreda education offices were analyzed. Then, the researchers compared and contrasted the participants' responses by level and by theme.

The Assignment of Educational Managers at All Levels

The ministerial-level experts' responses

The researchers asked the participants how educational leaders were placed in their respective positions. Concerning this, one of the experts from the Ministry asserted:

> The assignments of educational managers are based on their political participation. While educational institutions need to be managed by those who took educational management courses and graduated with these fields, the politicians assign agricultural and health professional graduates to manage educational institutions (MOEE-2).

The researchers then asked in what way political assignment of educational leaders affected their performance. He continued to state:

> Since the nomination is based on political support, the government places incapable people in the management positions. Due to this, the assigned leaders or managers are working simply to keep their positions. They do not accept experts' recommendations on how to improve learning. Hence, such kind of assignment affects experts' morale, motivation, and commitment (MOEE-2).

Another expert also stated the political placement in such a way, "The provision of education management position is purely political. In the Ministry, all directorate positions (e.g., inspection directorate, teacher development directorate, and so forth) require political support" (MOEE-4). Moreover, he argued the influence of the placement practices in the following way:

> I can say that it negatively affect our performances. Due to the nominated leaders' lack of expertise, they use their positions as a tool to keep people silent. However, the roles of managers are to facilitate working conditions and to maintain the morale of workers to realize the goals of education. Nevertheless, these roles were not realized (MOEE-4).

On the contrary, one of the experts from the same level agreed with the assignment of educational leaders based on their political support. He stated:

> To achieve the objectives of the ruling party, the government assigns educational leaders it trusts. The belief is that people who do not support the existing government might not lead to achieving the aims of the government (MOEE-1).

Regional experts' responses

At this level, several respondents had negative attitudes toward the political assignment of leaders except one who had a positive attitude toward the assignment.

A respondent who believed that the selection of education management based on politics could contribute a lot to the expansion of the education system because those who were nominated could manage the education business. As a result, they improved student learning. He continued to argue that "Because of coordinated efforts of the government through its assigned managers, various students were promoted from the existing grade to the next grade level" (REBE-2).

Contrarily, others perceived the practice of educational leader assignment as overlooking the importance of competence and expertise. One of the experts from the region asserted:

The appointments of heads at the position of Regional Education Bureau and its directorates are based on political involvement. In our region, to be assigned to leadership positions, you must participate in politics and you must be from the Sidama ethnic group (REBE-1).

He further added that "as Ethiopia is following ethnic-based federalism, indigenous people who are residing where the region is situated takes advantage. Due to this, those people who came from other zones do not get top positions" (REBE-1). He continued that the current practice of assigning managers for political consumption affects all other experts' enthusiasm to contribute to their country.

Another participant argued the political placement of educational managers with disappointment. He stated:

> I am not happy with what's going on in the assignment of educational directorates. While education management and related graduates are in the market, the politicians place a graduate of accounting to manage educational institutions. Furthermore, even though you have a first or second degree in educational management, no one assigns you unless you are from Sidama ethnic group (REBE-3).

He continued to state that such an ethnic-based assignment affected other experts to think negatively. They felt as they were worthless and could contribute nothing for their country because of not a member of Sidama ethnic. However, in general, the majority of respondents from the region feel that political assignment of educational leaders negatively affected their performances.

Zone experts' responses

The nomination of educational managers at the zonal education department level is also based on political affiliation. An expert from the zonal education departments contended:

> I have been working as an expert in this organization since 2000. What I notice is that the provision of the department head position is based on political needs. Currently, our head is a graduate of engineering and the politicians assigned him to manage the education department (ZEDE-2).

One can contemplate that the participant's response towards political assignment seems negative. Based on the above feeling, the respondent was asked whether there was a problem with assigning engineering graduates to manage the education organization. He continued to state that:

> Assigning inexpert individuals in educational management position not only ignored educational tasks but also overlooked human aspects in a given organization. The absence of this human factor leads to experts not working hard" (ZEDE-2).

One can infer that it is difficult to expect the effectiveness of such an assignment because those engineering graduates are better at enhancing construction and related issues that are different from managing the education process.

Moreover, another participant contended the existence of politically assigned leaders at all levels and the impact of such an assignment on their roles and responsibilities. He stated:

> At any level, the top position is reserved for politically nominated people. The problem is those assigned people do not have the knowledge and skills to manage educational tasks. As a result, they simply work with little interest (ZEDE-1).

From the above excerpt, one can contemplate that experts were disappointed with their roles and responsibilities because their voices and interests were ignored. On the other hand, an expert believed that political assignment based on political awareness contributed to the effectiveness of the education system. He continued to argue that:

> Before two decades, the number of schools, teachers, and students was very small compared to the current number of teachers and students. This is a great success because the government attempted to extend education to disadvantaged societies. Without a political assignment of educational management, it is difficult to achieve this (ZEDE-3).

The researchers followed up by asking if education quality could be maintained by opening up more schools. He added that:

> As we are living in a poor country, we cannot expand a lot of schools and maintain their qualities at the same time. The government should work on access to education first and quality issues second. It takes time to improve the quality of education (ZEDE-3).

This participant was inferring that the provision of quality education was secondary. However, literature shows that education access and quality could go hand in hand in general, at the zonal level, many experts had negative attitudes toward political assignments.

Woreda experts' responses

For experts at woreda level, the appointment of political leaders to education is debatable. One of the interviewees claimed that:

> When a new political party comes to power, assigning those individuals who are politically nominated is not a new phenomenon. Such kind of assignment boosts the achievement of educational goals. In addition, it shows the government commitment and support to education.

On the other hand, many experts complained about the political placement of educational leaders and its negative effect on experts' motivation and interest. One participant noted:

> It is unthinkable to be assigned as a woreda education office head unless the ruling party supports you. I know someone has a second degree in educational management and has long years of management experience but he did not obtain any position (WEOE-4).

From this, one can figure out that having long years of experience does not guarantee one to the head position. Sometimes, people may have a negative attitude toward those people who have competence and participation in politics. Anyway, the respondent contended the prevalence of the strong hands of politics.

For the same reason, one of the experts affirmed the prevalence of biased appointments. He claimed, "In our office, those people who have a close relationship with the political leaders have a position to manage the offices" (WEOE-1).

Another research participant explained the pressure of political affairs on quality management practices:

> I do not want to be led by someone who is under-qualified and lacks expertise because it is difficult to communicate with this kind of person. He or she oppositely understands you. For instance, if you ask for something to be improved, he/she will think that you undermine his/her expertise (WEOE-6).

In general, at the woreda level, the majority of respondents were not happy with the trend of political assignment to educational positions.

