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EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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THE IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATION

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FROM THE EDITORS

This issue of Educational Planning includes significant topics such as school climate and student achievement, gender diversity practices, planning for remote learning and cultivating school social relationship online.

In the first article, Belton and Brinkman examined the relationship of school climate and student achievement at the elementary school level. The findings indicated that the school climate dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates in all the schools of the two districts participating in the study.

In the second article, Assefa and Adamu explored the perceptions and policy practices of the gender diversity management issues in five selected Ethiopian public higher education institutions.

In the third article, Wilmot investigated how school principals in Jamaica develop social relationships with teachers and students online, their feelings about it, their motivation, and how they acquired this knowledge.

The study by Alzahrani and Joseph reported on how Riyadh School District in Saudi Arabia effectively transitioned from in-person student learning to remote student learning as a result of effective planning of resources and effective processes for implementation of remote learning.

The editors want to express their special thanks to all the authors of this issue to bring in their valuable international perspectives to enrich the educational planning experiences of our readers. It is their significant global backgrounds that contribute to the uniqueness and noteworthiness of our Educational Planning journal.

Editor: Tak Cheung Chan

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Assistant Editor: Selahattin Turan

February, 2024.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Abebaw Yirga Adamu is a professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Planning and Management at Addis Ababa University. He holds PhD in Education and Society; MA in Lifelong Learning Policy and Management; and MEd in Multicultural and Multilingual Education. Prof. Adamu is the Director of Quality Assurance at Addis Ababa University. His research interests include higher education (policy, diversity, quality, internationalization, harmonization, and leadership).

Wafa Alzahrani joined Howard University's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies as a Wallace Foundation Equity Initiatives Grant Program Coordinator in 2023. Dr. Alzahrani worked in the field of education in Saudi Arabia from 2001-2011 as a teacher. Her research interests include the implementation of virtual learning, school governance and educational equity. She holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy from Howard University, a Master's Degree in Educational Administration from Shenandoah University and a Bachelor's degree in Physics from Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University.

Easaw Alemayehu Assefa graduated from Addis Ababa University with a B.A. in Geography and Environmental Studies and Master's Degree in Educational Leadership and Management. He is also a doctoral candidate in educational policy and leadership at Addis Ababa University's Department of Educational Planning & Management, College of Education and Behavioral Studies. Easaw is the Academic Director at Amigonian International School right now. Over the course of two decades, he has worked as an academic director and lecturer at six different private institutions. Diversity Management, Educational Leadership, Gender, and the School Feeding Program are among his research interests.

David Belton is a school principal in the metropolitan Richmond, Virginia area. Dr. Belton started his career as a professional school counselor which fueled his zest for transitioning to school administration and desire to positively impact school climate. Dr. Belton has experience working in diverse school communities, including Title I, urban, suburban and rural. He has experience in PreK-12 instruction, co-curricular programming, social-emotional learning, school climate and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports.

Jodi L. Brinkmann is currently an Assistant Professor of Practice at Virginia Tech. She is the program coordinator for the Education Leadership Program, serving graduate students in the Program for the Preparation of School Principals and Supervisors. Dr. Brinkmann also teaches in the doctoral program. Previously, she was an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Longwood University serving undergraduate students in the Teacher Preparation Program. Her service also includes over thirty years in K-12 public education. Dr. Brinkmann's research interests include curriculum and instructional leadership, exceptional education (specifically collaboration and co-teaching), and phenomenological research investigating problems in K-12 education.

Shawn Joseph has been an English teacher, school administrator, central office administrator, and superintendent in Maryland, Delaware, and Tennessee. He currently serves as the Co-Director/Director of the Howard University Superintendent and Aspiring Superintendent Academies in partnership with AASA and IEI. Dr. Joseph is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Howard University. His research interests include school governance, Black superintendents, and how superintendents lead for equity. He earned an Ed.D. from The George Washington University, a M.S. Ed. from Johns Hopkins University, and a B.S. from Lincoln University.

Ann-Marie Wilmot's research in leadership is centered around postcolonial ideologies and marginalized people, experiences, and ideas, with a particular focus on middle leadership positions such as heads of departments (HODs). In her doctoral studies, she explored the neglected role of HODs. She has co-authored one edited book, "Handbook of Research on Activating Middle Executives' Agency to Lead and Manage During Times of Crisis," and written several book chapters and journal articles. She is an Educational Leadership and Management lecturer at The University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. With 27 years of experience, 19 at the higher education level, she held various administrative and leadership roles.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN READING IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN VIRGINIA, USA

DAVID BELTON
JODIE L. BRINKMANN

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

In the past decade, teachers and researchers have recognized the vital role school climate plays in the public school setting in the United States (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). One of the greatest indicators of achievement is the relationship between school and student socioeconomic status (Sirin, 2005). According to Bryk and Schneider (2003), if schools create positive learning environments, students will achieve at a higher level than what their socioeconomic background would otherwise predict. The purpose of this quantitative study was to identify the relationship between school climate and student academic achievement in reading at the elementary level in public schools in Virginia, USA. The researcher examined extant data from the 2018-2019 school year, which included Grade 5 Reading Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) pass rates and school climate surveys from two school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The findings indicated that the school climate dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates in both school districts. School leaders and building-level principals could use these findings to better understand the importance of school climate and its impact on student achievement.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, teachers and researchers have recognized the vital role school climate plays in the public-school setting in the United States (Thaps, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). School climate can improve student achievement and decrease high school dropout rates and problem behaviors (Wang & Degol, 2015). According to Bryk and Schneider (2003), if schools create positive learning environments, students will achieve at a higher level compared to what their socioeconomic background might otherwise predict. How well a student performs in school is a strong predictor of their future education, occupation, and salary potential (United States Department of Labor, 2017). Therefore, the aim of this study was to determine whether there was a correlation between school climate and academic achievement in Reading at the elementary school level.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on December 10, 2015. This act reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was passed by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 as part of his War on Poverty campaign (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). ESSA offers support and resources to schools that are in danger of academic loss due to environmental factors such as poverty (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). According to Chenoweth (2016), one of the main principles of ESSA is that school personnel must imagine that “all students can succeed” (p. 1).

ESSA goes beyond traditional assessment methods by requiring school districts to use at least one non-academic measure in their accountability methods for documenting overall student

achievement and school quality (Blad, 2016). Schools must have the ability to analyze the data connected to the measures to show whether there is any effect on various subgroups, such as English language learners (Blad, 2016). ESSA provides examples of feasible measures states can examine, including school climate and safety and student engagement (Blad, 2016).

The term organizational climate dates back to the 1950s when school researchers were attempting to form different types of concepts in the school workplace (Hoy, 1990). School climate is a phrase that indicates teachers' view of their work setting; it is affected by the school administration, informal organization, formal organization, and the personality of the staff (Hoy, 1990). A school's organizational climate is based on the internal qualities that differentiate schools from each other and affect the behavior of its staff (Hoy, 1990).

According to Wang and Degol (2015), positive school climates can improve student attainment and decrease dropout rates and problem behavior. ESSA highlights the correlation between student achievement and school climate. Having a positive school climate is vital for minority and underprivileged children (Booker, 2006; Haynes, Emmons & Ben-Avie, 1997). Konold, Cornell, Shukla and Huang (2017) posit that a fundamental question to be considered is whether students from minority groups think about school climate the same way as Caucasian students from majority groups. For instance, school conduct procedures could feel less fair for students of color than for Caucasian students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). According to Konold et al. (2017), minority children could also experience higher levels of mistreatment and bullying than Caucasian students. According to Kann et al. (2016), "the prevalence of having not gone to school because of safety concerns was higher among black (6.8%) and Hispanic (7.6%) than white (4.2%) students and higher among black male (6.9%) and Hispanic male (7.6%) than white male (2.9%) students" (p. 9).

According to White, LaSalle, Ashby and Meyers (2014), student views of and reaction to school climate are because of racial/culture and gender differences. Schneider and Duran (2010) discovered that Hispanic/Latino middle school students' responses differed significantly from Caucasian and Asian students. The research revealed that intimate connections with teachers were more significant than demonstrating positive behavior for Hispanic/Latino students (Thapa et al., 2013). Hispanic/Latino girls might recognize a positive school climate more than boys in elementary and high school (White et al., 2014). African American students in general usually report a lower awareness of school climate (White et al., 2014). It is vital that school leaders identify how a positive school climate could be felt by children from various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (Schneider & Duran, 2010).

From Kindergarten to high school graduation, students will spend approximately 11,700 hours in school (Hull & Newport, 2011). The National School Climate Center (2007) outlines four elements that form school climate: relationship, safety, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Students who feel secure at school will experience more growth and development (Devine & Cohen, 2007). School climate has been shown to affect student discipline, school attendance, school size, and teachers' sense of job fulfillment. According to Bryk and Schneider (2003), if schools create positive learning environments, students will achieve at a higher level compared to what might otherwise be predicted by their socioeconomic background. How well students perform in school is a strong forecast of their future education, occupation, and salary potential (United States Department of Labor, 2017).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

School climate affects student discipline, school attendance, and teachers' sense of job fulfillment (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). Previous researchers have studied secondary school climate and student achievement, but few have focused on climate at the elementary school level. Since elementary school is the foundation of a child's education, there was a need for more research on elementary school climate and its impact on student achievement. Assessing school climate can bring awareness to key school traditions that are frequently overlooked, which could help advance school culture by refining teaching procedures and schoolwide tactics for supporting students academically, socially, and emotionally (Kostyo, Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2018).

PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this quantitative study was to identify the relationship between school climate and academic achievement at the elementary school level. The researcher examined extant data from the 2018-2019 school year from one Northern VA and one Central VA school district, which included Grade 5 Reading Standards of Learning (SOL) pass rates and school climate surveys.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the relationship among the four school climate dimensions (interpersonal relationships, safety, teaching and learning, and institutional environment) and student achievement measured by the fifth-grade Reading SOL pass rate?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to the National School Climate (2007), school climate consists of four essential dimensions: interpersonal relationships, safety, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. These four dimensions may have a correlation, positive or negative, with student achievement which in this study is the pass rate in Grade 5 Reading Standards of Learning as shown in Figure 1.

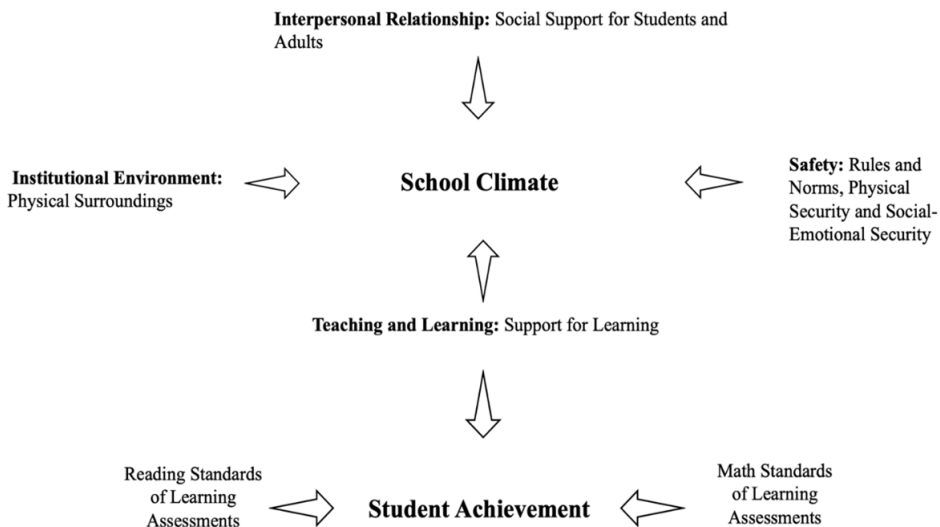


Figure 1: Conceptual framework.

The Interpersonal Relationships dimension which is defined as social support for students and adults helps to form school climate. The Safety dimension, which is defined as rules and norms, physical security and social-emotional security helps to form school climate. The Teaching and Learning dimension which is defined as support for learning helps to form school climate. The Institutional Environment dimension which is defined as physical surroundings helps to form school climate. These four school climate dimensions affect student achievement which is being measured by the Reading pass rates.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The researcher completed a multi-step process in collecting data from the 2018-2019 school year from 97 elementary schools in two divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The first school division, referred to in this study as the Central VA division, has 46 elementary schools. The second, referred to as the Northern VA division, has 51 elementary schools. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) mandates that schools in Virginia administer the Virginia School Climate Survey in Grades 4 and 5 as well as Grades 9–12; this is done through a partnership with the University of Virginia and Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services.

The first step is to utilize the VDOE website to review each school’s School Quality Profile Report, which showed its accreditation status and assessment scores. According to VDOE (2020), the SOL is a group of assessments public schools in the state of Virginia must administer to their students in Grades 3–12. The SOL assessments determine baseline expectations for skills and knowledge students should know and will acquire at the conclusion of each grade in Mathematics, Science, English, and History (VDOE, 2020). Students are assessed on content that should have been reviewed by their classroom teacher throughout the academic school year. SOL results ultimately affect a school’s yearly accreditation status (VDOE, 2020). After reviewing each school’s SOL results, the researcher reviewed their School Climate Survey results. The two school divisions administered different School Climate surveys to their communities, but the surveys shared similar underlying concepts and themes that they could both be used for this study. (See Table 1.)

Table 1
Data Collection

Data Source	Data
School Quality Profile	Assessments (Grade 5 Reading pass rates)
Central VA Climate Survey	Academic Growth Equity and Opportunity Relationships Safety and Wellness
Northern VA Climate Survey	Engagement Relationships Expectations Safety

Research Design

Quantitative research uses mathematical calculations to encapsulate, report, and study connections between traits (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). The researcher used the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) to examine the correlation between student achievement and school climate at the elementary level. According to Stevenson and Lindeberg (2010), “a Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient is a statistic measuring the linear interdependence between two variables or two sets of data” (p. 389859). A Pearson correlation coefficient, shown in Figure 2, is also named the product-moment correlation coefficient; it uses p for population and r for a sample. “Pearson’s r has a range of $(-1, 1)$, with 0 indicating no relationship between the variables and the larger absolute values indicating a stronger relationship between the variables” (Boslaugh, 2012, p. 182). This formula allowed the researcher to take advantage of the full range of variance in the data without collapsing into categories and provided more detailed and interpretable results. The researcher used Evans’s (1996) methods to describe the strength of the correlations between the school climates and the Reading and Mathematics SOL pass rates. The following is the breakdown: .00-.19 (very weak), .20-.39 (weak), .40-.59 (moderate), .60-.79 (strong) and .80-1.0 (very strong).

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

Figure 2: Pearson’s correlation coefficient formula. From Penn State Eberly College of Science, 2018. 2.6 - (Pearson) Correlation Coefficient r . Retrieved from <https://online.stat.psu.edu/stat462/node/96/>

Research Participant Sample Selection

The sample selection was 97 elementary schools with almost 10,000 fifth graders from two school divisions in Virginia: Northern VA had 51 elementary schools and Central VA had 46 elementary schools. The information was retrieved from the VDOE School Quality Profile. These two divisions were selected because their school climate data were readily available to the public and they were located in two different regions of Virginia. The participating schools served as the unit of research for this study, not individual student data.

Data Analysis

The researcher used SPSS to analyze the statistical data from the study to determine whether there was an association between the four dimensions of school climate and the SOL assessment pass rates. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the correlation between student achievement (fifth-grade SOL Reading pass rates) and school climate at the elementary level.

The researcher relied on extant data from the 2018–19 school year, which included reviewing individual school’s Grade 5 Reading SOL pass rates and school Climate Survey data. The Climate Survey data came from two school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The districts’ surveys asked different questions but had the same underlining meaning. The Northern Virginia School climate surveys sections are the following: Engagement (N:9), Relationship (N:18), Expectations (N:12) and Safety (N:12). The Central Virginia school climate surveys sections are the following Safety and Wellness (N:11), Academic Growth(N:14), Equity and Opportunity (N:8),

and Relationship (N:6). Scoring scales were constructed using all variables without missing data in the relevant sections of each survey with different questions and scales. For each school district, the researcher created four scales based off the subsets determined by the school district. The researcher coded the original values from the reports and then they were standardized so that the scale for each dimension would range from 0 to 1. The lowest possible value was 0 and the highest possible value was 1. The next step the researcher took was to take the mean from the recoded values to create the scales. For example, if there were nine items, they were added together and then divided by nine.

Table 2 presents the four school climate dimensions (Engagement, Relationship, Expectations, and Safety), Cronbach’s alpha reliability, mean, and standard deviation, organized by the Northern VA School District.

Table 2
Northern VA School Climate Dimensions

Dimension	A	M	SD	Items
Engagement (Institutional Environment)	0.751	.7762	.02550	9
Relationship (Interpersonal Relationships)	0.945	.6883	.01995	18
Expectations (Teaching and Learning)	0.901	.7807	.02407	12
Safety	0.797	.7928	.04125	12

Table 2 shows the Engagement school climate dimension descriptive statistics were as follows: $\alpha = 0.751$, $M = .7762$, and $SD = .02550$. The Relationship school climate dimension descriptive statistics were as follows: $\alpha = 0.945$, $M = .6883$, and $SD = .01995$. The Expectations school climate dimension descriptive statistics were as follows: $\alpha = 0.901$, $M = .7807$, and $SD = .02407$. The Safety school climate dimension descriptive statistics were as follows: $\alpha = 0.797$, $M = .7928$, and $SD = .04125$. The Northern VA district relationship school climate dimension has the highest score, $\alpha = 0.945$, $M = .6883$, and $SD = .1995$, compared to the other school climate dimensions. The Relationship school climate dimension for Northern VA district has the highest Cronbach’s alpha. The Safety school climate dimension has the highest mean and standard deviation score compared to the other school climate dimensions.