Cross case analysis of political assignment of educational leaders

Experts at the Ministry, region, zone, and woreda education offices have held opposite positions. Some of the experts supported the existing trend of political assignment and others refuted the trend. Those who supported the trend argued that because of the political assignment of leaders, students' promotion rate increased and education expansion arose. Because of these, it was argued that the political placement of leadership positions contributed positively and supported the education system. On the other hand, those who refuted the current trends of political nomination

argued that the system was placing incapable individuals at all levels of educational management. For instance, agricultural, accounting, and engineering graduates were leading educational top positions. Therefore, it was said that the majority of leaders did not have the competency of leading educational organizations. They use their political power in the absence of workers' motivation and commitment to accomplish educational tasks. However, in summary, more respondents were having a negative attitude of the political assignments since it ignored their voices in the decision-making process.

One-to-Five Networks Implementation

One-to-five Networks is a kind of cooperative learning in Ethiopia that is composed of one high achiever, two medium-hard workers, and two low doers working together to improve their learning. Experts' responses to the One-to-Five Networks Implementation is presented by level of category in the following:

Ministry of Education experts' responses

To improve the quality of education, the government of Ethiopia introduced One-to-Five Networks as one of the intervention mechanisms (MoE & ESC, 2018). It is imperative to see the worth of these networks to enhance student academic achievement. One of the participants from the Ministry stated:

> Currently, One-to-Five Networks are prevalent from the Ministry to students' levels. If it is an aspect of cooperative learning, it works only at the school and classroom levels. Because of 1-5 arrangements, rather than focusing on quality assurance, we were emphasizing on evaluating and reporting an individual's attitudes towards the existing politics every week (MOEE-3).

From the above citation, one can deduce that employees in the Ministry did not have an awareness of the importance of the Networks. It is odd to evaluate an individual's perception of the existing politics instead of focusing on learning. What matters most is the commitment and expertise to accomplish teaching-learning related tasks.

In like manner, another participant observed the power of One-to-Five Networks in his roles of work and he argued:

> I think One-to-Five classifications affected our practices negatively. ….These One-to-Five Networks were assigned to control the action and movement of other people secretly. Hence, the employees were working by following directions so they would not be fired. (MOEE-1).

Contrarily, a participant endorsed the importance of One-to-Five arrangements. He argued that because of this categorization, experts acquired knowledge and skills to manage educational institutions. He continued to contend, "When experts from different departments come together and discuss their respective department's problems, we can draw lessons that can boost the performance of employees." (MOEE-2).

To sum up, at the Ministry level, the majority of respondents had negative attitudes towards the One-to-Five Networks implementation.

Region experts' responses

Respondents from the region level believed that the One-to-Five categorization certainly affected their daily practices. One of the experts claimed:

> One-to-Five Network is a bottleneck for education quality management. Many times, I made plans to visit zones and schools but I did not apply my plans because of the evaluation of One-to-Five Networks. The politicians' emphasis is more on political marshaling within education institutions (REBE-3).

The above extract shows the political categorizations hampered the regular duties of supervising schools. Rather than emphasizing on improving schools and their personnel, the employees were wasting their time on evaluating one another.

Another interviewee argued the burden of this categorization on quality management practices. He claimed:

> One-to-Five Networks affect quality management practices. Because of this program, every expert is expected to participate in the evaluation. Hence, it creates unnecessary workload on educational experts and contributes nothing to the achievement of educational goals. Such kind of practices affects the motivation of experts (REBE-2).

On the other hand, one expert from the region believed that One-to-Five Networks contributed a lot to educational effectiveness. Due to its application, level experts evaluate educational strategies and solutions to problems weekly. Regardless, the majority of the respondents at the regional level had a negative attitude towards the One-to-Five Networks classifications.

Zone experts' responses

One of the participants from the zones level commented on the One-to-Five Networks:

> Surprisingly, when supervisors and inspectors come from the region, their first question asked is the extent to which zones arranged political networks. They force us to organize different political classification. If you do little about learning and you are only active in political arrangements, your zone will get incentives (ZEDE-3).

From what was claimed, the different groupings discouraged workers to emphasize on capacity enhancement. Because of this, experts at this level were not fully offering supports expected of them, resulting in negative impact on quality management practices.

Another participant remarked that the One-to-Five orderings negatively affected his practices. He could not attend the meeting of groupings because of school visitation. His supervisor then wrote him a warning letter not to miss this arrangement again. Since then, he did not care to supervise schools. He said he needed to keep his job (ZEDE-1).

On the contrary, a participant claimed that the arrangements positively contributed to work effectively at the level. Because of the implementation of classifications, they could identify underperforming experts and warn them to improve their practices. However, on the whole, the majority of respondents at this level had negative attitudes toward One-to-Five Networks.

Woreda experts' responses

Respondents from the woreda level were also discouraged with the high political control of education. One of the experts stated:

> The office head encourages us to focus on 1-5 arrangements. Therefore, on Friday afternoon, no one gives a response to clients because we have been occupied with the troublesome evaluation of the implementation of 1-5 networks that do not add value to student learning (WEOE-5).

The domination of the One-to-Five Networks on quality management practices is obvious. The experts at woreda level were forced to discuss the issue. Similarly, another interviewee stated, "Zone encourages us to focus on 1-5 networks. If inspectors come from the region or zone, they will initially ask you about different political categorizations" (WEOE-1).

A cross-case analysis of One-to-Five Networks implementation

The participants from the different levels of educational management had positive and negative attitudes toward the One-to-Five Networks implementation. Those who support the implementation argued that they acquired knowledge and skill because different experts came together and discussed the issues of education. Moreover, the application helped them evaluate the effective strategies of education and offer solutions to the problems. Furthermore, they secured the chance of capacity building practices through these classifications.

On the other hand, those who refuted the One-to-Five categorizations questioned the importance of classification at Ministry, region, zone, and woreda levels. They argued that because of the high emphasis on these classifications, quality assurance issues were forgotten. As a result, it focused on evaluating individuals' attitudes toward the existing ruling party while controlling the actions of experts secretly. Hence, they stated that such kind of networks affected their motivation and morale. In general, the majority of respondents at all levels had negative attitudes toward the One-to-Five classifications.

The Influences of the Mandate to Avoid Dropouts and Repeaters

The Ethiopian government's introduction of the mandate to avoid dropouts and repeaters is intended to enhance internal efficiency of of the education system.

Ministerial experts' responses

One of the experts argued:

> The mandate to avoid dropouts and repeaters comes from the top (political context). Then, the Ministry accepts it and turns it to the regions which in turn forward it to the zones. The zones will then give it to the woreda education offices. It will eventually be passed on to the teachers through the schools. Therefore, it is a kind of roll-down direction (MOEE-1).