Table 3 presents the four school climate dimensions (Safety and Wellness, Academic Growth, Equity and Opportunity and Relationships), Cronbach’s alpha reliability, mean, and standard deviation, organized by the Central VA School District.

Table 3
Central VA School Climate Dimensions

Dimension	A	M	SD	Items
Safety and Wellness (Safety)	0.789	.7702	.05394	11
Academic Growth (Teaching and Learning)	0.823	.8025	.03579	14
Equity and Opportunity (Institutional Environment)	0.852	.8118	.04743	8
Relationships (Interpersonal Relationships)	0.791	.7991	.05686	6

Table 3 shows the Safety and Wellness school climate dimension descriptive statistics were the following: $\alpha = 0.789$, $M = .7702$, and $SD = .05394$. The Academic Growth school climate dimension descriptive statistics were the following: $\alpha = 0.823$, $M = .8025$, and $SD = .03579$. The Equity and Opportunity school climate dimension descriptive statistics were the following: $\alpha = 0.852$, $M = .8118$, and $SD = .04743$. The Relationship school climate dimension descriptive statistics were the following: $\alpha = 0.791$, $M = .7991$, and $SD = .05686$. The Equity and Opportunity school climate dimension for Central VA district had the highest Cronbach's alpha, mean, and standard deviation score compared to the other school climate dimensions.

DATA RELATED FINDINGS

Table 4 presents the Northern VA school climate dimensions and the correlation to the fifth-grade Reading SOL pass rates. Northern VA's fifth-grade Reading SOL pass rates had a moderate positive correlation to the Relationships ($r = .435$) dimension and a weak positive correlation to the Engagement ($r = .306$) and Safety ($r = .378$) dimensions. The Grade 5 Reading SOL pass rates had no significant correlation to the Expectations ($r = -.028$) dimension. The Relationships dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL ($r = .435$), compared to the other school climate dimensions.

Table 4
Northern VA Reading Correlations

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Reading	–				
2. Engagement	.306*	–			
3. Relationships	.435**	.863**	–		
4. Expectations	-.028	.744**	.752**	–	
5. Safety	.378**	.482**	.536**	.417**	–

Note. $N = 57$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

The first school climate dimension in the Northern VA school district was Engagement. The Engagement dimension had a very strong positive correlation with the Relationships ($r = .863$) dimension, a strong positive correlation with Expectations ($r = .744$), and a moderate positive correlation with Safety ($r = .482$). The second dimension, Relationships, had a very strong positive correlation with Engagement ($r = .863$), a strong positive correlation with Expectations ($r = .752$), and a moderate positive correlation with Safety ($r = .536$). The third school climate dimension was Expectations. The Expectations dimension had a strong positive correlation with Engagement ($r = .744$) and Relationships ($r = .752$) and a moderate positive correlation with Safety ($r = .417$). Finally, the Safety dimension had a moderate positive correlation with Engagement ($r = .482$), Relationships ($r = .536$), and Expectations ($r = .417$). The Northern VA district school climate survey data and the Grade 5 SOL pass rates revealed that the Relationship dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates. The Expectations dimension had no significant correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates compare to the Relationship dimension.

Table 5 presents the Central VA school climate dimensions and the correlation to the fifth grade Reading SOL pass rates.

Table 5
Central VA Reading Correlations

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Reading	–				
2. Safety & Wellness	.613**	–			
3. Academic Growth	.210	.664**	–		
4. Equality & Opportunity	.305	.825**	.872**	–	
5. Relationships	.653**	.839**	.727**	.755**	–

Note. $N = 38-42$

** $p < .01$.

Table 5 shows that the Central VA district Grade 5 Reading SOL pass rates had a strong positive correlation to the Safety and Wellness ($r = .613$) and Relationships ($r = .653$) dimensions but no significant correlation to the Academic Growth ($r = .210$) or Equity and Opportunity ($r = .305$) dimensions. The Relationships dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL ($r = .653$), compared to the other school climate dimension.

The first school climate dimension in the Central VA district was Safety and Wellness. The Safety and Wellness dimension had a strong positive correlation to Academic Growth ($r = .664$) and a very strong positive correlation with Equity and Opportunity ($r = .872$) and Relationships ($r = .727$). The second school climate dimension in the Central VA school district, Academic Growth, had a strong positive correlation with Safety and Wellness ($r = .664$) and a very strong positive correlation with Equity and Opportunity ($r = .872$) and Relationships ($r = .727$). The third school climate dimension was Equity and Opportunity. The Equity and Opportunity dimension had a very strong positive correlation to Safety and Wellness ($r = .825$), Academic Growth ($r = .872$), and Relationships ($r = .755$).

Finally, the Relationships dimension had a very strong correlation to Safety and Wellness ($r = .839$) a strong correlation to Academic Growth ($r = .727$) and Equity and Opportunity ($r = .755$). The Relationships dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates. The Academic Growth dimension had the weakest correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates, compared to the Relationships dimension.

In Northern VA the Relationships dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL ($r = .435$), which is a moderate positive correlation. This correlation is considered statistically significant. Similarly, in Central VA, the Relationships dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL ($r = .653$), which is a strong positive correlation.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Finding 1: The Relationships dimension had the strongest positive correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates.

The Relationships dimension was consistent across both school districts. In Northern VA, Relationships had a moderate positive correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates, $r = .435$. In Central VA, Relationships had a strong positive correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates, $r = .653$.

According to L. E. Maxwell (2016), teachers who can create relationships with students that are warm, supportive, and focus on academic goals foster better academic success. Jia et al. (2009) found that when Chinese and American students felt they had teacher support, they saw positive correlation in grade point average and self-esteem. Similarly, Jimerson et al. (2012) concluded, "Positive relationships are likely to result in students making increased positive life-course decisions and having more positive perceptions of their self-control, cooperation, self-efficacy, cognitive abilities, and social problem-solving ability" (p. 9).

Finding 2: The Safety dimension had the second strongest positive correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates.

The second school climate dimension that was consistent across both school districts was the Safety dimension. In Northern VA, the Safety dimension had a weak positive correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates, $r = .378$. In Central VA, Safety had a strong positive correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates, $r = .613$.

School safety plays an important role in terms of school climate and student achievement. Positive school climate affects all four essential dimensions, especially school safety. When there are weak relationships, norms, and structures at school, students could experience bullying, violence, and disciplinary infractions, which affect their achievement and attendance (Astor et al., 2010). Students who feel secure at school experience more growth and development (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

Finding 3: Institutional Environment (i.e., Engagement/Equity and Opportunity) had a weak positive correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates.

The Institutional Environment dimension did not have a strong correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates. In Northern VA, the Engagement dimension had a weak positive correlation with Reading SOL pass rates, $r = .306$. In Central VA, the Equity and Opportunity dimension had a weak positive correlation with Reading SOL pass rates, $r = .305$.

Institutional Environment is an essential dimension that is often underestimated but plays a key part in students feeling comfortable and connected. Institutional Environment can be classified into two components: physical design and surroundings and school engagement/connectedness (Thapa et al., 2013). Researchers examining the effect of school building condition on school achievement and behavior found a positive association among student achievement and building condition (O'Neill & Oates, 2001). School facilities in poor condition led to a decrease in student learning, and poorly run facilities lead the way to poor student success (Buckley et al., 2004). Climate control, design arrangements, lighting, indoor air quality, and acoustical control have been linked to student success (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). According to Simon et al. (2007), facilities with good conditions forecast students' perceived self-respect. Design quality of a building, such as positive classroom furnishings and students' drawings displayed throughout the building, is linked with increased sense of self-respect and connection with the school (Killeen et al., 2003; Maxwell & Chmielewski, 2008).

According to the CDC (2009), school connectedness is “the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (p. 3). Loukas et al. (2006) found that school connectedness was associated with student happiness, fewer behavior problems, and violence prevention. In a study of kindergarten students, students who enjoyed school participated more in independent and cooperative engagement activities, which ameliorated their academic success (Ladd et al., 2000). Zullig et al. (2015) stated that classroom teachers have the influence to control the classroom setting and students’ daily events, and they play a vital part in encouraging students’ engagement in education.

Finding 4: The Academic Growth dimension (i.e., Expectations/Teaching and Learning) had a weak positive and or nonsignificant correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates.

The Academic Growth dimension did not have a strong correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates. In Northern VA, Academic Growth had a nonsignificant correlation with Reading SOL pass rates, $r = -.028$. In Central VA, Academic Growth had a weak positive correlation with Reading SOL pass rates, $r = .210$.

Thapa et al. (2013) concluded that teaching and learning is the most essential domain of school climate. According to Cohen et al. (2008), there are two subcategories in teaching and learning: Support for Learning and Social and Civic Learning. Having a positive school climate can increase morale, increase student achievement, and improve teacher performance (Kutsyruba et al., 2015). A negative school environment could significantly affect learning (Freiberg, 1998; Goddard et al., 2000; Heck, 2000). Shochet and Smith (2012) found that when teachers believed children would not perform up to standard, students did not believe in themselves and became disconnected from the educational process. When there is a higher level of educational pressure, teachers set higher goals, and the principal supports the teacher in accomplishing that goal set, the pupils work hard to accomplish the goals (Hoy et al., 2002). When schools foster a positive school climate, students can be successful while also fostering respect, joint trust, group unity, and a willingness to learn (Thapa et al., 2013).

DISCUSSION BASED ON IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this research led to four implications for practice for building level principals and school district leaders.

Implication 1: Building level principals should consider creating a team within their school to help outline a plan for identifying social emotional goals for relationship building. Implication 1 relates to Finding 1.

The Relationships dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates. This tells researchers that relationships are key to students’ academic success. Stakeholders, including teachers, students, school counselors, principal, parents, and other community members should create a comprehensive plan to address the social emotional needs of their students. For example, teachers using a morning meeting time to do social emotional activities with their students could contribute to a sense of belonging among elementary-aged students.

Implication 2: Building level principals should consider offering professional development that is centered around relationship building. Implication 2 relates to Finding 1.

The Relationships dimension had the strongest correlation to the Reading SOLs for both school districts. Professional development related to relationship building, such as the free materials

created by Sanford Harmony, would allow teachers to build skills and techniques to create secure relationships with their students and families. This could be year-long or at the beginning of the school year.

Implication 3: Schools should provide a clear understanding of schoolwide expectations to maintain a better sense of emotional and physical wellbeing within the school community. Implication 3 relates to Finding 2.

The Safety dimension had the second strongest correlation to Reading SOL pass rates. This suggests that safety plays a key role in creating a positive school climate. Schools should consider creating a PBIS team to help with the implementation of the schoolwide expectations that are developmentally appropriate which in return will make it comprehensible for students.

Implication 4: Building level principals should continually assess school safety. Implication 4 relates to Finding 2.

Principals should regularly and frequently address any miscommunication in terms of the school safety protocols and procedures among teachers, students, and parents. The safety and wellness dimension had the second strongest correlation to the Reading SOL pass rates, which suggests that safety plays a key role in school climate.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this study was the limited data available about school climate at the elementary level. Although school climate surveys are required at the secondary level, the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services does not require them at the elementary level. Because not all school districts choose to survey at the elementary level, data sets are only available from a few districts. Another limitation is correlational data can determine association between variables but not predict causation. Other limitations include the accuracy of the climate surveys and the reliability of the SOL data.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The researcher has the following suggestions for future research based on this study. Data from at least one school division from each of the eight regions in Virginia should be included. This would give a better insight on school climate across the Commonwealth. Another consideration would be to utilize items from the Learning Climate section from the VDOE School Quality Report to see they have any relationship with student achievement. An additional consideration would be to develop a mixed-methods study, incorporating student, parent, and staff interviews to gain insight on various stakeholders' views of school climate and its relationship to student achievement at the elementary school level.

CONCLUSION

School climate has been shown to affect student discipline, school attendance, and teachers' sense of job fulfillment (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). According to Bryk and Schneider (2003), if schools create positive learning environments, students will achieve at a higher level than would otherwise be predicted by their socioeconomic background. The findings of this study were consistent across both school divisions. The Relationship dimension of school climate had the strongest correlation to the Reading pass rates in both school districts, which was consistent with previous research in this area. It is with this information that school districts and building level

principals understand the importance of school climate and will now make relationships and safety a priority which in return will impact student achievement.

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**2019 Virginia School Climate Survey
Student Version – Grades 4 & 5**

Algonkian Elementary

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) thanks you for recently participating in the Virginia School Climate Survey as part of our work to support the efforts of schools and divisions to improve school climate.

We are pleased to provide you with the average survey responses of students at your school. 134 responses were received which equates to a response rate of 74%.

1. What grade are you in this year? *Mark one.*

43% 4th Grade

57% 5th Grade

1. ENGAGEMENT

A. EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. I like this school.	1%	2%	50%	46%
3. I am proud to be a student at this school.	0%	4%	51%	44%
4. I feel like I belong at this school.	0%	10%	50%	40%

B. ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
5. I usually work hard on my schoolwork.	1%	7%	48%	44%
6. I want to learn as much as I can at school.	2%	7%	42%	49%
7. I learn about important things at school.	0%	8%	49%	43%

C. BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. It is important that I come to school every day.	1%	14%	50%	35%
9. I help my class make decisions at school.	1%	22%	62%	15%
10. I get to do interesting activities at school.	1%	14%	38%	46%

2. RELATIONSHIPS

A. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG STUDENTS

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. I care about other students at this school.	0%	3%	39%	58%
12. I get along well with other students at this school.	1%	7%	57%	34%
13. Other students at this school care about me.	7%	11%	57%	25%
14. Other students at this school get along well with me.	2%	12%	56%	30%
15. [Validity Screening Item] I am telling the truth on this survey.	0%	0%	20%	80%

B. ADULT RESPECT FOR STUDENTS

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this school? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
16. Teachers and other adults at this school care about me.	1%	2%	45%	52%
17. Teachers and other adults at this school want me to succeed.	0%	3%	31%	66%
18. Teachers and other adults at this school listen to what I have to say.	1%	10%	49%	39%
19. Teachers and other adults at this school treat me with respect.	1%	5%	51%	43%

C. STUDENT WILLINGNESS TO SEEK HELP

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this school? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. There are teachers or other adults at this school I could talk with if I needed help with something.	1%	4%	40%	55%
21. I am comfortable asking teachers or other adults at this school for help with my schoolwork.	2%	13%	41%	43%
22. I am comfortable asking teachers or other adults at this school for help to solve a problem I am having with another student.	5%	19%	49%	28%
23. Teachers and other adults at this school will help me if I have a problem.	1%	1%	49%	49%

D. SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this school? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
24. I stop and think before doing anything when I get angry.	1%	19%	52%	28%
25. I work out disagreements with other students by talking with them.	0%	14%	60%	25%
26. I know how to disagree without starting an argument or a fight.	2%	16%	52%	29%
27. I know how to decide right from wrong.	0%	6%	53%	41%
28. I can control myself when I am upset.	0%	12%	51%	37%

3. EXPECTATIONS

A. ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this school? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
29. Teachers and other adults at this school expect me to succeed.	0%	6%	49%	46%
30. Teachers and other adults at this school provide me the support I need to succeed.	1%	7%	50%	42%
31. Teachers and other adults at this school challenge me academically.	3%	14%	50%	33%

B. INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this school? *Mark one answer per line.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
32. Teachers and other adults at this school expect me to explain my answer to a question.	1%	4%	54%	40%
33. Teachers and other adults at this school ask me to think about different ways to solve problems.	1%	10%	54%	34%
34. I work on projects with other students in my class.	1%	7%	50%	42%
35. Teachers and other adults at this school ask me to talk about what I am learning.	2%	27%	46%	25%
36. Teachers and other adults at this school often connect what I am learning to life outside the classroom.	7%	28%	48%	17%

C. SCHOOL DISCIPLINE STRUCTURE

2019 Virginia School Climate Survey: Students Grades 4-5

55. Are you Hispanic or Latino? *Mark one.*
 14% Yes 86% No
56. How many parents live with you? Include biological, step, adoptive, and foster parents. *Mark one.*
 1% None
 10% One
 80% Two
 8% More than two
57. How far did your mother go in school? *Mark one.*
 0% Did not graduate from high school
 6% Graduated from high school
 4% Graduated from a two-year college or technical school
 11% Graduated from a four-year college
 58% Completed post-graduate studies (such as a master's degree or doctoral degree) after graduating from a four-year college
 0% I do not know
58. Does your family speak a language other than English at home? *Mark one.*
 34% Yes 66% No
59. How many of the questions on this survey did you answer truthfully? *Mark one.*
 78% All of them
 12% All but 1 or 2 of them
 7% Most of them
 1% Some of them
 1% Only a few or none of them

	Never	Once or Twice	About Once per Week	More than Once per Week
47. Have you been bullied by a student at school in the past month?	67%	23%	3%	7%
48. Have you bullied someone at school in the past month?	98%	0%	1%	1%
49. Have you been bullied by an adult at this school this year?	93%	5%	1%	1%

If answered positively to any question above (O47-Q49) You have just answered some questions about being bullied in some way.

	Yes	No
50. Did you tell a teacher or another adult at school what happened?	64%	36%

Have any of the following happened to you personally at school this year? This includes school events like field trips, school dances, and sports events. *Mark one answer per line.*

	No	One Time	A Couple of Times	Many Times
51. A student pushed or hit you when you were not playing around.	72%	16%	8%	4%
52. A student told a mean rumor or a lie about me.	54%	20%	18%	7%

5. DEMOGRAPHICS

53. Are you a boy or a girl? *Mark one.*
 48% Boy 52% Girl
54. What is the best description of your race? *If you are more than one race, mark all that apply.*
 3% American Indian or Alaska Native
 10% Asian
 12% Black or African American
 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 66% White
 39% Other Race

55. Are you Hispanic or Latino? *Mark one.*

14% Yes 86% No

56. How many parents live with you? Include biological, step, adoptive, and foster parents. *Mark one.*

1% None
10% One
80% Two
8% More than two

57. How far did your mother go in school? *Mark one.*

0% Did not graduate from high school
6% Graduated from high school
4% Graduated from a two-year college or technical school
11% Graduated from a four-year college
58% Completed post-graduate studies (such as a master's degree or doctoral degree) after graduating from a four-year college
0% I do not know

58. Does your family speak a language other than English at home? *Mark one.*

34% Yes 66% No

59. How many of the questions on this survey did you answer truthfully? *Mark one.*

78% All of them
12% All but 1 or 2 of them
7% Most of them
1% Some of them
1% Only a few or none of them

GENDER DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN ETHIOPIAN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: PERCEPTIONS AND POLICY PRACTICES

EASAW ALEMAYEHU ASSEFA

ABEBAW YIRGA ADAMU

Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

In the past four decades, it is interesting to note that the issue of gender diversity management (GDM) in education has attracted scholarly and policy attention. However, there has been little or no study on the perceptions and policy practices of GDM in Ethiopian public higher education institutions (HEIs). Therefore, the purpose of this article was to explore the perceptions and policy practices of the GDM in the selected five Ethiopian public HEIs. It was also aimed to provide insights that might guide practical and successful interventions as well as ideas for improvements.

Employing mixed methods, a total of 395 regular undergraduate students (N=395) were recruited to take part in the quantitative phase of the study, while an additional group of 34 individuals (N=34) was sought to participate in the qualitative part. In total, (N=429) respondents participated in the study. A survey questionnaire comprising fourteen items was developed and subsequently analyzed using SPSS version 25. A narrative inquiry approach was also used for semi-structured interview analysis that allowed participants to present their tales. To substantiate data generated through questionnaires & interviews, further document analysis was also conducted.

The results show that inadequate GDM policy is being implemented on top of a lower perception of it, even in an environment where policy is generally positive. Additionally, this survey offered a substantial amount of new insight into perceptions and policy practices regarding GDM. Ethiopian public HEIs need to identify areas for improvement and revise and implement policies that are aligned with the needs and expectations of twenty first century's GDM issues.

INTRODUCTION

In the past four decades, it is interesting to note that the issue of gender diversity management (GDM) in education has attracted scholarly and policy attention (Wieczorek-Szymańska, 2020). Since then, efforts to narrow the gender diversity gap in HEIs have risen in favor of promoting equitable education for men and women (Hurst, 2020). Gender diversity refers to the existence of diverse gender identities within a community or organization (Kaur & Arora, 2020). GDM in higher education institutions (HEIs) involves intentional steps to promote equality, inclusion, and equitable opportunities for all genders (Klein, 2016). Promoting gender equality in education is crucial for reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance, as emphasized by Kofi Annan, the UN's seventh Secretary-General, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance" (UNDP, 2018, p,1). However, despite efforts, a gender gap still exists in HEIs, favoring men in many developing nations, particularly in Africa (Allan, 2012).

Female's involvement in HEIs varies across national, disciplinary and institutional borders, both in developed and developing countries (David, 2015). Studies indicate that female students' participation in HEIs tends to decline as they progress from secondary education (UNESCO, 2016). Obstacles such as double home responsibilities, low self-esteem, limited GDM practices, and lack of family support can impede female students' progress (Lin, 2016). These challenges often lead to dropout rates among female students (Paudel, 2019).

Perceptions play a significant role in shaping individuals' understanding of reality (Rudhumbu & Chawawal, 2014). Students' perceptions of diversity management are critical, regardless of whether they align with the actual situation. Assessing perceptions related to GDM is vital for making informed decisions that benefit HEIs and their members (Henry et al., 2011).

GDM policies in HEIs aim to promote and support gender diversity within these institutions (Pandit & Paul, 2023). While efforts have been made to implement such policies, challenges and problems persist (Peterson & Jordansson, 2022). Continuous evaluation, stakeholder involvement, and adaptability are necessary to address these issues (Ruggi & Duvvury, 2023). Inclusive participation of students, faculty, staff, and community members is crucial for developing, implementing, and evaluating gender diversity policies (May & Bridger, 2010).

In Ethiopia, where patriarchal culture has historically limited women's access to HEIs, various initiatives have been undertaken to promote gender diversity (Alemayehu, 2020). The government has established scholarship programs specifically for female students, aiming to reduce financial barriers and encourage higher education enrollment (Amente, 2019). NGOs and organizations also provide mentorship programs and support networks for female students, empowering them academically and personally (Alemu et al., 2022).

Despite these efforts, GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs remains challenging due to sociocultural issues, budgetary constraints, and gender-based discrimination (Abate, 2023). Continued efforts are necessary to achieve long-term sustainable progress in promoting gender diversity and empowering women in HEIs (Bayeh, 2016). In spite of the sector's growth being very encouraging, achieving gender diversity equality has remained a difficult task. And still, according to the new education development road map report, "there is a huge gender gap in enrolment among male and female" students in the Ethiopian HEIs (MoE, 2018, p. 49). As noted by Semela et al. (2020), studies identified that there are different obstacles to females in HEIs in Ethiopia.

While diversity management in HEIs has been widely studied (e.g., Adamu 2014; Adamu, 2013; Adamu & Bejital, 2007; Ambisa, 2010), there is no research specifically focusing on students' perceptions and policy practices related to GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs. Therefore, this study was aimed to address this gap and to explore the perceptions and policy practices of the students GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs. It was also aimed to provide insights that might guide practical and successful interventions as well as ideas for improvements.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The findings of this study addressed the following two basic research questions:

1. What are the respondents' overall perception regarding students GDM at Ethiopian public HEIs?
2. How are policies for managing the diversity of gender practiced at Ethiopian public HEIs?

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The Diversified Learning Environment (DLE) model, developed by Hurtado et al. (2012), offers a theoretical foundation for understanding and evaluating diversity management in HEIs. It aims to assess the level of support provided by the HEI environment for diverse students, faculty, and staff, while also examine whether the environment fosters structures, beliefs, and behaviors that positively influence the learning outcomes of all students (Hurtado et al., 2012).

The DLE model considers two contextual dimensions: internal and external. At the institutional level, it examines factors such as the institution's historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, the composition of students, faculty, and staff, and organizational structures like

policies and curricula (Hurtado, 2008). At the individual level, it takes into account psychological impressions, attitudes, and behaviors related to diversity (Hurtado et al., 2012; Dawson, 2007).

In the study of GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs, the DLE model's internal context is relevant. It explores individuals' psychological impressions and attitudes toward gender diversity on campus, as well as behaviors and experiences within intergroup encounters (Hurtado, 2008). Additionally, it examines the institutions' historical legacy, composition, and organizational structures related to gender diversity (Hurtado et al., 2012).

The DLE model's external context focuses on broader societal and policy factors. It considers governmental and policy frameworks influencing diversity management in HEIs, as well as sociohistorical factors shaping the overall diversity landscape (Wann, 2013; Hurtado et al., 2012).

Applying the DLE model to the study on GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs allows for a comprehensive assessment of internal and external factors. It examines the institutions' climate, historical legacy, composition, and organizational structures related to gender diversity (Hurtado et al., 2012). Furthermore, it considers governmental policies and sociohistorical factors influencing gender diversity management (Hurtado et al., 2012).

In conclusion, the DLE model provides a structured framework for understanding and evaluating diversity management in HEIs. By applying this model to the study of GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs, researchers can assess various dimensions of the institutions' climate, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies for creating an inclusive environment. This approach promotes gender diversity and enhances educational experiences within these institutions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014) to comprehensively address the research questions. Pragmatism, as defined by Morgan (2007), guided the selection of multiple methodologies, perspectives, and assumptions to gain a practical understanding of the study issue. Qualitative techniques, such as document analysis and interviews, were used to explore participants' perceptions and experiences related to GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs. Quantitative data from surveys were statistically analyzed to provide numerical insights. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the study aimed to triangulate data, validate findings, and gain a deeper understanding of the research subject (Johnson et al., 2007). This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis and ensured that multiple perspectives were considered.

The use of mixed methods was guided by influential scholars such as Creswell (2014) and Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007), highlighting the commitment to a thorough and comprehensive investigation. By blending various methodologies, perspectives, and assumptions, the study aimed to provide robust insights for practical interventions and improvements. Overall, the mixed-methods approach allowed for the integration of qualitative and quantitative data, resulting in a comprehensive analysis that addressed the research questions from different angles and provided a richer understanding of GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs.

Population and Samples of the Study

In 2020, the Ministry of Education categorized Ethiopian public HEIs into Research Universities, University of Applied Sciences, and Comprehensive Universities. Adama Science and Technology University and Addis Ababa Science and Technology University were science and technology universities not included in the categories (MOE, 2020). Additionally, Kotebe Education University was proclaimed as the first Education University in Ethiopia (FDRE, 2022). For the

study, five HEIs were chosen: one from each category, one from science and technology universities, and the Education University. The selection was based on proximity to the researchers and budget constraints. The selected HEIs were Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, Kotebe University of Education, Debre Birhan University, and Selale University.

A total of 39,962 undergraduate regular students are enrolled in the selected five Ethiopian HEIs, with 25,081 male and 14,881 female students. Using the Yamane formula, a sample size of 395 regular students (79 from each university) was determined. The sample size was distributed proportionately based on the number of male and female students in each HEI, resulting in 216 male and 179 female undergraduate students participating in the study through questionnaire responses.

Students were chosen as the primary data source due to their firsthand experience and understanding of GDM challenges and practices in HEIs. Their perspectives shed light on gender-based discrimination, unequal treatment, and the effectiveness of existing policies. Involving students allows for a more comprehensive understanding of GDM in Ethiopian HEIs. Additionally, as key stakeholders in the HEIs system, their experiences and perceptions directly impact their education and overall development. Engaging them in the study raises awareness of gender equality and inclusivity, encouraging them to advocate for positive change within their institutions and society as a whole. Qualitative data were collected from one gender office director, academic vice presidents, and student deans from each university, as well as two instructors and students from each university (see Table 1). However, one academic vice president declined to participate. These participants were chosen because they hold key administrative positions and possess firsthand knowledge of gender-related policies, practices, and challenges. They play a vital role in shaping and implementing GDM policies and programs. Including them provides insights into decision-making processes and strategies for managing gender diversity.

Instructors and students were selected to gain insights into students' day-to-day experiences and challenges related to gender diversity. Their perspectives identify areas of concern and inform targeted interventions. Participants were selected using purposive (gender office director, academic vice presidents, and student deans) and snowball (instructors and students) sampling techniques.

Table 1: *Total Participants from Ethiopian public HEIs*

Participants	Type of Participation	Male	Female	Total
Undergraduate Students	Questionnaire (quantitative)	216	179	395
Undergraduate Students	Interviews (qualitative)	5	5	10
Academic Vice Presidents	Interviews (qualitative)	4		4
Students' Deans	Interviews (qualitative)		5	5
Instructors	Interviews (qualitative)	5	5	10
Gender office Heads	Interviews (qualitative)		5	5
	Total	230	199	429

Qualitative data were also generated from official documents including the constitution, the education and training policy, the growth and transformation plans the higher education proclamation, the education development roadmap, the education sector development plans, and MoE's five-year strategic framework for enhancing women's participation in tertiary education in Ethiopia institutions. These documents help to better understand the policy context related to GDM.

Data Collection Instrument

The survey is divided into two sections: Section I gathers demographic information (gender, age, and education), and Section II uses a 5-point Likert scale to assess GDM policies and views. Thirty respondents that made up the pilot sample examined the questionnaire. The computed and real variances were compared in order to evaluate reliability. High dependability is indicated by an alpha value close to 1. Correlating each item with the total allowed us to assess each item's correctness. Ninety-nine percent accuracy was indicated by correlation coefficients for all items being less than 0.01. The SPSS analysis revealed a significant level of association. Following the pilot study, recommendations and adjustments were made.

Document analysis and interviews provided the qualitative data for the study. Protocols derived from GDM perception and policy practices were applied to in-depth interviews. During personal interviews, students and the remaining participants were generally not asked the same questions. While there may be some overlap in general interview questions, the focus and level of detail differ based on the role being interviewed for. Research questions, literature reviews, prior studies, and background information were used to produce the guidelines. Using a guide on gender and gender diversity management concerns, document data were generated through review.

Data Analysis

We checked survey responses for mistakes, gaps, and missing information. Descriptive statistics (frequency, standard deviation, mean and grand mean) were reported by using SPSS. Interview-derived qualitative data were organized and coded. Coding, statistics, and response reviews guaranteed correct data, compiled dataset, and exposed trends. The process of coding assigned themes to qualitative data. It aided in highlighting discoveries, drawing conclusions, and identifying reoccurring themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Perception of Participants on Gender Diversity Management

Research Question 1:

What are the respondents' overall perception regarding students GDM at Ethiopian public HEIs?

The research group's response on overall perceptions of GDM was evaluated in terms of mean and standard deviation values based on the data acquired from the quantitative survey responses. The data that pertains to the research subjects are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Overall Perceptions for Gender Diversity Management

No	Items	N	Mean	SD
1	There is respect and support for gender diversity.	395	2.57	1.077
2	This university makes gender diversity management a priority.	395	2.57	.973
3	Both genders treated fairly and equitably in this campus in general.	395	4.25	1.046
4	I believe that both genders have the same opportunities on this university regardless of their identities.	395	4.04	.980
5	I believe that this university has an inclusive environment for people of all gender.	395	3.89	1.138
6	Students value making friends with other students who have a different gender than them.	395	3.99	1.098
7	I feel comfortable around students whose gender is different from mine.	395	3.24	1.089
	Overall Average	395	3.50	

Perception on Respect and Support

The mean and standard deviation score for Item 1 ($M=2.57$, $SD=1.077$) indicated that most respondents had a negative opinion of the situation since there is less support and respect for gender diversity. This suggests that the atmosphere is less favorable and that inclusion, equality, and gender diversity are not as readily embraced. HEIs should take advantage of these results to push for more programs and regulations that support gender diversity, respect, and inclusion for all people.

In response to this question, respondents felt that, while there is some trial in offering respect and assistance, it is insufficient in the selected five Ethiopian public HEIs. One participant said,

Yes, respect and support are indeed essential in a given HEIs. The support is based on the capacity and budget of our university. We support with what we have and it may not be satisfactory. ... Since the need and expectation are high, it may not be of course sufficient.

(Interviewee, #22, May 2023, Own translation)

In this regard, this investigation replicates the recommendations of educational psychology in other countries' contexts where because substantial student achievement gaps are tied to learners' socioeconomic situation, respect with support helped educational success at all levels (Sternberg

& Williams, 2002). The issue of respect and support was similarly emphasized in the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP I) document, which stated that as a result of active affirmative action (admission criteria, as well as financial support such as a pilot scholarship program and tutorial support programs) and general expansion, the gender parity index (GPI) has significantly increased in favor of females (FDRE, 2010).

Perception on Prioritizing GDM

The quantitative respondents were asked about their perception concerning whether their HEIs make gender diversity management a priority or not, as indicated in Table 2, Item 2, and the results indicated that the majority of them perceived that their HEIs failed to make gender diversity management a priority highly having the mean and standard deviation value of ($M= 2.56, SD=.973$). These results suggest that most respondents thought their HEIs had not succeeded in providing GDM with the attention it deserved. It also suggests that the respondents were worried about how much time and energy is spent encouraging gender diversity in their HEIs. This also implies that the HEIs must recognize these perceptions and respond appropriately to allay the fears.

Consistent with the findings, the Ouagadougou Declaration and Framework for Action (1993) documents stated that among various regional (African) instruments, regional, bilateral, and international organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations, are advised to make females' education a high priority in their development efforts (UNESCO & UNICEF, 1993). The tendency to not prioritize gender diversity management is consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Semela, 2006), in which the gender issue was discovered to rely on the least priority task of HEIs' what to-do list, which was expected to create and maintain an environment by prioritizing GDM at HEIs for both genders as one of the GDM processes.

Perception on Ensuring Fairness and Equity

Item 3 in Table 2 had a mean and standard deviation score of ($M=4.25, SD=1.046$), suggesting that most respondents perceived that both genders were generally treated equally and fairly on HEIs. This suggests that respondents had a favorable opinion of how both genders were treated in the HEI setting. It also implies that there is a degree of trust in the justice and equity of gender-related practices, policies, and interactions on these HEIs. In a previous study by Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006), a few students reported unequal treatment of male and female students. The findings do not corroborate with the findings of this study. In the qualitative findings of Interviewee # 22, the following was discussed:

Still now, I have never heard a question of fairness in this university. The system and structure that we have will not allow everyone to be unfair. But as human needs are unlimited, we may not fulfill every need of our students. We are limited in budget. Perhaps, from the accessibility point of view, we have limitations.

(Interviewee, #22, May 2023, Own translation)

Perception on Equal Opportunities for All Genders

The responders' average score and standard deviation for Item 4 in Table 2, were ($M= 4.04, SD= 0.980$). As a result of this, it is highly reasonable to assume that the selected five Ethiopian public HEIs respondents perceived that both genders had the same opportunities on campus regardless of their identities which was expected by HEIs to create and maintain an environment

where both genders have the same opportunities as one of the GDM tasks. For example, Interviewee Number 22 stated:

Yes, I think that we are providing the same opportunities. Even legally, it is strictly forbidden not to provide the same opportunities. We are good in this regard. I never heard a complaint on this agenda. Perhaps in the lower office may be raised.