One can easily figure out that the primary responsible person in avoiding dropouts and repeaters is the teacher. In the same way, another interviewee contended the supremacy of the directive and furthered his argument:

> It is difficult to avoid dropouts and repeaters. First, some students and teachers are not interested in the teaching-learning process. They will drop the teaching and learning process. Second, the lack of inputs discourages student class attendance. Therefore, they may have to repeat the class (MOEE-4).

The above citation shows the difficulty of abolishing student dropouts and repetitions. It is obvious that when parents do not value education, they want their children to help them in

agricultural activities and household chores. In this case, it is troublesome to eradicate dropouts and repetitions.

However, another expert believed that the order contributed a lot in minimizing the trend of dropouts and repeaters. He argued that because of the mandate, experts at different levels work hard to minimize educational wastages. However, the majority of experts at this level considered it a political agenda.

Region experts' responses

Interviewees from the region verified that the direction regulated their quality management practices. One of the experts explained:

> As an expert, the order to avoid dropouts and repeaters is directly connected to our performance appraisals. when the number of dropouts and repeaters increases, our performance appraisal results will go down. The directive seems to overlook other factors such as social perceptions toward education, student socioeconomic status, and the motivation and qualification of the teachers (REBE-2).

Indeed, experts from the region cannot change student socioeconomic status nor teacher motivation. It is difficult to practice the ordinance with such problems. On the other hand, one interviewee clarified the importance of the mandate as he claimed:

> The government's ordinance is timely and crucial. Millions of children enroll each year. However, at the end of the academic year, about 30% of students either drop their schooling or repeat the existing grades. The mandate is put in place to minimize the extent of such an issue.

As a result of the mandate, the dropout and repetition rates have decreased. However, one would wonder what has been done to reduce the dropout and repetition rates. Are the students academic grades been manually adjusted to be higher? In general, the majority of respondents at this level assumed the mandate as a wrong command because preconditions were not met.

Zone experts' responses

The responses of the experts at this level also showed the mandate as a drawback. One of the experts said:

> I made a report to zone-education department head about the existing numbers of failures and returns and he saw the report and compared it with the instruction he took and told me to modify the data in line with the zone's mandate. Because of my boss's command, I was forced to report what our zone did not accomplish (ZEDE-3).

As can be seen from the above excerpt, the directive obliged the heads and their subordinates to cook the data. For sure, such practices have an impact on quality management practices. The experts had to report false information under pressure.

Similarly, one of the participants argued, 'Educational stakeholders need to know the triggering factors for the mandate issues and take some measures to combat the problem. However, preconditions were forgotten' (ZEDE-1). The interviewee rightly argued that, before attempting any intervention mechanism, it is better to know the cause of the problem is without proper academic assessment.

Woreda experts' responses

An interviewee at the woreda level commented on the power of this mandate as follows:

> The implementation of the mandate did not consider the actual situation of the woredas. As these areas are cash crop areas, various students leave their education to glean coffee. Because of this, students drop their education for two-three months. However, because of the fear of poor performance results, school principals allow them to continue their education (WEOE-1).

As can be seen from the above, students who failed to attend their classes for three months were allowed to continue their school with no makeup classes. For the same reason, one of the respondents contended the influence of the direction affected students' examination results. He stated:

> Since schools are signed an agreement to eliminate internal inefficiency, they provide free marks just to obtain high-performance appraisals. Some other schools are working to enhance exam cheating in the National and Regional Examinations (WEOE-5).

Because of the difficulties of avoiding the inefficiency, the experts at different levels try to fool their supervisors by facilitating examination cheating and offering free marks to students. Such practices affect policy planners too.

On the contrary, an interviewee believed that the ordinance helped them minimize the dropout and repetition rates and, as a result, everyone worked hard to score high. He also claimed that the mandate helped avoid educational wastages. However, in general, the majority of respondents at this level refuted the mandate.

A cross-case analysis of the mandate to avoid dropout and repetition

The respondents who supported the ordinance stated that the mandate was timely and crucial. They worked hard to achieve high student performance and reduce the number of dropouts and repetitions.

Those who refuted stated that the mandate overlooked other factors such as student socioeconomic status, societal attitude towards education, motivation, and commitment of both teachers and students. The mandate, intentionally or unintentionally, encouraged false reports, allowed exam cheating, and provided free marks just to avoid repetitions and dropouts. In general, the majority of experts at all levels were not happy with the mandate.

DISCUSSIONS

In this study, it was found that the politicians assign educational managers without clearly set criteria. This finding resonates with the findings of Abebaw (2019), MoE and ESC (2018) and Tesfaye (2019). They found that the process of the assignment of educational managers was based on political affiliation. Our argument is that politics is inevitable. Politicians need to assign capable, experienced, motivated, and committed leaders to the different hierarchy of education. When inept people are assigned as educational leaders, they might apply their political power for their self-interest purposes by being part of the political machinery overlooking public interests.

Besides, this study found the existence of a negative attitude toward the establishment of the One-to-Five Networks on the part of the managers from the Ministry to woreda education

offices. This finding is consistent with those of Belilew (2015), MoE & ESC, (2018) and Yohannes, (2015). They claimed that these arrangements affected the motivation and commitment of experts. It is difficult to attain the goals of education by forgetting human power at different levels. On the other hand, cooperative learning has the idea of supporting one another. It is unusual to find a student who is doing well in all academic subjects. In this situation, cooperative learning could be very effective. Students can cooperatively work together to help one another to improve in their areas of weaknesses. However, in Ethiopia, the so-called one high achiever simply supports the rest of the four students who do not work. This high achiever is expected to do assignments, homework, and projects to share with the rest of the group members.

IMPLICATIONS TO EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

Education experts starting from the Ministry of education to woreda education offices were not fulfilling their roles and responsibilities expected of them. They had the challenges of political interferences in the internal administration of education in the form of ordering to avoid internal inefficiency of education, different political arrangements, and assignment of political leaders to manage the education system. The finding of the study shed new light on the provision of autonomy to experts who will work with capable, experienced, and committed educators at all levels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Though the existing Education and Training Policy states schools have the autonomy to manage their internal administration and organization, in practice, politics dominated the education system by nominating educational managers without clear criteria, forces the schools to establish different arrangements and to use 'push-push' approaches. Such practices affect teaching-learning processes and divert the goal of education. Thus, politics influenced the autonomy of educational institutions and their quality management practices. Therefore, the regional and national government need to revisit their practices on education and allow only the educators to manage their education business in terms of internal administration.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

1. How do political practices influence quality management in secondary education of Southern, Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region?
2. In what way does a political assignment of educational leaders affect quality management practices in secondary education?
3. What is the problem with giving a position to Sidama ethnic and why?
4. What is the effect of the One-to-Five Networks implementation on quality management practices?
5. What is the effect of the mandate to avoid dropouts and repetitions on quality management practices?