(Interviewee, #22, May 2023, Own translation)

This appears to have no obvious violation of Article 26.1 of the United Nations (UN) human rights statement, which states that HEIs should be equally accessible to everyone (UN, 1948). In line with this, the worldwide aim for gender equality under ESDP IV needs to include fostering equal access and achievement in education and training for women and girls (FDRE, 2010). Supporting the idea of equal opportunity for both gender diversity, McDuff et al., (2020) also suggested that HEIs developed more inclusive processes and curricula to enhance equality of opportunity for all students.

Perception on Inclusive Environment for All Genders

The respondents' mean and standard deviation score of Item 5 in Table 2 were ($M= 3.89$, $SD= 1.138$), demonstrating that respondents perceived favorably their university as an inclusive environment for people of all gender. One respondent in the survey's qualitative section provided the following responses, which matched with the quantitative value.

I think there is an environment at this campus that is welcoming to persons of all genders. As you can see, both gender groups are present here, which is the very best proof that all genders are included. Naturally, individuals admitted to HEIs are a prerequisite for entry. So, I see that an inclusive environment exists here.

(Interviewee, #8, May 2023, Own translation)

However, it appears that the opposite is true in other nations, where there have been many studies that have concentrated on gender diversity stereotypes, and they have often indicated that there were situations of inequality when gender diversity was addressed. For example, in research conducted by Kollmayer et al., (2018) course materials were analyzed, and it was discovered that male characters outnumbered female characters in the texts.

As a result, in Ethiopian public HEIs, consistent with other studies (e.g., Stentiford, & Koutsouris, 2021), although it was expected to create and maintain an environment where an inclusive atmosphere for people of all gender as one of the GDM tasks, because interviewee respondents strongly perceived their university as having no inclusive environment for people of all gender, there is still a long way to go towards achieving an inclusive environment for people of all gender.

Perception on Embracing Cross-Gender Friendships

Item 6 in Table 2 had a mean and a standard deviation score of ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.098$) suggesting that the majority of respondents had a high perception as students value making friends with other students who have a different gender than they in their HEIs. Here is an example from the

interview who had similar concern, claiming that:

Once they join our system, regardless of their gender diversity, they were the same. It is in my opinion. Students to make value across gender and disability, we have made the environment conducive for it. And since they are in the same environment, less likely there will be discrimination. But human being naturally does have some attractive issues and needs. So, the grouping survival will be to what they know earlier. For instance, when I was freshman years back, I asked one student and he said from Gojam and I was happy to be with him since I came from Wellega which is near to Gojam.

Interviewee No. 11, May 2023 (Own translation)

This shows that most respondents at Ethiopian public HEIs valued friendships with students in the opposite gender's HEI tremendously. This also indicates a favorable outlook on encouraging friendships and social ties between people of different genders in the context of HEIs. In addition, it implies that students at the five Ethiopian public HEIs understand the value of diversity and are willing to form bonds with people of other genders in order to further inclusion and broaden their social circles.

Perception on Comfort with Different Gender

The respondents were asked about their perceptions concerning whether they felt comfortable around students whose gender was different from theirs or not. As indicated in Item 7 of Table 2, item 7, the results of the analysis indicate that the majority of them perceived that they were feeling comfortable around students whose gender was different from theirs. The mean and standard deviation value of (M= 3.24, SD= 1.089) are shown in the selected five Ethiopian public HEIs. For example, in the survey's qualitative part, one respondent submitted the following responses, which matched the quantitative value:

For instance, in my class, we are 46(forty-six) but the number of females is only five. However, socializing with them was not challenging and was not uncomfortable”.

(Interviewee, # 14, May 2023, Own translation)

Echoing an opposite concern, one participant from the interview decried that:

Yes, sometimes I feel discomfort when I am with other gender.

(Interviewee, #2, May 2023, Own translation)

This shows that, on the whole, students in these institutions are at ease and comfortable engaging with students of other genders. A welcoming and encouraging campus community where a range of gender identities are recognized and cherished must be fostered, and this requires a favorable perception. This result suggests that the five Ethiopian public HEIs have made strides in developing an inclusive environment that encourages constructive interactions amongst students of various gender identities. In this regard, this inquiry mirrors the findings of comparable studies in other country circumstances where students did not feel uncomfortable with students of a different gender diversity than their own (McLoughlin, 2005).

POLICY PRACTICE FOR GENDER DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

The study's particular goal was to empirically examine the GDM's perceptions & policy practices at Ethiopian public HEIs. It was also aimed to provide insights that might guide practical and successful interventions as well as ideas for improvements. The results of this study will draw the attention of policy makers to a few key elements that Ethiopian public HEIs' GDM policy approaches have in common.

Research Question 2:

How are policies for managing the diversity of gender practiced at Ethiopian public HEIs?

The research group's response to diversity-related policy practices for GDM was evaluated in terms of mean and standard deviation values together with qualitative data using information from the quantitative survey responses. A list of the data relevant to the research subjects may be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Gender Diversity Management Related Policy Practice

No	Items	N	Mean	SD
1	This HEI's mission statement specifically refers to the value of having gender diversity.	395	3.95	1.122
2	By the HEI's legislation, related policies and internal code of conduct, it is clearly written that discrimination against gender is not allowed.	395	4.21	.946
3	This university has clear disciplinary procedures for anyone to report prejudice or discriminatory experiences on gender issues.	395	4.26	1.022
4	In this university, gender diversity related policies, legislations and guidelines are effectively communicated to both gender students.	395	2.51	.935
5	The implementation of policy, rules and regulation that protect gender diversity is weak in this university.	395	4.16	.969
6	This campus is using affirmative action policy to manage gender diversity fairly.	395	4.20	.996
7	This university has specific policies, programs or initiatives to help gender diversity.	395	3.85	.913
	Overall Average	395	3.87	

Policy Practice 1: Inclusive Gender Diversity Mission

The majority of respondents stated that their campus's mission statement particularly mentions the benefit of having gender diversity on campus. This is shown by the mean and standard deviation scores for GDM-related policy practice Item 1 in Table 3 (M= 3.95, SD= 1.122). During the qualitative phase, however, one responder made the following comments, which contradicted the quantitative phase's findings:

As this will be an academic study, I must be completely honest with you and say that I have never noticed the issue of GDM in this university's goal statement. Perhaps it may be included in particular documents at offices, but not boldly advertised by posting around campus, which would be wonderful.

(Interviewee, #6, May 2023, Own translation)

This suggests that most participants perceived their HEI's mission statement emphasized the advantages of gender diversity. Additionally, it implies that the mission statements of the aforementioned HEIs clearly acknowledge and advocate for the value of gender diversity in their overarching vision and objectives. It also suggests that the HEIs' community is conducive to promoting fairness and inclusion. This is a promising finding since it implies that the HEIs have made efforts to include gender diversity as a valuable central mission statement and principle. It exhibits a proactive strategy for fostering an inclusive environment that respects and encourages a range of gender identities. The result is consistent with Krishnamurthi's (2003) finding that universities were under pressure to integrate gender and other diversity into their mission, although it was one common justification being the necessity for an inclusive learning environment.

Policy Practice 2: Gender Discrimination Protection Policy

In Table 3 GDM related policy practice Item 2, respondents were questioned about whether or not gender diversity discrimination was explicitly prohibited by HEI's laws, associated regulations, and internal code of conduct. Most of them thought so, according to the data's mean and standard deviation ($M= 4.21$, $SD= 0.946$).

These results indicate that most respondents talked about how the internal code of conduct, rules, and legislation of the five Ethiopian public HEIs specifically forbid discrimination based on gender diversity. This shows that the respondents were confident in the rules and regulations that are in place on HEIs to deal with and stop discrimination based on gender identity. It is a sign of the institution's good work in advancing equality, inclusion, and a conducive environment at HEIs for people of all genders. This inquiry replicates what is stated in the mentioned policy papers, which claim that one of the objectives of Ethiopia's Higher Education Proclamation (FDRE 2019, Article 6.2) is to enhance HEIs services that are free of any sort of gender discrimination. According to this agreement, entrance evaluation or admission techniques developed for any female student, among others, must be separate from the others (Article 6.33). This is in accordance with both the Constitution (FDRE, 1995) and the UNESCO Declaration on Higher Education (1998).

Policy Practice 3: Gender Discrimination Reporting Procedures

The vast majority of survey participants strongly agreed that their university had clear disciplinary processes for anybody to report prejudice or encounters with discrimination based on gender diversity concerns. The respondents' responses to GDM related policy practice Item 3 in Table 3 had the following mean and standard deviation scores: ($M= 4.26$, $SD= 1.022$). Replies from the following respondent was consistent with the quantitative phase findings:

Yes, as you are aware, there will be instances of disciplinary misbehavior while you work at HEIs. Most of the time, we concentrate on actively preventing harm. However, if an issue arises, we have policies set by the previous MoSHE (the present MoE), and HEIs are

subject to disciplinary action. Additionally, this university has created a set of disciplinary guidelines. [...] We will use this paper to take remedial action. We also have a discipline committee, and according to the rules and regulations, this body will take remedial action when disciplinary issues arise. This committee will make important choices like terminating people and refusing to provide them with documents after graduation. Additionally, students have the option of appealing to the university president.

(Interviewee, #3, May 2023, Own translation)

These results suggest that the great majority of survey respondents firmly believed that their HEIs had explicit disciplinary procedures in place for reporting bias or instances of discrimination stemming from concerns about gender diversity. This suggests that respondents have a good opinion of the institution's dedication to recognizing and resolving incidents of bias or discrimination pertaining to gender diversity. The selected five Ethiopian public HEIs have demonstrated their ability to provide channels for students to report occurrences, get assistance, and take necessary action against discrimination based on gender when they have well defined disciplinary procedures in place.

However, concerning the HEIs specific policy environment, the opposite reported by both MoE, (2004) and Semela, (2006, b) that in Ethiopian public HEIs students, it appears, are not only victims of their parents and significant others but also victims of the HEIs environment (MoE, 2004). To yet, HEIs lack functioning, standard, and specific policies that safeguard female's rights and can be forcefully enforced against those who violate them (Semela, 2006, b).

Policy Practice 4: Effective GDM Policy Communication

The respondents strongly agreed that gender diversity-related policies, regulations, and guidelines were not successfully communicated to both gender students at their institution, as evidenced by the average response and standard deviation for GDM related policy practice Item 4 in Table 3 ($M= 2.51$, $SD= .935$). The finding indicates that male and female students at their HEIs were not effectively informed about policies, rules, and standards pertaining to gender diversity. This shows that information on rules and guidelines pertaining to gender diversity is not being adequately disseminated. This also implies that to guarantee knowledge, comprehension, and compliance among all members of the HEIs, gender diversity-related rules must be effectively communicated. Confusion, a lack of clarity, and possible gaps in the implementation and enforcement of these regulations can arise from ineffective policy communication.

This finding is consistent with UNESCO's (1998) World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century declaration document stating that among the priority actions that each country should take at the national level is establishing the legislative framework for the reform and further development of HEIs that HEIs shall be accessible to all (UNESCO, 1998 Article 1.a), defining, communicating and implementing policies to eliminate all gender stereotyping in HEIs, and consolidating women's participation at all levels and in all disciplines (UNESCO 1998 Article 1.i).

Policy Practice 5: Gender Diversity Management Policy Implementation

The majority of respondents indicated that their university's implementation of policies, rules, and regulations protecting gender diversity was inadequate, as evidenced by their mean and standard deviation scores for GDM related policy practice Item 5 in Table 3 ($M= 4.16$, $SD=0.969$).

This implies that insufficient efforts exist to ensure that gender diversity is protected in Ethiopian public HEIs and to successfully translate policy into practice. A lack of appropriate resources, enforcement mechanisms, and assistance for gender diversity-related issues can arise from the ineffective implementation of legislation and regulations. Gender identity or expression may give rise to situations where people are subjected to discrimination, exclusion, or unfair treatment. It also implies that these institutions must assess their implementation tactics closely and pinpoint areas that require improvement in order to allay this worry.

In this regard, this investigation replicates the findings of a related paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association addressing female educational problems. The gender diversity issue necessitates the formulation and implementation of enabling policies. In many countries, women's educational experiences have become a central focus of education policy and planning in a very short period (Samoff, 1999).

Policy Practice 6: Fair Gender Diversity Affirmative Action

Affirmative action policy is being used by their campuses to equitably manage gender diversity, according to the majority of respondents, according to the mean and standard deviation scores for GDM related policy practice Item 6 in Table 3 ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.996$).

This shows that the majority of respondents said their HEIs handle gender diversity fairly by using affirmative action policies. This implies that the HEIs actively work to advance gender diversity and guarantee that people with a range of gender identities have equitable representation and opportunity. The replies of the following respondent during the qualitative phase matched the quantitative outcome as follows:

The affirmative action is provided despite the accessibility issue. For example, we created a library that is too close to the female dorms to protect women from harassment in the evening. Anytime they read, it benefits them. Due to the fact that even nature is hostile against men, we are working to give affirmative action to females. Furthermore, women do have a lot of dragging things. I'd say we're developed but not quite there if we added more items for women. It could not even be fulfilled by our future children. [...] Females may not study for three to four days at least because of their monthly administration. Nature prefers men. Not only in this country, but even all over the world, what is being done for females as compared to the burden that they have, not sufficient. I have two females and one male child and the amount of burden that we load in our females' children is heavier than our male ones.

(Interviewee, #3, May 2023, Own translation)

The above finding also implies that the selected five Ethiopian public HEIs show a dedication to fostering a more varied and inclusive atmosphere where people of all genders have equal access to education and other opportunities by putting affirmative action policies into practice. Ethiopian public HEIs need to monitor and evaluate affirmative action policies to ensure they are serving the intended purposes. This is consistent with the results of ESDP III, which stated that one of the purposes of the education sector was to take affirmative action to achieve parity of female participation in all education and training programs. Female students were supposed to be assigned based on their preferences, while those who were married and have families were supposed to be enrolled in HEIs closer to their home (FDRE, 2005).

Policy Practice 7: Gender Diversity Support Initiatives

The respondents overwhelmingly agreed that their institutions had specific policies, programs, or activities to support gender diversity, as shown by the average response and standard deviation for GDM related policy practice Item 7 in Table 3 (M= 3.85, SD= 0.913). On the importance of having policies, Interviewee Number 3 stated that:

Since diversity entails inclusivity, we must establish a policy that reflects that stance. The institution should assert that diversity is the wellspring of prosperity and growth. Then, [...] the practical aspects will start moving toward implementation in practice. Policy should thus emphasize it. When we observe numerous forms of diversity in a certain organization, we won't be afraid then.

(Interviewee, #3, May 2023, Own translation)

Based on this data, it can be inferred that the selected five HEIs are actively attempting to create an inclusive and equitable environment by establishing policies, programs, or activities that specifically foster gender diversity. These programs can include, but are not limited to, support groups, mentorship programs, gender identity and expression training, educational campaigns, and gender-inclusive toilets. HEIs recognize and respond to the special demands and problems of people with a variety of gender identities by putting such initiatives into practice. It conveys the idea that Ethiopian public HEIs respect diversity and are prepared to offer a secure and encouraging environment to all community members. The HEI's attempts to foster an open and encouraging atmosphere for people of both genders appear to be working well, as seen by the respondents' broad agreement that certain policies, programs, or activities exist to encourage GDM. Consistent with this finding, past critical studies on diversity management have emphasized that specific policies ought to be essential elements of diversity management (Noon, 2007).

CONCLUDING REMARK

This study is aimed to explore the perceptions and policy practices of the students GDM in Ethiopian public HEIs. It is also aimed to provide insights that might guide practical and successful interventions as well as ideas for improvements. We employed convergent parallel mixed research (QUAN + QUAL) methodologies by the pragmatic research paradigm in terms of philosophy. The general findings of the study indicate that inadequate GDM policy was being implemented on top of a lower perception of it, even in an environment where policy was generally positive.

In general, a many-sided strategy was needed to address the problems of inadequate GDM policy implementation and lower perception. Raising awareness, advancing an inclusive culture, offering resources and training, encouraging leadership dedication, and routinely assessing and modifying policies to satisfy changing requirements were all part of it. HEIs could foster more equitable and inclusive settings that benefited students, organizations, and society at large by emphasizing gender diversity and putting in place efficient GDM policies.

For tracking and assessing the effects of GDM policies over time, the results could be used as a baseline. HEIs could monitor success, pinpoint areas for development, and make data-driven choices to improve and fine-tune GDM policies and programs by routinely evaluating the perceptions and practices linked to gender diversity.

Out of fifty (50) public HEIs found in Ethiopia, the selection of only five public HEIs might not have provided a comprehensive representation of the entire landscape of GDM's perception

and policy practices in Ethiopian public HEIs. The findings and conclusions drawn from such a limited sample might not have accurately reflected the experiences and challenges faced by other government and private HEIs within the sector. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of GDM in Ethiopian HEIs, it was crucial to incorporate a larger and more diverse sample that included both government and private HEIs. This broader sampling approach could help address the identified gaps and provide a more nuanced analysis of the state of GDM across the entire higher education sector in Ethiopia.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

For educational planners at HEIs, the results of this mixed study on perceptions and policies around GDM might be quite helpful. These results can help educational planners create precise perceptions and incorporate GDM strategies in the following ways:

1. Informing Policy Development: The results can be used as a basis for creating or improving GDM procedures at HEIs. Educational planners may identify areas for development and create policies that are in line with the requirements and expectations of the institution's stakeholders by having an in-depth understanding of the current perceptions and policy practices around gender diversity.

2. Raising Awareness: The results of the study may be used by educational planners to educate instructors, staff, and students on the value of gender diversity and its advantages for the learning environment. Planners may create a culture that is supportive of GDM and help people realize its worth by disseminating study findings and encouraging dialogue.