PLANNING FOR DIFFERENTIATION: UNDERSTANDING MARYLAND TEACHERS' DESIRED AND ACTUAL USE OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Maryland teachers' views on their actual and desired use of differentiated instruction and the implications for professional development planning. Overall, the Maryland teachers who participated in this study desire to use various student-centered differentiated instructional strategies and currently employ some of these. However, our analysis of survey statements showed that the statements that had the greatest difference between Maryland teachers' desired and actual practices referred to practices associated with individualized planning, self-directed learning, and student autonomy. Teachers want to use these constructivist, student-centered approaches more consistently than they currently do. The findings from this study can inform short-term and long-term planning for professional development focusing on differentiated instruction. The gap between teachers' desired and actual use of differentiated instruction can provide a space for professional development planners and educational leaders to engage in individual or group professional inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

The changing cultural and linguistic landscape of today's classrooms in the United States coincides with reform initiatives that have set ambitious student learning goals (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019). While multiple factors may contribute to the achievement of these goals, transforming classroom practice relies on teachers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Thus, scholars and educational reformers have called for paying greater attention to the quality of professional development opportunities available to teachers (Burko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Milner, 2015). Professional development planners must engage teachers as stakeholders rather than as passive targets of professional development (Burko, 2004). Indeed, Putnum and Borko (2000) view teachers as active learners who are engaged in multiple communities of practice. Understanding how teachers are addressing learners' multifaceted needs while fostering deeper learning outcomes is critically important to transforming classroom practices. Focusing on Maryland teachers, this article contributes to a greater understanding of teachers' use of differentiated instruction.

Similar to their peers in other states, Maryland teachers have been exposed to a variety of pedagogical models, programs, strategies, techniques, and activities designed to facilitate constructivist student-centered teaching and learning, such as differentiated instruction, to meet the learning needs of their students (Johnson, Collins, Duperes, & Johansen, 1991; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2009; Polka, 2002). Multiple studies have investigated the desired and actual practices of teaching–learning behaviors in teachers in other U.S. states (Eller, Polka, & Mete, 2019; Peace, Polka, & Mete, 2017; Polka, 2010; Polka, VanHusen, Young, & Minervino, 2016). The present study focused on the desired and actual practices of Maryland teachers' teaching–learning behaviors.

Located on the U.S. East Coast, Maryland has a rapidly diversifying and growing population that is estimated to be 6 million, with 56.80% White, 30.9% African American, 10.4% Hispanic, and 6.7% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This diversity is reflected in the school-age population, where students of color are the fastest growing segment (Maryland State Department of Education [MSDE], 2019.). At the same time, the teaching force in the state of Maryland reflects national trends, which have remained mostly homogenous: White, middle class, and monolingual speakers of English (Banks et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Given the changing demographics, it is imperative to reframe the work of teachers as profoundly grounded in democratic ideals, including a commitment to meet the needs of all learners and to engage in reflective practices (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Hersi, 2019; Leonard, Moore, & Brooks, 2014).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT RESEARCH

The constructivist perspective on learning serves as a useful framework for understanding learning and the assumptions that inform how teachers approach learning. The constructivist perspective views knowledge construction as an engaged meaning-making process in which learners construct their knowledge rather than receive it passively (Allard & Santoro, 2006; Brewer & Daane, 2002; Driscoll, 2018; Wilson, 2018). Central to constructivism is the view that learning is active, includes problem-solving, and is collaborative (Driscoll, 2018; Wilson, 2018). Learning is profoundly learner-centered in the constructivist perspective (Gay, 2010). In learner-centered classrooms, teachers build on students' existing knowledge and encourage problem-solving, collaboration, and a sense of autonomy (Clements & Battista, 1990).

Teachers grounded in constructivist perspectives are reflective and analytical about their practices and can adapt their instruction to meet the needs of their students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Adapting and differentiating instruction is a common approach for meeting the needs of diverse learners (Tomlinson, 2014). Although teachers may be familiar with the concept of differentiating instruction, their practices may be misaligned or they may believe that they have little freedom to implement these approaches (Eller et al., 2019). Polka (2002) and others have observed that differentiating instruction from a constructivist perspective can take many shapes and forms, including instruction based on students' interests and prior knowledge, inquiry and project-based learning, collaboration, formative assessments, and small group instruction (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka, 2010; Polka et al., 2016).

Two poles and nine teaching–learning practices have emerged from student-centered differentiated instruction (see Figure 1; Polka, 2002). The left side of the image includes the teacher-centered practices, while the right side includes the learner-centered practices. The two poles—a teacher-centered pole and a student-centered pole—are supported by the nine teaching–learning behavior categories: teacher objectives, teaching planning and preparation, teacher communication and messages, teacher behavior, student objectives, student planning and preparation, classroom expectations of students, student communication and messages, and student evaluations (Eller et al., 2019; Polka, 2010; Polka et al., 2016). Polka (2002, 2010) investigated these nine teaching–learning behavior categories and determined that teachers typically balance teacher-centered and student-centered practices.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For this article, we examined teachers' self-reported actual and desired use of differentiated instruction through the lens of planning and preparation. Specifically, we examined the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices?
2. Where do specific practices fall along the spectrum from the greatest to the smallest difference between desired and actual classroom practices?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As noted above, meeting individual students' needs has been an important consideration for teachers and the teaching profession (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). We believe that encouraging practicing teachers to reflect on their desired as well as their actual teaching–learning behaviors is an important first step toward helping teachers develop a more in-depth understanding of differentiated instruction. Given the increasing diversity in Maryland schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) and the previous research on desired and actual practices of student-centered differentiated instruction in other U.S. states (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka, 2010; Polka et al., 2016), we conducted survey research with a large list of Maryland teachers for this study to better understand Maryland teachers' actual and desired use of student-centered differentiated instruction in K–12 classrooms.

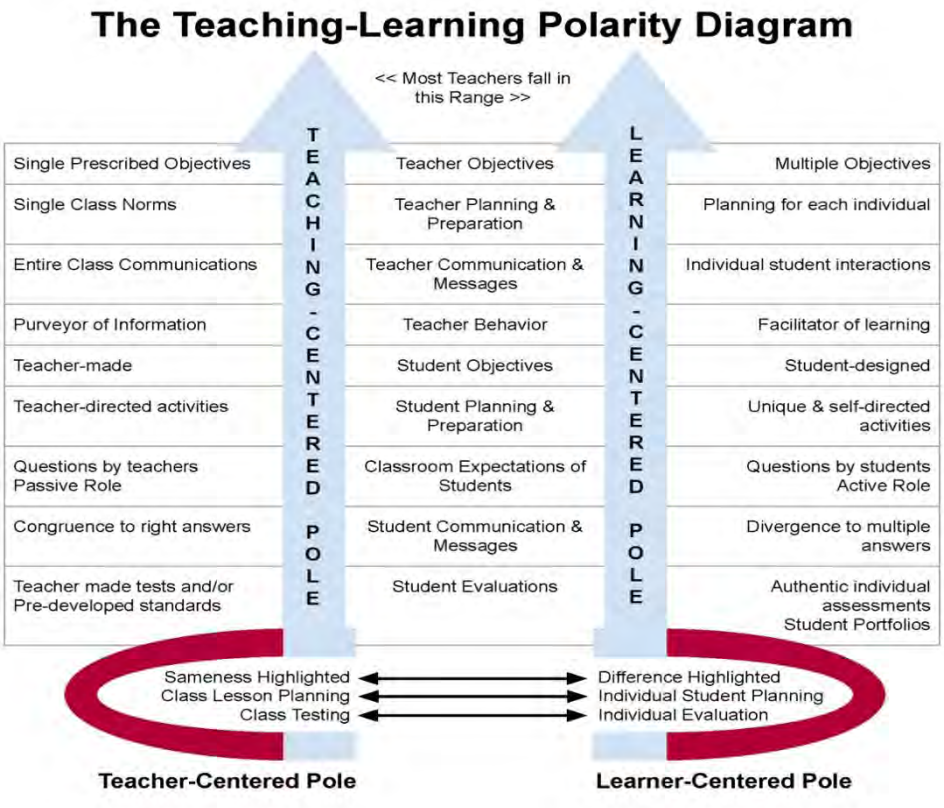

Figure 1. The Teaching-Learning Polarity Diagram. Reprinted from "Facilitating the Transition from Teacher-Centered to Student-Centered Instruction at the University Level via Constructivist Principles and Customized Learning Plans," by W. Polka, 2002, *Educational Planning*, *13*(3), p. 55-61.

METHOD

Research Instrument

The Desired and Current Use of Constructivist Activities and Techniques survey (Polka, 2010) was utilized for this quantitative case study. The survey captures teachers' desired and actual use of learner-centered, constructivist strategies in classrooms and has been used in multiple studies in the U.S. (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016). The survey includes three sections: demographics, desired and actual instructional strategies, and open responses.

Survey demographics

The Desired and Current Use of Constructivist Activities and Techniques survey includes seven demographic questions. We added ten more demographic questions for the present study, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education level, employment, and certification. We included these

to further understand the backgrounds and needs of Maryland teachers and for comparison with specific demographics collected by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE, 2016, 2017).

Desired and actual instructional strategies

The desired and actual instructional strategies section of the survey includes 25 statements that require a desired and actual rating, resulting in 50 individual responses per participant. Each statement is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *5-Always* to *1-Never.*

Open response

The open response section includes two questions, similar to Polka (2010), that focus on changes that are needed to increase the use of student-centered differentiated practices in the classroom. However, the present article focuses on the demographics and desired and actual instructional strategy sections of the survey, so we do not include the responses to these questions.

Survey reliability and validity

The reliability of the Desired and Current Use of Constructivist Activities and Techniques survey used in this study was tested with a Cronbach's alpha reliability test (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). The 25 statements focusing on the desired practice had a reliability of $\alpha = 0.935$, and the 25 statements focusing on the actual practice had a reliability of $\alpha = 0.93$, yielding high reliability for both the desired and actual practice responses.

The 25 statements (both desired and actual practice) are further divided into the nine teaching–learning behavior categories (Eller et al., 2019). These nine teaching–learning behavior constructs and the 25 survey statements have been utilized in various studies investigating the desired and actual practices of teachers (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka, 2010; Polka et al., 2016). These previous studies and an analysis of these constructs and survey statements (Polka et al., 2016) support the validity of the survey instrument and the findings of the present study.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were Maryland teachers who taught during the 2018–2019 school year. We purchased a list of Pre-K through 12th-grade teachers in both public and private schools in the state of Maryland. The list contained information for 14,332 different teachers, representing 23.88% of the teacher population in Maryland, including the teachers' names, professional email addresses, schools of employment, school cities, and school zip codes. We used the professional email addresses to distribute the survey. From the original list of Maryland teachers (N = 14,332), 672 (4.69%) of the professional emails bounced back, leaving a total of 13,660 email distributions of the survey to Maryland teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was distributed in the Spring of 2020. Originally, we planned to send reminders every eight days to support a higher completion rate, but the first day the survey was sent out was also the first day of Maryland's school closure due to COVID-19. We received multiple responses from potential participants reporting high stress levels and anxiety regarding the closure and pandemic, so we suspended the reminder emails for a few weeks, but kept the survey open to allow teachers to complete it at their convenience. We eventually sent two follow-up reminders about completing the survey in an attempt to increase the completion rate. The first of these was sent three weeks after

the initial distribution, and the second was sent four weeks after the initial distribution. The survey was open for a total of six weeks and was completed online by 742 (5.43%) participants. Of these, 187 (1.37%) were omitted because they were only partially completed, leaving 555 (4.06%) usable surveys for our analysis.

For this article, we analyzed only two sections of the Desired and Current Use of Constructivist Activities and Techniques survey: the demographics section and the desired and actual instructional strategies section. The demographics were analyzed through two lenses: first, to showcase a diverse group of Maryland teachers, and second, to make comparisons between the study sample (N = 555) and all Maryland teachers (N = approximately 60,000; MSDE, 2016, 2017). The responses for the desired and actual instructional strategies were analyzed in several ways to address the two research questions. For research question 1, regarding whether there is a significant difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices, we compared the desired and actual responses using two paired *t*-tests, one between the overall desired and actual practice responses for all statements, and the second comparing the desired and actual practice responses per statement. For research question 2, regarding where specific practices fall along the spectrum from the greatest to the smallest difference between desired and actual classroom practices, we sorted the mean differences between the desired and actual responses for each statement and placed them into quartiles following Polka et al. (2016), thus highlighting the greatest to the smallest differences between what Maryland teachers are actually doing in their classrooms and what they desire to do in their classrooms.

RESULTS

The results of data analysis for the demographics and the research questions are presented in the following subsections.