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PLANNING TO CULTIVATE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE: LESSONS FROM FOUR JAMAICAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

ANN-MARIE WILMOT

The University of West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

ABSTRACT

Establishing social connections is crucial for providing exceptional educational experiences, whether in-person or online. However, online teaching presents challenges for principals as it limits their ability to interact with students face-to-face, resulting in less contact time. Additionally, the current COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the administrative demands on school principals, further reducing their available time. This study investigated how school principals develop social relationships with teachers and students online, their feelings about it, their motivation, and how they acquired this knowledge. Using a qualitative, semi-structured, one-on-one interview methodology, the research explored the central question: How and why do school principals develop social relationships with teachers and students online? The findings uncovered that school principals employ various strategies to foster online social bonds with teachers and students. However, while the strategies used with teachers primarily focused on administrative functions and emotional support, those used with students were not intentionally geared towards academic engagement. As such, this research concludes that an opportunity exists for Jamaican school principals to fully harness the power of social relationships to enhance their students' academic performance. Consequently, a recommendation is that principals be offered various training opportunities to become more strategic in leveraging social connections to enrich learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the pre-COVID-19 classroom context presented several avenues for social interactions between teachers and students and their peers (Kwaske & McLennan, n.d.) and for school principals to interact with their students. Unfortunately, this conventional interaction was severely disrupted after the World Health Organization (2020) affirmed COVID-19 as a pandemic. This occasioned large-scale crisis-response transport of universities, with online learning as the educational platform (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). In Jamaica, universities and K-12 educational institutions were impacted by a similar large-scale shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to online. Online learning is a mode of remote education capturing any teaching-learning experiences with reliance on the Internet as the dominant purveyor of class exchanges and communication (Appana, 2008).

Given the inadequate preparation among teachers to utilise online pedagogies and of students to learn online, concerns still exist about whether online learning is a sub-standard instructional delivery modality (OECD, 2020). Likewise, doubts exist about its suitability for principals to connect with their students. This is especially true in contexts like Jamaica, where the sophistry of technological integration in pedagogical interactions could be higher. Given teachers' consistent online contact with students, they can implement reconsidered approaches to develop these relationships, even if severely hampered. On the other hand, the online teaching modality limits principals' contact time with students because of the inability to do walk-ins and meet students in offices or other spaces for physical interactions. This compromises their ability to develop social relationships with their students effectively.

However, Kwaske and McLennan (n.d.) warned that educational stakeholders must treat social relationships more seriously in online learning environments. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020) advanced some benefits of support that seem to validate Kwaske and McLennan's caution: Varying categories of support are confirmed to be helpful for the cultivation of optimistic attitudes towards learning and can guarantee that students attain the outlooks and temperaments that can amplify their capacity to maximise online learning opportunities. OECD (2022) also advanced that positive attitudes towards learning, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation can improve academic performance, especially if online learning continues.

This importance of building social relationships in online pedagogy invariably drives the assertion that as a strategic imperative, school principals in Jamaica and, by extension, the Caribbean should have a plan to purposively develop and nurture social relationships during online schooling as part of their instructional leadership portfolio. It remains to be seen if school principals embrace this as a part of their administrative and leadership philosophy. However, the role of school administrators in the success of online academic programs has been previously explored. Wiley University (n.d), for instance, suggests that school administrators play a role in developing the independence of the organisational structures and provide strong support for online decision-making and execution. They ensure the process is transparent and that it involves appropriate stakeholders, from faculty members and administrators.

At the same time, the crisis has exacerbated school principals' personal, operational and leadership demands (Boswell-Lewis et al., 2022; Kaufman et al., 2022). This reduces their available time as they juggle consistently shifting demands, which remains part of their competing reality and could further negate their efforts. Consequently, the need exists to know if they are managing this aspect of their responsibility. Additionally, understanding principals' leadership behaviours on this subject matter remains relevant even though the COVID-19 pandemic has eased because other crises will occur in the future and "though the hybrid classroom existed well before the pandemic, Covid-19 necessitated — and ultimately normalised — a combination of in-person and remote learning throughout academe" (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023, p.8). Though this statement referred to the higher education context, it is quite applicable across educational levels. Online learning is forecasted to be a constant among instructional delivery tools, and helping students get the best experiences should be prioritised. Therefore, this research explored whether school principals are prioritising or making deliberate efforts to plan for robust, meaningful social relationships with students and teachers, what motivates them, and the strategies they employ to accomplish such.

BACKGROUND

Long before the Covid-19 crisis, social relationships in and out of educational circles were highly valued. Broadly defined, the existing associations among people who have regular interactions to which the participants ascribe personal meanings are called social relationships (August & Rook, 2013). From a psychological perspective, a social relationship is the emergent quality from repeated interactions (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018; para.1). The concept of connections is entrenched in both definitions, an element of relationship support. Supportive relationships play an essential role in creating an environment of nurturing in schools where all members of the school: students, teachers, staff, parents and administrators are known, appreciated and cared for (Chourn & Sorajjkool, 2017).

In a study investigating students' perceptions of online and face-to-face learning courses, Bali and Liu (2018) reinforce Chourn and Sorajjkool's observations by naming social presence as one of the most critical factors in online learning spaces. Another study confirmed the importance of

social interaction for students' online learning experience. Hurst et al. (2013) found that all classes in the study attributed social interactions to students' learning experiences related explicitly to 1) the positive work environment it created and 2) how it enhanced their critical thinking skills by accommodating various angles from which to view concepts (Hurst et al., 2013).

Online Learning Negatively Impacts Students: The Jamaican Context

The problem arising from the persistent need for online instruction yields the unintended consequences of social separation, drastically reducing social interactions. In Jamaica, for example, unruly/disruptive behaviours have increased since schools have returned face-to-face, and experts have anecdotally connected this to the absence of social interactions for the two years students have been out of school. Lowrie-Chin (2021) observed that learning loss is not the only area in which it is evident that school closures have an impact. She named an increase in illnesses related to diet, such as diabetes and hypertension and a raft of psycho-social manifestations, such as feelings of loneliness, hyperactivity, hypertension, unruliness, unhappiness, isolation, frustration, and disquiet, as among those impacting Jamaican school children. A year later, the impression remained. A UNESCO representative to Jamaica, Kamoshima (2022), expressed concern that the disturbing events of violence between students indicate that we are facing a development of mental health problems exacerbated by COVID-19. These problems are not fresh but have multiplied, like the learning challenges before the pandemic.

Positioning the School Principal in the Instructional Leadership Role and Social Relationships

Research shows that principals may have a profound indirect impact on the learning experience of the students (Weber, 1989). Therefore, school principals are foregrounded in this study because of the roles and expectations of Instructional Leadership and the guiding theory of this research ascribed to them. Instructional Leadership is the behaviours of school principals aimed to promote and improve schools' teaching and learning processes, including school planning, school management, school facilities and resources to provide optimum experiences for teachers, students, and parents (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Bush (2020) rationalises Instructional Leadership's increasing importance to prioritising teaching and learning as the main activities of educational institutions. The importance of these activities is subsumed under four anchors: visibility in their leadership role, provision of resources, being an instructional resource and communicating (Wilma & Smith, 1989).

All four pillars align with the direction of this paper, which investigated how principals build and nurture social relationships online. In this role, principals focus on constructing an environment free of disruption, developing pointed teaching objectives and harbouring high expectations of both students and teachers (Hattie, 2009). The effectiveness of these demands can be amplified when school principals acquire deep knowledge about and understanding of their teachers and students. Student learning, then, becomes the litmus test of effective teachers, principals and, ultimately, schools (DiPaola & Wagner, 2018). This requires specified characteristics of the principal (Santos & Villanueva, 2020). Among them, displaying competency is a hallmark of an excellent instructional leader.

Additionally, such principals are up-to-date with content and pedagogical innovations, such as new technology, impacting an improvement in instructional programs. Hattie (2009), who conducted over 800 meta-analyses investigating achievement, noted that Instructional Leadership ranked higher than other types of leadership in its impact on student learning. The learning leader

(DiPaola & Wagner, 2018) is responsible for understanding students and teachers as a critical entry point to responding to their needs. Whether in online or face-to-face instructional environments, cultivating meaningful relationships is a critical starting point, but it is especially needed online, given the isolationist tendencies of that space.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The main research question of the study is:

How and why do school principals cultivate and maintain social relationships with teachers and students online?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This research is significant for several reasons, three of which I will outline. Studies on building social relationships with students have focused mainly on teachers building relationships with their students or principals building relationships with their teachers. Therefore, the gap in this discourse is the inadequate attention researchers pay to the perspectives of school administrators, pre-COVID-19 and after, to how principals build relationships online with their students, generally and in Jamaica, specifically. This research addresses this gap by examining why and how school principals build social relationships online and by getting their perspectives, a position not frequently explored. Given the continued imminent threat of crises in various forms, the findings of this research are significant in assisting educational policymakers in crafting a social relationship policy for online schooling. They will be helpful to school principals in Jamaica and similar spaces as they seek to strengthen or initiate deliberate efforts to plan strategically for building social relationships with their students and teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Building Social Relationships Online

In a supportive online learning space, teachers not only successfully utilise relevant practices of pedagogy to address the learning needs of their students, but also nurture a constructive relationship between themselves and their students to encourage students' inspiration and engagement with lessons (Lai, 2017). Kwaske and McLennan (n.d) expanded the list of justifications, increasing student commitment and motivation, which can improve student performance. In this light, they encourage educators to ponder how they will rupture online spaces in which social interactions are meaningful and sustainable, especially when students must balance their studies with other life activities. This suggests that where these relationships do not exist, they are encouraged. Other researchers solidify the importance of social relationships in academic settings, which can also be relevant to online learning settings. For example, while Lai (2017) and Kwaske and McLennan (n.d) argue for the academic benefits, Yeager et al. (2013) proffer its academic-psychosocial value noting that, generally, a positive of interacting socially in educational settings is that it promotes an awareness of belonging. Where this awareness is missing, demotivation for matters related to academic work is a consequence. Will (2020) aptly sums up the benefits: When student-teacher relationships are strong, there is a distinct connection to medium and long-term developments on numerous fronts. Regardless of the student's family and surroundings, school administration can anticipate reduced dropouts, antisocial behaviours, and the need to suspend students, as well as increased attendance and performance and elevated academic commitment among students.

Zelihic (2015) explored the importance of relationship building in online classrooms related to students' levels of success and advanced the argument on the benefits of building relationships online:

The consensus is that courses are more effective and students more engaged if they feel connected to a professor. This relationship, created out of necessity in a classroom setting by the shared nature of frequent teacher-student interactions, can evolve into one of trust, mutual respect, and, at times, admiration (p.4).

The common thread among what researchers have found, though with varying degrees of emphasis, is that students will be motivated to become more engaged in wanting to learn online when they enjoy a strong social relationship with their teachers. Zelihic (2015), however, adds that both students and teachers alike will accrue benefits when teachers build relationships online. However, the students are not the only ones who enjoy such benefits; where the learning processes are more refined, the teachers' experience is higher productivity. Given that learning is a crucial function of schools, any strategy that has the potential to maximise this role should be high on the priority list of school principals.

Consequences of Lack of Social Interactions in the Online Teaching Modality?

Across the world, part of governments' response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a total lockdown of educational institutions in some places of business and the imposition of measures that required social distancing to become a priority. This upended the normal modes of interactions, even within single families, and not without some deleterious repercussions. In the academic arena, the absence of standard social exchanges, a part of the essence of face-to-face interactions, can contribute to the already-existing feelings of isolation motivated by the other social distancing procedures occasioned by the pandemic (Tea, P.I., 2022). Other researchers have noted that among the emotions students experienced during the pandemic are general feelings of loneliness and fatigue resulting from isolation (Labrague et al., 2021). Such a state of mind can lead students to experience stressful personal and learning conditions. Therefore, it becomes even more critical for schools, especially those in administration, to include building social relationships in their planning processes. Compared to other ages, this cannot be overstated; young adults [school-aged students included] place a much higher value on being socially connected (Arslan, 2018). Therefore, if the lack of or reduced socialisation preoccupies students, a case can be made for how this could impact their overall potential lack of responsiveness to online learning.

Strategies for Building Social Relationships Online

During periods of high-stress levels, teachers may be compelled to increase their intentional efforts toward connection with their students to develop trust and maintain engagement (Tackie, 2022). Once the pandemic struck, schools were required to pivot by initiating remote teaching and learning. This burdened existing connections due to varying stresses and a digital divide among stakeholders (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). The cruciality of social relationships among students and teachers was long established in all teaching modalities. However, moving fast and ill-prepared online elevated this need for school principals to build these social relationships strategically.

Among the strategies touted as helpful in building social relationships online are an infusion of fun during class time, giving students personalised notes and feedback, prioritising relationships before content and taking time to understand students' interests beyond the bounds of their academic involvement (Will, 2020). In addition to these suggestions, building relationships with parents and teachers, building peer connection/buddy systems, doing regular check-ins daily or weekly and mapping student relationships with adults (Protherro, 2020) are other viable approaches that the classroom teachers and school principals can implement. Unlike Protherro's (2020) communal-type

approaches, Hasem's (2020) strategies for building social relationships with students online are more individualised. Generally, he encourages teachers to find ways to involve students' faces and voices in classes. More specifically, he explained that this involves asking students to lead particular classes and assigning projects that require students to record themselves to share with the class.

Though some of UNESCO's (2022) suggestions are similar to those offered before, their strategies are more encompassing. As a general rule, stakeholders should connect schools, parents, teachers and students by mobilising tools at their disposal. They also suggest establishing communities to ensure regular human interaction, enable social care measures and address potential psychosocial challenges students face when isolated. Online teaching-learning spaces are diverse and present limited opportunities to communicate verbally and observe paralinguistic cues, necessitating extra effort from school administrators to nurture resilient student-administrator relationships. If the response demand on teachers is this great, one can extrapolate that school principals, with their multiple and complex demands, who sometimes enjoy a more distant, though undesirable, relationship with students, are more unlikely to agree. Hence, Tackie's (2020) claim that there is a need for greater intentionality should hold great significance for school principals as well.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To understand the position of the principals, this qualitative investigation aimed to explore whether the principals develop and foster a social relationship with their teachers and students online, their motivation to do so and how they accomplish it. The study used a semi-structured interview methodology to obtain information from four purposively selected expert Jamaican school principals, at least one from each county, who all engaged in teaching and learning online. There was a need to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of social relationships online. These four participants were sufficient to provide and facilitate this opportunity because qualitative research engages an examination of a few individuals, sometimes just a single person (Litchman, 2013).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this qualitative research were collected using one-on-one, in-depth, open-ended video conference interviews, using one main research question and four interview questions that provided a valuable way of accessing the participants' thoughts of building social relationships online (Brown, 2009). To elicit rich data about this central research question: "How and why do school principals cultivate and maintain social relationships with teachers and students online?" participants responded to four interview questions:

1. What is your understanding of social relationships?
2. Describe your feelings about building social relationships with teachers and students online and why.
3. How do you cultivate social relationships online with teachers and students?
4. How did you learn about the sources of support for these strategies you utilised in building social relationships online?

Additionally, open-ended interviews were ideal because qualitative studies make superb use of them in facilitating flexibility and responsiveness at the highest levels of the issues that will

arise for interviewees and respondents (Schwandt, 1997).

The project's goal was explained to each participant, after which each participant was asked to participate. A verbatim transcription of each audio was performed, and an initial reading was done to secure a general understanding of each of the emergent themes in the transcripts, which were then compared among the four transcripts. This process adhered to what Boeije (2002) described as a constant comparison, whereby the researcher moves from within the artefact to within the group, a process which facilitates naming themes and establishing connections among them. Boeije's (2002) constant comparison method suggests an open approach, which worked excellently for this project because it facilitated both anticipated and emergent themes from the data source, which deepened the scope of analysis.

Reliability and Validity

Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to get them to speak freely and completely about how and why they develop and nurture social relationships online during interviews lasting 1 to 1 ½ hours to obtain prolonged engagement in a single setting and generate thick and rich data. Each interview transcript was returned to the participants to allow them to read and comment on their contributions to ensure their ideas were accurately represented. Sagor (2000) advises that such a practice adds authority to a research process, boosting its reliability. Additionally, after re-verifying and coding the member-checked transcripts, independent reviewers were engaged in a deep analysis to ensure consistency of thematic ideas, check for discrepant ideas, and locate possible biases.

FINDINGS

This section delves into the findings emanating from the research that aimed to explore the methods and motivations of principals in developing social connections in online environments. To achieve this objective, four interconnected interview questions were conducted to examine the principals' perspectives on social relationships, their attitudes towards establishing online social connections with teachers and students, and the underlying motives behind their actions. The major findings of this study are:

1. Principals' Understanding of Social Relationships in Schools

There were slight variations in participants' responses. Generally, it was conceived as a motivation tool, while others linked it to a practical function. Principal Maurice tabled that "social relationship is interpreted to be the unwritten curriculum that exists in the school that you encourage, but which needs management because it can be misconstrued if not guided properly." Principal Dane's understanding underscores the motivational aspect of Maurice's definition but not the need to impose limits. He shared that social relationships are "the kinds of systems created for relationships to be formulated, and how schools are structured to allow everyone to relate and become supportive of each other."

Unlike the previous definitions, Principal Jack and Principal Joshua understood the concept more as an administrative tool. Jack explained that "social relationships, in schools, is about how we build strong relationships among stakeholders to ensure that there is a high degree of effectiveness in the operations of the school and getting the various machinery of the school to work effectively." The element of limitation, which Maurice expressed was echoed in Joshua's description who noted that social relationships "does not mean that we are going to be chummy." Rather, he invited us to view it as a mechanism which aids how "we build strong relationship among stakeholders to ensure that there is a high degree of effectiveness in the operations of the school and getting the various

machinery of the school to work effectively.”

2. Principals’ Reasons of Building Social Relationships with Teachers and Students Online.

All four principals felt that it was imperative to build social relationships with students and teachers online. Generally, there was a high level of consistency among their descriptions of social relationships and the importance they ascribed to them. However, some, for example, Dane, expressed an initial uncertainty about its methods “because it was new to them.” The degree to which they expressed importance ranged from “important” to “very important” to “strong belief in building social relationships.” The following is a presentation of the various rationales the principals gave for building social relationships with students and teachers.

Why do school principals build social relationships with teachers online?

Several reasons accounted for principals’ rationale for building relationships with teachers online, including the general categories of providing emotional support and, relaxation and efficiency in administrative functioning.

Social relationships and emotional support

The principals felt that building social relationships online was an excellent source of emotional support. Apart from bridging the disconnect among teachers and rebuilding comradery, making social connections as a system of support, a navigation tool for challenges, and a means to combat isolation and alienation were also reasons principals advanced. Dane said he realised “strong feelings of disconnection among teachers online.” In this light, he encouraged video conferencing as he felt this would be an excellent way to “encourage them,” and this would maintain connectivity online. Therefore, the administrators “would have expressed to them that intimacy was still possible.”

Another reason for building social relationships for emotional support was a recognition that teachers were “extremely stressed because the pandemic resulted in a kind of isolation for them”, as Jack explained. He elaborated that a sense of community and family was fundamental; so, building social relationships “was to ensure that administration provided support for teachers to deal with the challenges that they were facing, so they felt supported at all times.” Interestingly, though this is geared toward teachers, it was still tied to organizational functioning. He reinforced the importance of providing the “various resources to bring teachers up to speed so that they can meet the established standards of the school.”

Maurice felt building social relationships with teachers online was crucial because “the space felt alienating; many persons felt disconnected, while others felt trapped in their spaces; [therefore] it was important to build and maintain connections, previously enjoyed face-to-face.” In other cases, such as Joshua’s, building social relationships is just a matter of “providing necessary support for each other for matters related to our families, or whatever struggles we may be encountering.”

Administrative Efficiency

Administrative efficiency to advance the business of the schools was the dominant driving force behind school principals’ thrust for engagement in social relationships. This manifested as the need to maintain accountability, motivation to teach, smooth execution of processes and development of increased commitment.

Dane felt that bonding with teachers in the online space “ensured that they performed their

teaching and learning-related tasks.” On the other hand, Jack was more specific in explaining his efforts at building social relationships online. He elaborated:

It was instrumental in navigating the school's various challenges in that context. One of the greatest assets during times of crisis was the ability to still access divergent views for the effective operations of schools around common goals. Social relationships are engines of change, given their usefulness to administrators who want to bring about changes in schools.

Maurice’s position echoed similar resonances: “It makes them [teachers] feel better about the organisation and consequently feel more invested in it. This makes them give more of themselves to the organisation because it engenders a sense of trust and care.” Joshua’s reasoning for building social relationships is linked to administrative effectiveness as he explained that “strong relationships online are necessary to achieve strategic goals and accomplish other activities in the school.” He explained, “Teachers need to have strong relationships with the students they are teaching online, to reach them and teach them [since] if you know certain things about students’ backgrounds, it puts you in a better position to serve them.” He is the only participant who directly connected building online connections with students to their learning.

Reasons school principals build social relationships with students online

While the rationale behind establishing social connections with students lacked discernible patterns, unlike the reasons for cultivating relationships with teachers, there were some connections between the two. However, the underlying themes were less dominant than they were about teachers.

Accountability and leadership presence

Joshua tied his position for building social relationships to the administrative role of being visible among the students, explaining that “from any leadership standpoint, a principal should be visible. The need to be visible, he remarked, was that students needed to know they could reach out to him at any time. Dane’s response indicated that he attended to the emotional support of students; however, for the most part, it seemed to be a strategic move to ensure accountability. As part of the justification for emotional support, he shared: “Many students were handling death and grief, and we needed to provide support for them, and that was the space we could reach them.” Grief and death can cause strong negative emotional responses. This might explain his other reason for building social relationships to account for all: “We did not want to fall prey to our students going missing. So, when the government reported that one hundred and twenty thousand (120K) students were missing or not connecting online, we could account for all of ours.” Adding to the reasoning of accountability and visibility, Jack recollected, “I made myself available to restructure our motivational sessions because we wanted the boys to be able to speak purpose to their lives at this critical point.” Not all administrators had similar levels and severity of challenges.

Social relationships as a response to the dislocation of school

While some principals were ensuring each student was accounted for and establishing their leadership presence online, Maurice reflected on the depth of his challenges, which spurred the need to develop social relationships with his students online:

School was an escape from home for many of our students, which was no longer available. The disadvantage for those students was that many lost their meals; some had to remain

in their homes under cramped conditions, and many were stuck for extended periods with their abusers, some of which we were aware of and others that we might not have been.

Additionally, he continued his lament that students were enduring these conditions while balancing learning. This was because, according to him,

online was seen as being home, and many did not associate with their home as a learning space. Creating an atmosphere so students could freely relate in the online space was urgent and needed, so we activated various teams to get them in that mode.

Though Maurice did not describe his reason for building social relationships as etched in the human factor of schooling, his and Jack's reasoning bear some similarities, though differently nuanced, as described below.

Social relationships as a response to the human element of schooling

Jack linked his motivation for building social relationships online with students to a "response to the need for human development in these tough times when students just want to sign off." Therefore, "it was important to pique their curiosity ... since the heart of a school is really about human beings," he counselled. He further reasoned that even while juggling the rough administrative demands, the reason for doing that is for human development. Consequently, "administrators must work on engaging people on the level of their emotions." However, his reasoning ended not only at the place of emotional engagement. He argued that "teachers and students will want to go the extra mile and buy in on the school's activities if they are strongly connected to a sense of purpose." He reinforced that building social relationships is crucial because "it is one of those critical things where people do not care about your plans unless they know you care about them."

3. Principals' Strategies to Build Social Relationships with Teachers and Students Online

Upon carefully analysing the principals' approaches to fostering social connections, I identified three overarching themes: entertainment, communication, and emotional support. Additionally, I observed a fourth category, academics, playing a role. For an in-depth breakdown of the strategies employed by principals for cultivating relationships with students and teachers, kindly refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Strategies Principals Used to Build Social Relationships Online with Teachers and Students

Strategies Principals Used to Build Social Relationships with Teachers	Strategies Principals used to Build Social Relationships with Students
Entertainment	Entertainment
Games comedy shows Sip and paint Virtual socials online Hat, scarf & tie day & tea parties	Games Movie night Online walkthroughs Online concerts
Communication Strategies	Communication Strategies
Video-conferencing Regular communication Purposive individual check-ins Randomized individual check-ins Online teachers' lounge	WhatsApp group with parents and students Meet and greet in Google Classroom Online Social Interaction Policy
Emotional Support	Emotional Support
Regular motivational quotes Temperature checks – Guidance Counselors posts and teachers respond No screen-day for recalibration Staff Welfare Committee	Motivational sessions Mental health empowerment sessions Establishing leadership presence Special sessions for parents to deal with students
Academic	Academic
Remote Learning Taskforce Innovations Committee	Headmaster's quest

An analysis of the findings on the strategies that principals used to develop social relationships online with their teachers and students demonstrated that solid emphasis was not intentionally placed on the academic element of schooling. Whereas only one direct academic strategy was reported, entertainment and emotional support accounted for 7 of 16 strategies engaged with teachers. Eight of 12 strategies were also linked to these categories for students. For the teachers, five strategies were associated with communication as opposed to 2 for students.

4. How School Principals Learned about Their Strategies to Build Social Relationships with Students and Teachers online

Some support systems were common across schools but fell into four broad categories. They were either internal to the local or external to the school context, self-initiated personal development or prior experience.

Internal to the local school context

Among principals, those sources of knowledge generated within the schools, the Remote

Learning Taskforce, which “dealt with the documented hiccups whether from parents or students,” and the Innovations Committee, “which was challenged to table solutions to various challenges, arising out of the crisis, are sources of knowledge unique to Jack’s school. Only Dane spoke about developing The Online Social Interaction Policy, “a response to the School’s Board [of Governance] asking us what we were going to do to ensure that teachers and students were engaged.” All principals learnt from some workshops, from their Staff Welfare Committees, their Guidance Teams, and their Deans of Discipline.

External to the local school context

From those sources of knowledge that came outside the school context, Jack and Dane spoke to help from the Central Ministry – Ministry of Education, Youth and Information in Jamaica, but in opposing terms. Dane felt that “the Ministry’s Education in Emergency documentation had a lot of guidance regarding how to deal with online school”. By contrast, Jack recalled that though the Ministry tried, he “found that it sent out too many bulletins. Even with the best of intentions, they were just stuff that they grabbed off the Internet, sources that I [he] had already read.” Two other principals, Dane and Joshua spoke to the strong support they got from their Education Officer, citing in both instances that they each enjoyed a strong relationship, before the era of online learning. All principals agreed that the Jamaica Teachers’ Association (JTA) was a source of knowledge. Dane and Joshua spoke about learning from short courses the National College of Educational Leadership (NCEL) offered. Jack and Maurice attributed credit to their schools’ Past Students’ Association. Still, only Jack spoke to the Jamaica Association of Secondary Schools (JASS) sources of information, and all principals invited guests to present on various topics.

Self-initiated personal development and prior experience

Apart from those initiatives that emanated from the school and external spaces, all principals reported that, in some instances, they had to initiate their learning journey about how to build relationships online. Only some had relevant prior experiences on which they drew. They shared common strategies such as watching YouTube videos, reading blogs extensively, and networking with other schools. Only three principals shared that they all pulled on prior experiences: Jack and Joshua reported they had previous experiences as Education Officers. Joshua also applied knowledge from the Child Development Agency, and both Joshua and Dane found skills gained through their work with Social Development helpful in building relationships online.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

School principals were familiar with the basic concept of how social relationships function within the teaching-learning construct. Many scholars (Lai, 2017; Will, 2020; Yeager et al., 2013) attribute developing and cultivating social relationships in online learning to improved student engagement and learning outcomes. In contrast, this research found that principals were more explicit in connecting it to the general motivation of staff and for administrative purposes related to the functions of schools. These functions are crucial and have broadened the scope of how these relationships work, hence cementing their importance. However, they deviate from the philosophical position that excellent principals must be up-to-date with content and pedagogical innovations (Santos & Villanueva, 2022) and deeply understand students and teachers (DiPaola & Wagner, 2018) to maximise instructional experiences. This and the fact that only one principal explicitly linked efforts at building relationships online with student learning indicates an area of concern in the Jamaican educational context. While scholars will raise a plausible argument about

how the moment of crisis may have influenced principals' responses, it is yet to be understood whether the insufficient focus on building social relations as a learning strategy was intentional or was not treated as a priority, given the myriad of other demands the crisis situation brought on.

The importance principals attribute to building social relationships with teachers online

The principals place solid value on building social relationships online with teachers, which signals a strong responsiveness to their needs. This finding corroborates the idea that social presence should be a dominant element of online learning engagements, as Chourn and Sorajjkool (2017) found in their study. The literature acknowledges that social relationship online cultivates a sense of belonging in the classroom among teachers (Yeager, 2013). This research expanded this body of work, demonstrating that school principals know that teachers also need to feel valued and supported in online teaching spaces. It suggests that when principals planned to build social relationships in online teaching communities, they engaged in the strategic utility of social relationships. This meaning is further reinforced because they linked social relationships to teachers' motivation for work, implicitly linking it to teaching.

The importance principals attribute to building social relationships with students online

There was unanimity among principals about the importance of building relationships online. Each tabled a different reason for its pertinence, though all were linked to the intention of providing support. Similar to how the connection to teaching was not explicit, the connection to students' learning was vague. This could be a general deficit in an overall understanding of the more profound academic value of building social relationships in this context, as Zelihic (2015), Lai (2017) and Will (2020), among other researchers, have argued. Notwithstanding, the formed social relationships could motivate students to attend classes and be engaged, as Zelihic (2015) offered. Additionally, Yeager et al. (2013) posit that forming social relationships influences students' performances since it promotes awareness of belonging and thwarts demotivation that would negatively affect academic performance.

Contrastingly, the greater motivation for principals' planning behaviours seemed to have been embedded in response to the maladies of the pandemic. These behaviours favour Weber's (1989) observation of the profound indirect impact that principals can have on teaching when they are accountable and visible.

Tackie (2022) noted that where stress levels are high, teachers might be forced to become more intentional to develop trust and maintain engagement. In this study, the principals are the ones who were found to increase their intentionality, thus widening the pool of available personnel to which students can have access. Locally, Lorie-Chin's (2021), Kagoshima's (2022) and internationally Labrague et al.'s (2021) descriptions of the emotional struggles students experienced aligned as possible symptoms of the causes (cramped conditions, being trapped with their abusers, lack of food, etc.) that principals described.

Strategies principals used to build social relationships with students and teachers

Many of the strategies principals reportedly utilised as part of their plan to build social relationships online are similar to what the literature advised. Prothero's (2020) Community-type approaches, UNESCO's (2022) integrated approach, including the inclusion of parents, as well as the more individualised approach of Will (2020) and Hashem (2020), though to a lesser extent.

Cumulatively, the employment of these strategies evidenced strong sensitivity in principals' planning to provide support. DiPaola and Wagner's (2018) argument that in responding to students' and teachers' needs, principals carry the distinct responsibility to understand them validates this leadership practice. This demonstrated that their planning considered that young adults place premium value on social interactions (Arslan, 2018) and prioritised relationships before content per Will's (2020) philosophy.

The principals implemented strategies to minimise the possibility of students feeling isolated from each other and detached from their teachers. This is crucial in helping students feel seen and develop a sense of belonging. The implementations sought to counter what Tea (2022) and Labrague et al. (2021) noted as some emotional challenges students experienced resulting from the pandemic – feelings of isolation, loneliness, and fatigue.

Interestingly, while the strategies sought to create and maintain social relationships online, they may only serve as a foundational component to positively impact students' performances. A justification for this is that if the strategies led to adequate student performances, it would be inadvertent since the principals' approaches did not seem intentional in achieving that objective. Lai (2017) stated a two-pronged approach to catering to students in the online space: to use the relevant pedagogical practices to satisfy students' learning needs and forge constructive relationships between themselves and their students to inspire them to engage in lessons. For social relationships to impact students' learning, there should be a direct link between social relationships and instructional practices. Based on the principal's responses about why they endeavoured to form social bonds, the element of intentionality for students' learning seemed missing. The seeming lack of intentionality indicates gaps in their understanding of Hattie's (2009) findings that instructional leadership trumps other types of leadership related to its impact on student learning. The weak planning emphasis on academics also runs contrary to Bush's (2020) claim that instructional leadership prioritises teaching and learning as the main activities of schools.

Sources of strategies that principals use to build social relationships in schools

The sources of knowledge informing the strategies the principals selected to support their effort to build relationships online with teachers and students reinforced the importance of the full participation of all related stakeholders when planning. Most of the external sources that principals tapped into for support were bodies already in place for school leadership support. This raises the question of whether other external sources of support were unavailable and what motivated their choices. Overall, Santos and Villanueva's (2020) notion that principals must display excellence and remain up-to-date with relevant teaching-learning initiatives became relevant because principals reconstructed their instructional leadership pedagogies to respond to the needs of students and teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH PRACTICE

A concern arising from the analysis of the data was what appeared to be the lack of principals' intentionality in using social relationships to enhance students' academic performance. It is recommended that principals be exposed to a combination of training opportunities to become more strategic in utilising social relationships as a tool for elevating learning experiences. Such training would:

1. Empower principals with skills and competencies that will enable them to more effectively consider how the formation of social relationships can become a tool for bolstering students' academic performances. These strategies would prioritise the psycho-social advantages and the

benefits to students' engagement and commitment to learning.

2. Equip principals to guide the development, implementation and assessment of activities that embed social relationships in their whole school pedagogy. Teachers could be involved in constructive dialogues to determine the best-suited strategies – strategies that not only have students communicating with teachers and classmates for conversation and fun but also provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their academic competencies and give teachers a chance to provide students with meaningful feedback.

3. Help school principals understand more deeply that their investment in teachers prioritises student learning, connecting the philosophy behind their administrative and leadership decisions, given that emotional support is part of their reason for developing social relationships with teachers.

Practice

Only one of the four principals thought favourably about the Ministry of Education and Youth as a source of knowledge for valuable strategies to cultivate social bonds in online instruction. At the Macro level, it is recommended that educational planners in Jamaica and the Caribbean revisit the schools' curriculum to develop a comprehensive social relationship planning policy framework for principals' use in schools. Such a framework would make explicit the connections between social bonds and learning and provide suggested strategies for implementation.

Principals could share best practices in their Quality Educational Circles or other professional learning spaces, even locally, as some activities are common to all schools. This information would strengthen Caribbean countries' existing crisis response policy framework.

It is recommended that the National College for Educational Leadership develops a course or expand its current Virtual Instructional Leadership course to include in its Aspiring Principal Programme. Current principals could also access the same course micro-credentials.