Demographics

The participants (N = 555) represented a diverse group of Maryland teachers. Most of the participants were female (77.5%), had a master's degree (83.6%), and were Maryland-certified teachers (90.6%). The participants also came mostly from suburban schools (77.5%) and public school systems (85.6%), but they had a wide range of ages, teaching experience, grade levels, and class sizes (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demographics of Participants

Characteristic	Percentage
Age	
20–29	8.1%
30–39	25.6%
40–49	23.6%
50–59	28.8%
60+	13.9%

Grade level	
Pre-K–grade 5	42.3%
Grade 6–8	23.1%
Grade 9–12	34.6%
Number of students in school	
499 or less	20.9%
500–999	42.7%
1000–1499	17.8%
1500–1999	8.3%
2000–2499	7.0%
Over 2500	3.3%
Number of students in classroom	
10 or less	8.3%
11–15	9.7%
16–20	17.5%
21–25	24.3%
26–30	28.7%
Over 30	11.5%

Note. $N = 555$.

This study is focused on Maryland teachers from the original purchased list of Maryland teacher emails (N = 14,332) representing local school districts (81.2%) and private and charter schools (18.8%) throughout Maryland. While previous studies have focused on specific school districts (Peace et al., 2017) or rural schools throughout a state (Eller et al., 2019), we did not collect specific school or district information from the respondents and instead focused on statewide teachers' desired and actual student-centered differentiated instructional practices.

The respondents in this study are representative of the racial and gender makeup of Maryland teachers. Maryland has approximately 60,000 teachers, with 73.5% identifying as White and 78.14% identifying as female (MSDE, 2016, 2017). In 2016, almost half of all Maryland teachers had taught for fewer than 10 years (47.02%), whereas most of the participants in our study were at least in their eleventh year or more of teaching (74.6%; see Table 2).

Research Question 1: Desired and Actual Instructional Strategies

To answer research question 1, regarding whether there was a significant difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices, the desired and actual responses were compared. This question was approached in two ways, through a comparison of the overall desired and actual practice responses and through a comparison of the desired and actual practice responses for each statement.

Table 2
Comparison of the Demographics for this Study and for Maryland Teachers Overall

Category	Sample percentage [a]	Maryland percentage
Gender		
Female	77.5%	78.14%
Male	22%	21.86%
Other	0.5%	n/a
Race		
White or Caucasian	79.6% [b]	73.5%
Black or African American	13% [b]	17.7%
Other	9% [bc]	8.8%
Total teaching experience		
Less than one year	n/a [d]	5.94%
1–4 years	4.7%	23.35%
5–10 years	20.7%	23.67%
11–15 years	18.7%	18.29%
16–21 years	22%	12.53%
Over 21 years	33.9% [e]	16.2%[e]

Note. The Maryland percentages come from Maryland State Department of Education reports (MSDE, 2016, 2017).

[a] $N = 555$.

[b] Participants in the sample were able to select multiple races, and 1.6% of the sample chose more than one race identification.

[c] Six race categories were included in the survey: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Other, but to match the MSDE (2016, 2017) categories, we combined the latter four categories as "Other."

[d] The MSDE (2016, 2017) categories included less than one year, but this study did not include this category because the participant sample list was curated from a Fall 2018 Maryland teacher list and so, for the 2019–2020 school year, none of these teachers had less than one year's experience.

[e] The MSDE (2016, 2017) categories for total teaching experience ranged over 1–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, 16–20 years, 21–25 years, 26–30 years, and more than 30 years. The Desired and Current Use of Constructivist Activities and Techniques survey (Polka et al., 2016) included the categories indicated in Table 2, so the MSDE categories 21–25 years, 26–30 years, and more than 30 years were combined for the comparison.

Comparison of the overall desired and actual practices.

We conducted a paired sample *t*-test between the overall means for the desired and actual practices in order to determine whether the desired and actual practice scores were different from each other. The means of the desired and actual responses were statistically different from one

another at the 0.05 alpha level with a large effect size of 4.39, $t(24) = 22.3$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 4.39$, 95% CI [0.72, 0.89], meaning that there are more than four standard deviations between the mean desired and actual practice scores (see Table 3). These results indicate a significant difference between Maryland teachers' overall self-reported desired and actual classroom practices.

In the Desired and Current Use of Constructivist Activities and Techniques survey, each statement includes two responses, a desired practice response and an actual practice response. The desired practice response was a self-reported rating for each statement regarding what teachers wanted to do in their classroom on a 5-point Likert scale. The actual practice response was a different self-reported rating for each statement regarding what teachers actually do in their classroom on the same 5-point Likert scale. We conducted paired sample *t*-tests for each statement to compare the scores for the desired and actual practice. For all statements, the means between the desired and actual practice responses were statistically different from one another (see Table 4), suggesting a statistically significant difference between self-reported desired and actual practice scores. An effect size was also calculated for each statement, and a large effect size was found for all statements. Effect sizes greater than 1, statements 4 and 6, means that there is more than one standard deviation between the mean desired and actual practice scores. These results further indicate a significant difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices for each statement.

Table 3
Overall Desired and Actual Practice Paired t-Test

						95% CI for the Difference		
Response Focus	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*	*t*(24)	*p*	*LL*	*UL*	*d*
Desired	4.17	0.29	0.06	73.22	0.000	4.06	4.29	
Actual	3.38	0.39	0.08	43.59	0.000	3.22	3.54	
Desired–Actual	0.79	0.18	0.04	22.30	0.000	0.72	0.89	4.39

Table 4
Per Statement Desired and Actual Practice Paired t-Test

						95% CI for the Difference		
Statement #	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*	*t*(554)	*p*	*LL*	*UL*	*d*
1	0.65	0.67	0.03	22.48	0.000	0.59	0.70	0.95
2	0.67	0.75	0.03	21.09	0.000	0.61	0.73	0.90
3	0.55	0.81	0.04	15.90	0.000	0.48	0.62	0.68
4	1.07	0.98	0.04	25.78	0.000	0.99	1.15	1.09
5	0.82	0.91	0.04	21.23	0.000	0.74	0.89	0.90
6	1.14	1.08	0.05	24.84	0.000	1.05	1.23	1.05
7	0.93	1.02	0.04	21.40	0.000	0.84	1.01	0.91

8	0.86	0.90	0.04	22.39	0.000	0.78	0.94	0.95
9	1.01	1.26	0.05	18.94	0.000	0.91	1.12	0.80
10	0.87	1.02	0.04	20.20	0.000	0.79	0.96	0.86
11	0.80	0.86	0.04	21.92	0.000	0.73	0.87	0.93
12	1.09	1.18	0.05	21.75	0.000	0.99	1.18	0.92
13	0.81	0.96	0.04	19.87	0.000	0.73	0.89	0.84
14	0.50	0.73	0.03	16.00	0.000	0.44	0.56	0.68
15	0.78	0.85	0.04	21.53	0.000	0.71	0.85	0.91
16	0.75	0.90	0.04	19.68	0.000	0.68	0.82	0.84
17	0.67	0.94	0.04	16.86	0.000	0.59	0.75	0.72
18	0.94	1.10	0.05	20.01	0.000	0.84	1.03	0.85
19	0.86	0.94	0.04	21.55	0.000	0.78	0.94	0.91
20	0.52	0.76	0.03	16.24	0.000	0.46	0.59	0.69
21	0.63	0.78	0.03	19.03	0.000	0.56	0.69	0.81
22	0.89	0.97	0.04	21.50	0.000	0.80	0.97	0.91
23	0.83	0.90	0.04	21.92	0.000	0.76	0.91	0.93
24	0.60	0.81	0.03	17.46	0.000	0.53	0.67	0.74
25	0.63	0.76	0.03	19.57	0.000	0.56	0.69	0.83

Research Question 2: Greatest to Smallest Mean Differences

To answer research question 2, regarding where specific practices fall along the spectrum from the greatest to the smallest least difference between desired and actual classroom practices, the mean differences for each of the 25 statements were sorted from the greatest difference to the smallest difference and divided into quartiles.

Mean difference quartiles.

The means of the desired and actual responses ($N = 555$) for each statement were calculated and compared to determine the differences between the desired and actual use of learner-centered, constructivist strategies in Maryland classrooms. Four equal-size categories were calculated based on the mean differences and used to determine the degrees of difference between the desired and actual practice means: greater than 0.9, between 0.8 and 0.899, between 0.63 and 0.799, and less than 0.63 (Polka et al., 2016). Mean differences greater than 0.9 (see Table 5) are considered to have the greatest degree of difference between what Maryland teachers are actually doing and what they desire to do in their classrooms (Polka et al., 2016). These statements, with a mean difference range of 0.926–1.139, indicate the greatest difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices for each statement.

Table 5
Mean Desired and Actual Practice Differences Greater than 0.9

Teaching–learning behavior category	Survey statement number	Survey statement	Mean difference
Student evaluations	6	Students are evaluated individually and move on to another task once they have mastered the objectives on a unit.	1.139
Teacher objectives	12	The time that students have to complete or master a given concept or skill varies based on individual differences.	1.085
Student communication and messages	4	Sufficient time is allocated for students to think, play with ideas, manipulate objects, and experiment in learning.	1.067
Student evaluations	9	Student evaluations are based on individual learning growth instead of fixed standards all are expected to learn.	1.011
Teacher planning and preparation	18	Lesson planning is done for individual students rather than for the entire class.	0.935
Classroom expectations of students	7	Students conduct a major part of their learning on a self-directed basis.	0.926

Mean differences between 0.8 and 0.899 (see Table 6) are considered to have a high degree of difference between what Maryland teachers desire to do and what they are actually doing in their classrooms (Polka et al., 2016). These statements, with a mean difference range of 0.805–0.885, indicate a large difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices for each statement.

Table 6
Mean Desired and Actual Practice Differences Between 0.8 and 0.899

Teaching–learning behavior category	Survey statement number	Survey statement	Mean difference
Student planning and preparation	22	Students play an active role of contributing to the direction or content of the lessons in their learning experiences.	0.885
Teacher objectives	10	Knowledge of each student, including life outside of school, is used to plan instructional activities.	0.870
Teacher communication and messages	8	The teacher's role is that of a facilitator of learning or resource partner, "guide on the side".	0.859
Student objectives	19	Pretests and other similar diagnostic instruments are used to determine the parts of a unit that individual students need.	0.859

Teacher planning and preparation	23	A variety of diverse learning assignments are designed to meet individual student interests and needs.	0.832
Teacher objectives	5	Different students, when working on a unit of instruction, use different materials, resources, and equipment.	0.818
Student evaluations	13	Divergent ideas are encouraged by the teacher in evaluating student work, as opposed to expecting convergence in exams and other assessments.	0.805

Mean differences between 0.63 and 0.799 (see Table 7) are considered to have a moderate degree of difference between what Maryland teachers desire to do and what they are actually doing in their classrooms (Polka et al., 2016). These statements, with a mean difference range of 0.645–0.796, indicate a moderate difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices for each statement.

Mean differences less than 0.63 (see Table 8) are considered to have the smallest degree of difference between what Maryland teachers desire to do and what they are actually doing in their classrooms (Polka et al., 2016). These statements, with a mean difference range of 0.495–0.627, indicate the smallest difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices for each statement.

Table 7
Mean Desired and Actual Practice Differences Between 0.63 and 0.799

Teaching–learning behavior category	Survey statement number	Survey statement	Mean difference
Teacher behaviors	11	The students and teacher respect the diverse opinions of others and come to agreements in a collegial fashion.	0.796
Student communication and messages	15	Information is presented in a manner that promotes authentic inquiry and students are encouraged to consider questions for which a "right" answer may not exist.	0.778
Student evaluations	16	Formal evaluation and marking are based on authentic assessment principles.	0.750
Teacher planning and preparation	17	Diagnostic elements, such as I.Q., reading level, and math ability, are used to plan individual student activities.	0.672
Teacher objectives	2	Classroom objectives focus on cultivating and facilitating social skills, cooperation, idea exchange and shared problem-solving.	0.667
Student communication and messages	1	The teacher practices the use of open-ended questioning rather than focusing on a "right" answer syndrome.	0.645

Table 8
Mean Desired and Actual Practice Differences Less Than 0.63

Teaching–learning behavior category	Survey statement number	Survey statement	Mean difference
Teacher planning and preparation	25	The teacher varies the type and degree of difficulty of their questions to assure that each student understands.	0.627
Teacher behaviors	21	Different instructional techniques are used with different students.	0.627
Student planning and preparation	24	Students are offered instructional assistance and guidance individually rather than in a large group setting.	0.600
Classroom expectations of students	3	Cooperative learning experiences are used so that students often receive instructional assistance from one another.	0.550
Teacher communication and messages	20	The teacher communicates individually with students or in small groups, as opposed to "total" class discussions.	0.523
Teacher communication and messages	14	The personal problems or learning handicaps of students are accepted with consideration, understanding, and empathy.	0.495

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Two research questions were investigated in this study: Is there a significant difference between Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual classroom practices, and where do specific practices fall along the spectrum from the greatest to the smallest difference between desired and actual classroom practices? The results indicate significant differences in both the overall self-reported desired and actual classroom practices and the self-reported desired and actual classroom practices per statement. The classification of practices, sorted by the greatest to the smallest differences, with the highest difference being 1.39 points and the lowest difference being 0.495 points on a 5-point Likert scale, indicates that certain statements have a greater disparity between desired and actual practice than others, and the focus for professional development should be considered for the practices indicated by these statements.