Research

The participants in this study have not significantly attributed their tactics for building social bonds to an overall strategy for academic improvement. Therefore, further research could explore students' experiences with how the strategies influence their motivation for school work. Additionally, it was apparent that implementing the strategies was a planning response to the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances. It would be helpful to explore if principals still implement these practices or how they inform face-to-face practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the extent to which school principals prioritize planning to foster strong social connections with students and teachers online and the methods and motivations behind their efforts. The findings revealed that principals were primarily motivated to build social relationships with teachers online to address administrative demands and provide socio-emotional support. Conversely, their focus on students was centred on their overall well-being. Interestingly, the participants did not prioritise academic justifications for building social relationships online. This presents an opportunity for the Jamaican and broader Caribbean educational systems to explore ways to enhance principals' leadership behaviours. The research also highlights various policy, practice, and research possibilities. Therefore, the question is not whether these changes are necessary or feasible but rather whether we, as a region, value this aspect of learning support enough to implement the required changes and integrate it into our schools' cultural practices to catalyze learning further.

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PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING REMOTE LEARNING IN RIYADH SCHOOL DISTRICT, SAUDI ARABIA

Wafa Alzahrani
Shawn Joseph

Howard University, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic wreaked havoc throughout school systems across the world during the 2020-2021 school year. Riyadh School District in Saudi Arabia effectively transitioned from in-person student learning to remote student learning as a result of effective planning of resources and effective processes for implementation of remote learning. Employing Stufflebeam's CIPP evaluation model, an input evaluation and a process evaluation were conducted to shed light on the planning process employed to distribute resources and implement remote learning in a large school district in Saudi Arabia. Centralized supports for schools, including proper national funding, coordinated national teaching supports, and effective communication, aided Riyadh School District in the effective implementation of on-line learning for students.

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) experienced a sudden, dramatic shift from in-person learning to remote learning due to the global Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Within 10 hours of announcing that school would be closed as precautionary measures to prevent the pandemic from spreading, the Ministry of Education (MoE) launched its distance learning initiative (MoE, 2020). Accordingly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) shifted immediately to remote learning due to heavy investment in improving education and technology integration within education systems (*Saudi vision 2030, 2016*). A shift to distance learning does not merely depend on utilizing technology; it also depends on the capacity of teachers, staff, and school leaders to serve their students via technology. As a result, the MoE exerted the utmost effort to provide teachers with the skills necessary to make effective use of virtual classroom technologies and distance education platforms (MoE, 2020).

Over the past decade, there was an initial focus to expand infrastructure and build teachers' capacity and capability as part of Vision 2030 (Tatweer, 2017). On April 25, 2016, Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched the Kingdom's Vision 2030, an ambitious strategic plan that reflected the government's confidence in the ability of its people to realize their aspirations and potential. Saudi Vision 2030 aims to underpin citizens and create a diverse and sustainable economy. It states:

We are determined to build a thriving country in which all citizens can fulfill their dreams, hopes, and ambitions. Therefore, we will not rest until our nation is a leader in providing opportunities for all through education and training, and high-quality services in employment, health, housing, and entertainment. (*SaudiVision 2030, 2016, p. 7*)

Alghamdi and Holland (2020) confirmed that Saudi Vision 2030 was a continuation of a reform education initiative. The researchers found the education reform journey to be guided by a very ambitious social and economic plan called the National Transformation Program 2020, part of its Vision 2030 development (as cited in Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). Since Saudi Vision 2030 was launched in April 2016, the government has taken bold steps and emphasized technology, innovation, growth and quality. There has been an apparent shift from the quantitative to the qualitative perspective on the education front, which the government considers a valid indicator of education development. Accordingly, the Saudi government is committed to closing the gap between

higher education outputs and the job market requirements. Saudi Vision 2030 (2016) stressed the link between education and a competitive economy, noting that investing in education leads to a more prepared workforce able to meet market requirements.

Researchers conducted studies on e-learning in higher education institutions before and during the pandemic (Alarifi, 2020; Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2017; Aljaber, 2018; Alqabbani et al., 2020; Alshehri et al., 2020; Alturki, 2014; Tayyib et al., 2020; Walab & Luppisini, 2020), but investigations of remote learning in K-12 schools were scarce (Alenezi, 2019; Alwahoub et al., 2020; Bingimlas, 2017; Munshi & Aljojo, 2018). This paper offers suggestions for planning and implementing remote learning. The original study used the CIPP evaluation model (Stufflebeam, 1983) to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Riyadh School District's implementation of remote learning (Alzahrani, 2023). This paper reports on the input and process evaluations from the original study. The paper concludes with recommendations and insights gained from the Riyadh School District on best approaches to effectively plan for and implement distance learning.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Hassounah et al. (2020), officials reported the first confirmed coronavirus case in the KSA on March 3, 2020, thereby forcing the KSA, like many other countries worldwide, to shut down classrooms. Nevertheless, the MoE did not allow any stoppage of education, even for a single day. Educational institutions started to implement distance learning by using web-based instruction programs on March 8, 2020. This change forced many K-12 educators to quickly shift from teaching students in the classroom to a remote experience, introducing the educational system to emergency remote learning.

Remote learning helped shift the pedagogical strategy in the KSA from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered learning approach (Walabe, 2020). Although the significance of distance learning lies in changing the bias for face-to-face learning, a number of challenges faced education groups. Therefore, the Saudi government adopted new policies and strategies to enhance the e-learning system and overcome the difficulties educators and learners encountered. In addition, the MoE used new technologies and procedures to ensure continuity of education during the crisis. It also provided learners adequate access to educational curricula and enriching materials through various methods and means. However, a formative evaluation of the implementation of remote learning was needed to provide feedback to policymakers and the administration of schools in Saudi Arabia.

Due to the scarcity of empirical studies evaluating virtual learning in K-12 Saudi schools, it was essential to conduct an evaluation of virtual learning in K-12 schools during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance remote learning experience in future years.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were developed to guide the performance of the study. The effectiveness of implementing distance learning was evaluated by taking an input and process approach.

1. Were the resources allocated to implement distance learning appropriate to effectively support teachers' effective implementation of distance learning in Riyadh schools during the 2019-2020 school year? Explain. (Input)
2. Was distance learning implemented as it was designed to be implemented in Riyadh schools during the 2019-2020 school year? (process)

CONTEXT OF STUDY

The study was conducted in public schools in the Riyadh region of the KSA. Riyadh is the capital city of the KSA and the largest public school district in the KSA. The Riyadh region included 282 schools. In addition, 807,502 students attended its schools and 50,805 teachers taught in the schools during the time of the study (Schools Data 1442 H, 2020). Thus, the population of this study consisted of teachers and administrators employed in Riyadh public schools. It was important to collect the voices of administrators and teachers from the north, east, south, and west areas of Riyadh region at a minimum to support distance learning experience. Teachers and administrators were working together to overcome the challenges and adopt distance learning. The data were collected from the voices of teachers of elementary, middle and high schools. Additional voices were collected from principals, supervisors, educational office leaders and design team representatives.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for the study was the context, input, process, and product (CIPP) evaluation model (Stufflebeam, 1983). The CIPP model asks, “What needs to be done? (Context) How should it be done? (Input) Is it being done? (Process) Did it succeed? (Product)” (Stufflebeam, 2010, p. 5).

Oliveira et al. (2021) used the CIPP model to investigate interrelations among the context, input, and process elements of emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 crisis. The researchers stressed that it is vital to learn how to develop empathy online as this helps to involve all the participants in the learning process. Results also revealed some ground for future research, particularly concerning applying and engaging students in virtual learning, as these are fundamental factors in the learning process. The findings of the study were broad, and the recommendations can be generalized at the university level.

In contrast, Al-Shanawani (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study to evaluate the self-learning curricula of a kindergarten in the KSA by utilizing the CIPP model. Al-Shanawani found that the objectives of the curricula were moderately correlated to the context. The input, process, and product also moderately contributed to the educational needs of the Saudi community. On the other hand, the curricula failed to meet the needs of the kindergarten students and the community with regard to providing multiple sources of knowledge, teaching competencies, and training opportunities. Accordingly, the researcher indicated the need to develop a kindergarten curriculum based on the children’s educational needs and the community’s developmental needs. This study did provide in-depth understanding and analysis due to the mixed-methods approach utilized; however, one should view the study findings with caution as a result of the limitation the researcher described with respect to the absence of curriculum inputs.

Alhamid (2020) utilized methods similar to those of Al-Shanawani (2019) to evaluate an intensive English program undertaken in the KSA to prepare students for university study. The researcher employed the CIPP evaluation model to evaluate the intensive English program and provide some recommendations to improve the program, finding that the intensive English program enhanced students’ self-confidence and educational skills. Although the research revealed mutual cultural acceptance between students and their native English teachers, it found that the textbooks were unsuited to the Saudi context and incompatible with intensive English program assessment approaches. Although this study did provide in-depth understanding and analysis due to the mixed-methods design employed, the findings of the study and the recommendations can be generalized only at the university level.

The CIPP model was comprehensive enough to be used to evaluate remote learning focused on improving the e-learning system. In this article, we are reporting on the input evaluation and the process evaluation of distance learning in the Riyadh District schools.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the world, the education system in the KSA abruptly shifted from face-to-face learning to remote learning to ensure the safety of all educators and learners (Alarifi, 2020; Hassounah et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2020; MoE, 2020a). Leveraging continued investment in developing education and technology, the MoE was able to transfer immediately to remote learning. In addition, distance learning plans and strategies reflected the unique strengths of investments in a digital infrastructure (Al Ohali et al., 2018; Aldiab et al., 2017; Alghamdi & Holland, 2020). Concurrently, the emphasis was on enhancing teachers' capacity to maintain learning continuity during crisis times (AlAmri & Saleh, 2019; Albaqami, 2019; Albugami, 2016; Alresheed, 2017; MoE, 2020a; Sabah et al., 2014). Over the past few years, researchers have focused on exploring e-learning in higher education institutions (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2017; Alqabbani et al., 2020; Alshehri et al., 2020; Alturki, 2014; Tayyib et al., 2020; Walabe & Luppardini, 2020). On the other hand, studies on distance learning in K-12 education schools have been more limited due to the rise of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alenezi, 2019; Alwahoub et al., 2020; Bingimlas, 2017; Munshi & Aljojo, 2018).

The literature search encompassed sources from 2012 to 2020 that identified virtual learning in Saudi Arabia as a critical term. It also comprised literature on shifting to remote learning, investment in education and technology, and teacher professional development programs. The search for sources also focused on the following terms: e-learning in educational organizations, integrating technology in educational institutions, distance learning in educational institutions, virtual learning in educational organizations, remote learning in K-12 schools, teacher training, and teacher development. From 2014 to 2021, the literature search included Dissertation Abstracts International, the Education Research Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) database, World Wide Web Internet searches, Proquest, reference lists from studies related to distance learning and books in the field of education related to distance learning.

Many researchers have contributed to the literature related to e-learning in Saudi Arabia. The research on utilizing e-learning in educational institutions comprised document analyses and review of a body of literature that was a mix of theoretical and empirical data (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Al-Shehri, 2010; Alahmari & Amirault, 2017; Aldiab et al., 2017; Aljabre, 2012; Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2017; AlMegren & Yassin, 2013; Alturki, 2014; Munshi & Aljojo, 2018; Solangi et al., 2018; Yengin et al., 2011). Researchers used both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore this field.

Hassounah et al. (2020) conducted theoretical research on the use of digital technology in the KSA during the pandemic, using official announcements, press releases, news clips, published data, and peer-reviewed literature. The researchers found that the KSA possessed e-learning infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Saudi Vision 2030 had paved the way for digital learning. Hassounah et al. cited Aljaber's (2018) research on e-learning management system and explained, "The expected high usage of Internet services, which exceeded the current capacity by around 33%, was also supported by the Saudi Communication and Information Technology Commission, which developed related infrastructure to accommodate the sudden high demand" (p. 5). Similarly, Alarifi (2020) evaluated the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education sector and the ways in which the KSA controlled the spread of the epidemic. The researcher confirmed the significance of

education planning in disaster management, including natural and human-made disasters, to reduce their effects. Concurrently, Mann et al. (2020) utilized methods similar to those of Alarifi (2020) to explore how well the KSA was prepared to deal with the pandemic and school closures. The study found that the KSA was well prepared for the lockdown and shifted to alternative learning by using television, online provision, and instructional packages.

METHODOLOGY

An input and process evaluation was employed to conduct the study to produce answers to the research questions. Input evaluation identifies the resources, infrastructure, curriculum, and content needed to implement the teaching learning processes. Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014) stated input evaluations allow stakeholders to choose from available initiatives, write grant or funding proposals, allocate funds and training, and assign personnel appropriately. The literature related to shifting to remote learning, investment in education and technology, and teacher professional development programs were cited in support of the input and process approach (Alarifi, 2020; AlAmri & Saleh, 2019; Albaqami, 2019; Albugami, 2016; Alresheed, 2017; Al Ohali et al., 2018; Aldiab et al., 2017; Alghamdi & Holland, 2020; Hassounah et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2020; MoE, 2020a; Sabah et al., 2014).

Both components of the study relied on three primary sources of data: document analysis, individual interviews and focus groups. Interviews with administrators, including the principal, a supervisor, an educational office leader, another educational office representative, a design team representative, and teachers were conducted. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with administrators, including principal, supervisor, educational office leader, another educational office representative, and design team representative. Focus groups were conducted with administrators and teachers from the north, south, west, and east areas in the Riyadh region to gather the voices of educators in each one of those areas at a minimum. Data were coded, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking to draw conclusions. Table 1 summarizes the research questions, data collection methods, and analysis procedure for this study.

Table 1:
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DATA SOURCES, COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

Research question	Data source	Method of collection	Data analysis procedure
Were the resources allocated to implement distance learning appropriate to effectively support teachers' effective implementation of distance learning during the 2019-2020 school year?	Principals, supervisors, teachers, educational office leaders, and design team	Personal Interviews Focus group interviews Document analysis	Qualitative
Was distance learning implemented as it was designed to be implemented in Riyadh Schools during the 2019-2020 school year?	Principals, supervisors, teachers, educational office leaders, and design team	Personal interviews Focus group interviews Document analysis	Qualitative

Research Design

This study utilized an evaluation strategy with a qualitative methods approach. Qualitative methods allowed the researcher to gain a rich understanding of teachers' and administrators' experiences. Stufflebeam (2001) defined evaluation as "a study designed and conducted to assist some audience to assess an object's merit and worth" (p. 11). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) defined evaluation as "the systematic process of delineating, obtaining, reporting, and applying descriptive and judgmental information about some object's merit, worth, probity [moral correctness], feasibility, safety, significance, or equity" (p. 698). Yarbrough et al. (2011) defined evaluation as "systematic investigation of the value, importance, or significance of something or someone along defined dimensions" (p. 287). Aziz et al. (2018) defined evaluation as "the process of determining the extent to which objectives are attained. It is concerned not [only] with the appraisal of achievement but also with the improvements" (p. 190). Thus, this study is aimed to evaluate remote learning in K-12 education at Riyadh schools using Stufflebeam's CIPP evaluation model.

Research Participants

The population of this study consisted of teachers and administrators employed in Riyadh public schools. Educators are key players in effective implementation of distance education. This research involved the use of a sample of approximately 44 educators, including 20 teachers and 24 administrators. The sampling was gathered from the north, south, west, and east of the Riyadh region.

The researcher utilized a purposeful sample and selected participants to be interviewed based on specific criteria: at least 5 years of experience in the field of education and knowledge of instructional practices for e-learning in public schools. Specifically, the study included participants who used technology platforms prior to the pandemic and who were trained by the Ministry of Education. Participants in the study were required to be between the ages of 27 and 47 and either male or female.

Research Instruments

The instrumentation of the study consisted of an open-ended interview protocol developed by the researcher. For one-on-one interviews and focus groups, this study used an open-ended format derived from the CIPP evaluation model and guided by the documentation of The Saudi MOE Leading Efforts to Combat Coronavirus Pandemic [COVID-19].

Data Collection

A comprehensive review of documents, focus groups, and in-depth interviews provided answers to the research questions. The researchers also used reflective journals as a tool to reflect on issues arising during the phase of data collection.

Focus groups

Focus group interviews were a primary source of data for this study; the researcher gathered qualitative data through group discussions between research participants. Focus group interviews assisted the qualitative researchers to expand the sample size of the evaluation (Creswell, 2013). In addition, focus groups enabled research participants to interact with each other to generate data. The participants were able to focus on the most significant topics and issues in remote learning, thereby making it easy for the researchers to determine consensus on an issue.

Interviews

The researchers also conducted individual interviews with key informants through the Skype program for approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Key informants were identified by asking administrators in the focus group interviews about other candidates working in the same

school district who may be good sources of information. There were four individual interviews with administrators, including principal, supervisor, central office leader, another central office representative, and design team representative. Key informants who were interviewed did not participate in focus groups.

Document Analysis

The researchers conducted a thorough document search, including documents such as The Saudi MOE Leading Efforts to Combat Coronavirus Pandemic (2020b), Saudi Vision 2030 (2016), National Transformation Program Delivery Plan (2021), and the MoE website. The researchers looked at documents including but not limited to internal memorandums, lesson plans, reports, and other essential documents. In addition, the researchers asked key informants for additional documents that should be analyzed.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The researchers conducted a qualitative analysis for this study, as described by Creswell (2007):

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. (p. 180)

Creswell (2013) identified six steps in the process of qualitative data analysis: organizing and preparing data for analysis, reading or looking at all the data, coding the data, generating a description and theme, representing the descriptions and themes in the qualitative narrative, and giving the meaning of the data.

In this study, the researchers transcribed all of the data from the interviews and included them in a document analysis form. The researchers gained a general sense of the data, wrote notes in the margins, and recorded the data. In the third phase of qualitative data analysis, the researchers organized the collected data by classifying the images and text and then labeling each category. Furthermore, the researchers examined common themes of individual and group interviews and then analyzed the associated data between the individuals and groups. Finally, the researchers used narrative passages to explain the outcomes of the analysis, discussing emergent themes that have emerged from the analysis. The researchers used quotations from individuals, groups, and documents in the qualitative narrative. In the final phase, the researchers presented an interpretation of the findings.