We compared the Maryland findings with previous studies utilizing the Desired and Current Use of Constructivist Activities and Techniques survey (Polka, 2010). Polka et al. (2016) collected responses from teachers in Georgia and New York, Peace et al. (2017) gathered responses from teachers in one county in Indiana as a case study, and Eller et al. (2019) collected responses from teachers in small school districts in rural Idaho. Our Maryland study included teachers across the state and did not limit the focus to one county, school district, or town.

Previous studies have focused on the smallest degree of difference as a starting point for teachers and professional development planners (Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016). The recommendations in the present study differ, focusing instead on the greatest degree of difference as a starting point for teachers to engage in reflective inquiry into the problems of practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Moving toward greater use of differentiated practice can be facilitated for teachers by having them ask questions and reflect on their practice. We concur with Hubbard and Power's (2003, p. 25) observation about the potential of teacher research and reflective practice:

> Often, the best [teacher] research questions are located in a taut space between two points. We sometimes walk a tightrope between who we are as teachers and learners and who [we] want to be. Once you find a gap that needs to be traversed—between what you think will be learned and what is learned, you have found the territory in your classroom that is ripe for question.

Thus, we begin the discussion of our findings' implications for professional development planning with the greatest degree of difference (see Table 5), as all of the mean differences between the self-reported desired and actual classroom practices are statistically significant, and the statements with the largest mean difference indicate the greatest need for teacher growth.

The mean desired and actual differences greater than 0.9 (see Table 5) indicate the largest disparity between what Maryland teachers want (desire) to practice and what they currently practice in their classrooms. The statements refer to practices such as evaluating students as individuals, providing time for individuals to progress through learning concepts, and providing time to think and play with ideas. These practices should be prioritized when developing student-centered, differentiated instruction professional learning for Maryland teachers. The six statements in Table 5, which have the greatest degree of difference between teachers' desired and actual practice, align with findings in other states (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016). Two statements that fell into the greatest degree of difference category in this study, numbers 6 and 12, were also identified as having the largest disparity in Georgia/New York, Indiana, and Idaho (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016), which suggests potential areas for further research and analysis of national trends.

The mean desired and actual practice differences between 0.8 and 0.899 (see Table 6) indicate a high degree of disparity between what Maryland teachers want (desire) to practice and what they currently practice in their classrooms. In the ranking of needs for Maryland teachers, these statements should be considered second, after the statements with the greatest degree of difference, when developing student-centered, differentiated instruction professional learning for Maryland teachers. The rankings for six of these seven statements align with findings in other states (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016), while in contrast, Statement 5, which was found to have a high degree of disparity between Maryland teachers' desired and actual practice, was not classified at this level in the other states. Polka et al. (2016) and Eller et al. (2019) identified this statement as having a moderate degree of difference in Georgia/New York and Idaho, and Peace et al. (2017) identified this statement as having the greatest degree of difference in Indiana. In the United States, educational policies and funding vary across state and district boundaries, resulting in variations in the availability of district materials, resources, and equipment available to teachers (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). While lying beyond the scope of the present study, further research is needed to examine the impact that district and state policies have on teachers' desired and actual use of differentiated resources.

The mean desired and actual practice differences between 0.63 and 0.799 (see Table 7) indicate a moderate degree of disparity between what Maryland teachers want (desire) to practice and what they currently practice in their classrooms. These statements, although important, are reported to be more similar regarding desired and actual practice and should be considered after the statements having the greatest and high degrees of difference when developing student-centered, differentiated instruction professional learning for Maryland teachers. These six statements in the

moderate degree of disparity appear to align the least with the other states (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016). This could in part reflect how the studies were designed and analyzed. For example, in this study, the differences between the desired and actual data were divided into equal-sized quartiles, and the categories were identified utilizing terminology similar to Polka et al. (2016) and Peace et al. (2017), while different methods were utilized in Eller et al. (2019). While the results for these statements in the relevant research were the most diverse, two of these statements still aligned with the other state data: statement 15 was also identified as having a moderate degree of difference in Georgia/New York and Idaho (Eller et al., 2019; Polka et al., 2016), and statement 2 was also identified as having a moderate degree of disparity in Georgia/New York and Indiana (Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016). Further analysis of the created categories, cutoff points, and identification of a moderate degree of difference are needed to better understand the differences between these states.

The mean desired and actual practice differences that were less than 0.63 (see Table 8) had the smallest degree of disparity between what Maryland teachers want (desire) to practice and what they currently practice in their classrooms. Statements having the smallest degree of difference between Maryland teachers' desired and actual practices reflected practices that are associated with effective teaching, such as small group instruction, use of differentiated strategies, and cooperative learning. These six statements align with findings for other states (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016). In particular, statement 14 was also identified as having the smallest degree of disparity in Georgia/New York, Indiana, and Idaho (Eller et al., 2019; Peace et al., 2017; Polka et al., 2016). Further analysis of other data across the studies is needed to better understand the differences between states.

CONCLUSIONS

In today's diverse classrooms, meeting the needs of all students requires providing access to deeper learning and transforming classroom practices through greater implementation of differentiated instruction (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019; Hersi, 2019). Understanding teacher practice is an important factor in national efforts to improve learning outcomes for all students. This study contributes insights into Maryland teachers' self-reported desired and actual practices. Maryland teachers generally reported actual practices that are consistent with constructivist approaches to teaching (Wilson, 2018). The findings affirm Maryland teachers' desire to use various student-centered differentiated instructional strategies and their current employment of these; however, an analysis of the survey statements focusing on the greatest degree of difference between Maryland teachers' desired and actual practices indicated that the practices indicated by these statements are associated with individualized planning, self-directed learning, and student autonomy. This suggests that Maryland teachers desire to use these constructivist, student-centered approaches more consistently than they currently do.

The results of this study have the potential to inform short- and long-term planning for professional development focused on differentiated instruction. For professional development planners and educational leaders, the gap between teachers' desired and actual use of differentiated instruction can provide a space for engaging in individual or group professional inquiry. Moreover, at the district, school, grade, or team level, professional development using reflective inquiry can focus on contextual factors that help or hinder greater implementation of differentiated instruction (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Finally, this study's findings and analysis highlight the need for more research focusing on data from multiple states to better understand the impact that state- and

district-level policies, resources, and evaluation practices have on teachers' desired and actual use of differentiated instruction.

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