FINDINGS

Input Evaluation

Virtual learning has become an essential phenomenon in the Saudi education system since the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The Saudi government invests in education and training by allocating a large portion of the budget to develop essential infrastructure and create a digital educational environment. During the pandemic, the Saudi government responded quickly and effectively and adopted new strategies to overcome the difficulties educators and learners encountered. The allocated resources to implement distance learning were viewed in a positive light and were appropriate to support teachers' effective implementation of distance learning.

Financial resources were adequate

In designing and implementing digital learning, the Saudi government has committed to providing strong support for the development of the education sector. Due to education being a top priority of the KSA, the education sector obtains the largest share of government budget expenditure.

Between 2014 and 2020, the government spent on education and training around SAR 200 billion (General Authority for Statistics, 2020). As already noted, in 2019, the government spent SAR 193 billion on education (MoF, 2019).

The educational system in KSA is standardized. Accordingly, the MoE sets standards for the entire national education program, including the hiring of teachers, selecting textbooks and curricula, and allocating financial resources. All public schools are funded equally by the Saudi government. During an interview, an elementary principal stated,

The MoE set a funding formula to determine the total amount of funds needed for each student and establish the school's share of those costs. The MoE promoted equal standards of education to ensure equality in school facilities, personnel, and other training resources. The government provides funds. Therefore, there are no differences in public school funding from one region to another. Equal school funding is aimed to increase the quality of education among all members of society.

The Saudi government launched many initiatives and structural reforms to enable economic transformation. In 2016, the budget allocated for the education sector was SAR 191.69 billion (\$51.11 billion). One of the primary objectives the MoE concentrated on achieving Vision 2030 was improving the educational environment and accessing high-quality educational opportunities. Accordingly, the MoE provided training and professional development to educators. For long-term success, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has launched science and knowledge programs to empower future generations. About 14 digital innovation labs were launched, and 26,000 people, with a total of 260 training camps, have benefited. Even more, the Saudi digital academy was established to develop digital capabilities in partnership with the private sector. Around 104 scientific centers were established inside schools to increase STEM skills. The STEM centers are designed to focus on technology and innovation and raise the professional competence of teachers and supervisors (Vision 2030, 2020). Participants, such as an educational leader of schools, emphasized the resources provided for Vision 2030 helped with the prompt switch to remote learning. In an individual interview, a high school principal emphasized, "Education is a top priority of Saudi Vision 2030."

In 2007, the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project received the highest budget, amounting to SAR 11.8 billion. The project has allocated SAR 4.2 billion to improve the educational environment. Another SAR 3.58 billion has been allocated to extracurricular activities, and SAR 2.943 billion was assigned to train teachers. The curriculum development program has been given a sum of SAR 980 million (Tatweer Educational Technologies, 2010). Accordingly, the MoE has demonstrated its commitment to developing the education system through providing teachers with modern technology tools. It also provided intensive training for educators to improve their knowledge and skills.

With the government's continued focus on strengthening the education system in KSA, the education sector still obtains the largest share of government budget expenditure, which was 17.5% in 2019. The Saudi Arabian government allocated SAR 192.82 billion in 2019 for public and higher education and workforce training. The budget also included allocations of SAR 4.89 billion for Vision Realization Programs for human capital development initiatives. Education and human resource development received the second-largest allocation (22.5%) of budgeted expenditures after military and security services/regional administration (Ministry of Finance, 2019).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic hit the education sector like all other countries by surprise, the MoE leveraged existing resources to accelerate the shift to remote learning and allocated new resources to meet the needs of students and schools. Due to digital transformation initiatives, education expenditures in 2020 were expected to increase by 1.4% as compared to the

previous year. Therefore, the investment in online infrastructure increased (software and hardware) to accommodate the sudden demand on its networks and complete the academic year. In 2020, the Saudi Arabian government allocated SAR 193 billion (\$254.6 billion) for education and human resource development, the largest allocation (19.37%) of budgeted expenditures (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

The Saudi government continued to allocate large amounts of budget for the education sector. About 186 billion Riyals were allocated in 2021 for the education sector. According to the MoE (2021), the main projects that were launched; the fourth phase of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques external scholarship program to continue the scholarship program; three local academies, the National Academy for Artificial Intelligence, the Academy of Administrative Leadership Development, and the Academy of Public Health; and the cultural scholarship program in vital educational institutions around the world to train 10,000 citizens.

Human resources and training were appropriate

Focus groups and individual interviews with administrators and teachers, as well as document analysis, indicated a high level of commitment from the MoE to train educators during the transition to distance learning. The MoE used funds to support efforts to train teachers and leaders to effectively integrate technology into curricula and instruction and increase educators' digital skills. Although the MoE integrated technology into teaching-learning processes prior to the pandemic, teachers were trained to use technology and hold virtual classes effectively during the crisis. The MoE adopted an intensive training program for all educators and provided them with all the necessary equipment such as tablet PCs and technical tools to facilitate the transition to remote learning. In the focus group interviews, the teachers cited efforts the MoE made to develop a teaching force skilled in remote learning continuity. One of the high school teachers shared the following:

The MoE provided educators free access to online education courses, classes, and lessons from any university in KSA to enhance their learning and teaching. Teachers received intensive training while teaching online, which helped them to acquire the skills, confidence, and resiliency to use a new set of digital tools. Concurrently, professional learning communities have increased opportunities for self-development and the exchange experiences among teachers to address the challenges of distance learning. Many teachers and leaders have produced video clips to explain how to use digital tools. Some teachers have shared sample lessons with peers on YouTube. In addition, teachers and leaders deployed their ideas and exchanged deeper professional learning to support the distance education path.

In the focus group interviews, all administrators agreed that the MoE did its best to prepare teachers and leaders to continue distance learning, as well as promoting the exchange of resources and advice among peers.

The MoE also extended training opportunities to support parents and community members. During an interview, the educational office leader stated,

The Saudi government demonstrated great support for the education and training sector to enhance the shift to distance learning during this crisis. At the same time, the MoE extended their support for all families and educators and equipped them with needed resources to help students learn at home.... In addition, the MoE cooperated with educators, counselors, and social workers to provide additional support to students with needs....

The MoE and National Center for Educational Professional Development (NCEPD) provided online training programs to all educators to facilitate digital transformation. During the

summer of 2020, the MoE placed further training plans to raise educators' awareness of effective distance education. When Madrasati was launched, at the beginning of the 2020 academic year, all stakeholders were provided with training to effectively use the platform. Later, instructors were provided with various professional development opportunities. From the MoE down to the supervisors, there was active participation in training educators to ensure the continuation of distance learning. Supervisors have played a significant role in the professional development of teachers through communicating and exchanging best practice in all subjects during the pandemic.

The MoE invested financial and human resources in the transition to distance learning. In general, the Saudi government has allotted a large portion of the budget to education and professional development for educators. The MoE has provided resources in digital learning to raise educators' digital skills, including both financial and human resources support.

Process Evaluation

Saudi Arabia invested in digital infrastructure that provided a solid foundation in the e-learning sector. Due to previous investments in digital education, the MoE was able to shift to distance learning across the country at an impressively fast rate. On March 2, 2020, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported. Accordingly, on March 6, 2020, the MoE was empowered to suspend schools in any affected province in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The MoE implemented distance learning for all K-12 schools and university education on March 8, 2020. Accordingly, on Monday, March 9, 2020, attendance was suspended in all public and private educational facilities. The MoE took deliberate steps in response to the urgent need for continuing remote learning.

On the first day of the school closure, iEN satellite TV educational channels began broadcasting lessons to all students across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Within 10 hours after the decision to suspend school attendance, the transition to distance learning immediately occurred and lessons began broadcasting to students in their homes according to a specific time plan consistent with the educational plan. Lessons were started from 8:00 a.m. until 12:00 noon. Repeated lessons were broadcast around the clock until the lessons for the next day started broadcasting at 8:00 a.m. Weekends were also devoted to rebroadcasts of the lessons presented during the week. The lessons were broadcast to learners live from the studios according to the educational level and grade. On March 15, 2020, the iEN satellite channels reached 20 educational TV channels offering live and recorded broadcasts of classes for all grades and all subjects.

In the focus group interviews, an educational leader of schools emphasized the following: One of the major initiatives ongoing before the pandemic was the iEN Portal, which includes electronic copies of course materials, enrichment activities, question banks, recorded lessons, and professional development resources for teachers. During the pandemic, iEN and a YouTube channel were redirected to provide live and record lessons for all learners, which facilitated the transition to distance learning.

For the success of distance learning, the MoE designed a new online curriculum to facilitate the transition to distance learning. According to the MoE (2020b), during the pandemic, the MoE provided digital educational content supporting virtual learning. The design of the curriculum began with defining curricular goals, developing curricular structures, and choosing curriculum content. Then, the educational specialists designed individual courses and lessons to deliver lessons effectively. Educational specialists had responsibility for filming, recording, editing, and choosing the most effective delivery methods for each lesson.

In the focus group interviews, a curriculum designer emphasized the following:

The MoE designed new curricula to facilitate remote learning. Concurrently, the MoE

provided digital educational content suitable for distance learning such as e-textbooks and e-tests. In addition, the MoE created the Madrasati platform, which is considered one of the greatest achievements of digital education, in addition to virtual kindergarten. The Madrasati platform allowed learners to interact with the lessons and educational activities (homework, tests, enrichment activities, educational paths) of the academic courses. The Madrasati platform also allowed the users to interact with the school's staff, as the school community service allows the deployment of educational materials, while the interactive meetings service allows attending meetings through Microsoft Teams.

During an interview, an elementary principal stated,

The MoE made intensive efforts to develop digital content and facilitate the educational process. The MoE integrated technology into the educational system before the pandemic which accelerated the response to the COVID-19 crisis. QR codes had been created in Saudi education before the pandemic occurred, which enhanced the transition to distance learning. Over the years, the QR codes have increased, and their roles became more effective by offering e-textbooks, educational clips, and learning games. Currently, QR codes allow stakeholders access to different resources and provide feedback on the online curriculum.

In addition, the Saudi government improved the quality of digital services provided to stakeholders by providing fiber-optic network coverage to more than 3.5 million homes across the country. During the pandemic, the Internet traffic increased by 30%, which doubled the Internet traffic and increased the Internet speed from 9Mbps in 2017 to 109 Mbps in 2020. In addition, the Saudi government covered over 576,000 homes in remote areas with broadband services to provide households with basic telecommunication services (Unified National Platform, 2022). Additionally, free Wi-Fi hotspots were deployed in 60,000 public points throughout Saudi Arabia (Unified National Platform, 2022). The Communications and Information Technology Commission instructed Internet service providers to provide free access to educational platforms. Additionally, the government allowed free-of-charge access on mobile applications to government services (Unified National Platform, 2021). Moreover, the MoE collaborated with the Takaful Foundation and other agencies to provide devices and support for in-need stakeholders.

In the focus group interviews, a supervisor stressed,

The MoE worked hard to expand educational solutions to ensure equal educational access for learners. For instance, the MoE allowed all learners to have full access to lessons through educational channels that do not require computers. Also, the MoE worked hard with the Takaful Foundation to provide devices for students with socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, the students without technology and the Internet can continue their learning via receiving hard copy materials and regularly visit the school to use the school computer.

The Saudi government worked on its digital and cloud infrastructure by raising fiber connectivity, expanding faster Wi-Fi to rural areas, and driving the shift to 5G. To promote inclusive access to connectivity, free or discounted services were provided for low-income families when the schools closed, and in poorly served areas, trucks were stationed to boost bandwidth. In addition, the two learning platforms, iEN and Madrasati, were continuously improved with tools and technologies that support artificial intelligence applications and adaptive learning solutions. Madrasati's intelligent dashboard permitted instructors to monitor learners' progress, and its parental accounts allowed guardians to be more fully involved in their children's learning (UNESCO, 2022).

During an interview, a supervisor stated,

The technology plan was sufficient and successful to move to remote learning. The MoE set up new policies and strategies for implementing continued learning during school closures. The MoE provided many alternative educational solutions to students from vulnerable segments. The learners without Internet access and/or devices can regularly visit school and use school devices. Moreover, learners can receive printed materials as the primary source. Learners may also watch recorded lessons on TV channels that include all lessons for all grades. Concurrently, the MoE connected schools to high-speed internet broadband.

The MoE provided training and support for teachers to improve engagement with distance education. All teachers were provided with orientation programs and training workshops to improve their digital skills. The remote shift had an impact on digital literacy. “An impressive 93.9% of administrators identified improvement in students’ skills and 95.7% of administrators saw improvement in teachers’ skills” (Online Learning Consortium, 2021, p. 7). Distance learning played a significant role in improving educators’ and learners’ digital literacy skills. In addition, the MoE supported all stakeholders by providing introductory training sessions to educate them on distance learning. According to UNESCO (2022), “The MoE organized over 58 virtual meetings for parents to raise awareness about e-learning and related topics, such as the mental health and well-being of students in the online environment” (p. 19).

During an interview, the elementary school principal stated,the sudden transformation to remote learning forced all educators to improve their digital skills. During Summer 2020, the MoE added further training plans to support teachers’ digital literacy and skills. The training programs raised educators’ awareness of effective distance education strategies and pedagogy

DISCUSSION

The experience of transition to remote learning was unique. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is considered one of the leading countries that took precautionary measures to suspend education and rapidly implemented virtual learning to ensure that more than 6 million students continued their education. The existence of digital learning reduced the closing effects of schools and saved the school year with flexibility and high efficiency. Since then, priority has been given to designing and implementing rapid measures to respond to the crisis, particularly through emergency budget tools, such as supplementary budgets, transfers and reserve funds, emergencies, and emergency decisions. Additionally, this unexpected change required overcoming many challenges, but also exposed genuine opportunities worth taking advantage of in learning and teaching.

The centralized education system with a top-down management approach played a critical role in the success of the transition to distance learning. In a centralized education system, the MoE set educational policies and curricula, allocated budgets, and hired staff. The centralized approach was more equitable in Saudi Arabia than the United States because all districts received appropriate funding, unlike the US where it is based upon differing tax bases. The education policy in KSA acknowledged schools’ needs and takes into consideration individual schools’ needs. Accordingly, the MoE sets criteria for distributing the budget according to the beneficiary category and the size of the financial item. The education sector has continued to receive the largest share of the budget expenditure to improve the system of education. According to the General Authority for Statistics (2020), between 2014 and 2020, the Saudi government allocated for education and training about SAR 200 billion to meet digital generation needs. Accordingly, the MoE provided equal funding for schools to ensure equitable access to learning among all members of society. An elementary school principal expressed that the funds received from the MoE were equal, with no differences in

public school funding from one region to another. Although the MoE leveraged existing resources to accelerate the transition to distance learning, the MoE allocated new resources to meet the needs of students and schools. According to the Ministry of Finance (2020), in 2020, the Saudi government allocated \$254.6 billion for education and human resource development, the largest budgeted expenditure. The MoE has set strategic plans to reduce the closing effects of schools and continue remote learning. The coordinator of the Madrasati platform emphasized that the MoE allocated effective resources and tools to implement distance learning. The MoE provided digital content supporting virtual learning that included e-textbooks, educational videos, and e-tests. Concurrently, the MoE supported all educators and learners during the fast transition to distance learning, especially related to Internet connection and access to technology devices (MoE, 2020b). Additionally, The MoE has made intensive efforts to improve the quality of education by subjecting all education policies and initiatives to government oversight. The high expenditure on the educational sector assisted to improve professional training and development, formulate effective curricula, and integrate technological tools.

The MoE set strategic plans to develop the education system. The educational supervisor expressed that the MoE succeeded in tackling challenges by improving teacher training programs and developing plans and strategies to achieve the Saudi Vision 2030. Concurrently, an educational leader of schools emphasized that Saudi Vision 2030 had a major role in restructuring education and updating the goals and initiatives, which facilitated the transition to distance learning. She also stated that all resources allocated to implement distance learning were unique and enabled the acceleration of shifting to distance learning. Participants cited that the MoE expanded educational solutions to ensure equal educational access for all learners. Digital literacy and technical issues had a significant impact on the success of distance learning. In 2022, “the Kingdom has been ranked among the top ten developed countries globally for its robust digital framework” (Unified National Platform, 2022, para. 4).

IMPLICATIONS

Countries can learn much from how KSA dealt with the rapid transition to distance learning. First, KSA ensured that access to technology and resources were available throughout the country. In a time of extreme emergency, KSA demonstrated the effectiveness of a centralized response from a government. The centralized support and direction provided by KSA ensured equitable access to learning.

In KSA, it was clear that education was a priority and the government immediately appropriated funds to be distributed throughout the country. Unlike environments where funds are distributed inequitably locally, the national response ensured resources were distributed immediately and with a sense of urgency. As such, teachers, administrators, and families were properly supported.

Finally, large scale strategy and support must be properly given to educators who were thrust into teaching utilizing a different teaching modality. In KSA, the government was both swift and decisive in establishing support for teachers in Saudi Arabia. The use of technology and the ability to partner with government schools enabled teachers throughout the country to be prepared and supported as they transitioned to distance learning. Central leadership is critical in times of crisis. The hesitation to provide centralized, optional supports, tends to limit the efficacy of the country’s overall strategy to ensure students throughout the country to be properly educated.

CONCLUSION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia effectively transitioned from in-person learning to virtual learning during the global pandemic. KSA effectively resourced schools within the country and it had an effective plan to train and support teachers. The centralized function of the country proved to be equitable and responsive to the needs of school staff and students. In times of crisis, a decisive national response can prove to be effective to support large scale improvements.

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