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Community

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Community

Fahad Alshammari

Abstract

The Saudi Arabian government's Vision 2030 economic strategy includes factors pertaining to education such as reallocating resources for buildings and equipment as well as teacher competencies/assessment and professional development. In this article the author discusses his experience in a U.S. Middle School, and especially how to improve the learning outcomes of students. Community involvement, class size and a curriculum that helps the students are discussed here. The U.S. education system is very different from what operates in the KSA. Here the author claims that the flexibility in the American education should be considered in that of Saudi Arabia.

Community

On April 16, 2019, a regional test was conducted and on the following morning, while I was at my office I saw the emailed results of the tests and noticed that the scores were low. Furthermore, the assistant director was in my office at the time and we discussed the low test scores. We wondered why the scores were so low and subsequently, I asked myself about how the curriculum in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is accredited by the Ministry of Education and what different teachers experiences have been when implementing it. Why and how are the educational outcomes low compared to other countries? What are the causes or issues? Is it about resources, including the poor level of teachers, their training and/or school resources? Or is it about the educational environment in the class-

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room, and the inadequate use of educational tools or aids? One of the things I was thinking to do as a principal is to put classroom operations, and more specifically, curriculum-building decisions and authority into the hands of the community. That means I would encourage teachers and parents to conduct meetings to put some rules in place on how classrooms should be run, and potentially focus on the issue of large class sizes and overcrowding. The overcrowding of classrooms is pedagogically less effective. I have addressed the impact of overcrowding, for example teachers are spread too thin, students do not receive the attention or personalization they require, students lose interest, which encourages students to eventually drop out. Finally, teachers and students feel increased stress due to having too many people in the classroom.

I scheduled a meeting with school teachers to discuss the poor learning outcomes and the high drop-out rate. One teacher stated that the school curriculum development and classroom priorities should focus on each student's learning pathway and outcome, not the whole school because learning skills are different from one student to another. Another teacher focused on the school environment. This topic was an important one because it was true that many students feel as if they live in a hostile and regimented environment. We discussed these problems ahead of our extensive meeting with teachers and parents in order to try and generate a solution about what we all can do to improve the learning outcomes for our school's students.

Vision 2030 is an economic policy initiative that was created a few years ago by the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It sets out to address the poor education results in international and even regional ratings. For example, in the recent Program for International Student Assessment conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019), Saudi students were significantly below the averages of their peers score-wise, i.e., 73rd out of 78 countries for mathematics, 71st for science, and 65th (of 77) for reading. To address these issues and others connected to the anticipated societal changes in Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 wants the Ministry of Education to identify best school practices (Tatweer schools) and address identified issues relevant specifically for school principals. They include:

- ◆ Reallocating resources to include buildings and equipment, and teacher competencies/assessment for purposes of professional development
- ◆ Improve learning environment ('chalk and talk'), including more classroom collaboration
- ◆ Replace or revamp the traditional curriculum so that it responds better to the labor market.

Vision 2030 aims to convert 2000 Tatweer schools throughout the country to operate "as small organizations" and to "assign school administration to develop

the education process” and to “elevate the service quality provided to students.. It must also pay attention to giving ‘investment opportunities to school facilities and service operators” (Ministry of Education, 2019a, p. 1). However, Islamic and Arabic studies are still very much part of the school curricula, including the university curriculum. These curriculum changes may impact the classroom time for secular topics such as geography and arithmetic. Furthermore, educators are directed to use ‘different sciences and knowledge and materials in the curriculum, adapt and teach them with an Islamic perspective in dealing with issues (Ministry of Education, 2019b, p. 1).

Moreover, the decreed segregation of men and women in public places and restrictions on women’s activities is gradually coming to an end: the first step as part of this process was enfranchising women voters so they could have a say in local government affairs (British Broadcasting Commission, 2015); women received the right to obtain a driver’s license (Smith-Spark, 2018); male permission (*mahram*) for women to leave the country was rescinded; and women could now enter previously male-only professions such as pilots (Conversation, 2019). More recently, legal relaxations are now evident in the previously strictly segregated entrances at restaurants (Kalin, 2019).

While Kalin (2019) doubts there will be mixed-gender classrooms any time soon, Nabout (2019) earlier reported that women educators would be invited to apply for jobs teaching primary school children to the age of 8 years, although these classes remained segregated. Indeed, there was always the need for male teachers in girls’ schools for some subjects, or girls were admitted to boys’ schools for learning; universities catered for the needs of men and women but where they were separate (Abdel-Raheem, 2014). Female education in Saudi Arabia is organized within traditional Islamic boundaries. Saudi women emerged as professional teachers only during the 1960s (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991). Women are still expected to fulfill both domestic and professional roles. For example, some jobs, including teaching in girls’ schools and social work with women, can only be filled by females, but in general social attitudes do not encourage a public role for women (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 287). Hence, generally the social attitudes that exist in Saudi Arabia do not encourage women undertaking or pursuing public roles.

The Ministry of Education oversees and administers the education of Saudi girls. The country uses its resources to offer better accommodation, facilities, and curriculum (Alsuwaida, 2016). Although women outnumber men in the education system, there are fewer women in the workforce (Hamdan, 2005). In fact, that is still the case with 19.7% of eligible Saudi women in the workforce, yet 30.9% were unemployed in 2018. There were 1.07 million employed Saudi women (3.1 million Saudi men) out of a total of 12.5 million workers in Saudi Arabia (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Consequently, although the connection between education and self-determination for women may be improving and becoming much more self-evident, the country has not yet achieved true gender equality.

Academic success does not translate into employee satisfaction for women in the KSA. Religious subjects are not subject to international testing. Alrabai (2016, p. 2) contends that individual differences, including anxiety, gender, attitude, and other factors in the learning environment such as teacher competence, curriculum, and opportunity, affect their performance. Moreover, technology should be incorporated into their learning. In 2009, Tatweer schools were selected for introducing significant information and communications technology (ICT) to advance the Saudi 'knowledge economy' for skilled workers (Wiseman, Al-bakr, Davidson, & Bruce, 2018). Female teachers were more likely to use ICT resources in comparison to their male counterparts. Hence, technology will enhance women's education throughout the country.

During my five weeks being immersed in the practices at Camelback High School, I attended a meeting of the Central District Managers and discussed the balance between work and life on our leadership trip with our teachers and community. We also discussed the idea of ensuring all students have high-quality seats in the classroom. When I went to the library to do homework, at that point I realized that my experience of studying in the U.S. had made me more proactive and interested in promoting change. I learned how to become a full-fledged change facilitator able to identify a problem, analyze its essential aspects, and find solutions to it. Before coming to the U.S., I had perceived education more as a way of obtaining knowledge. However, during my immersion experience, I realized that an essential point about any education system was changing people's mindsets and perceptions of the surrounding world.

The education system in the U.S. is a "decentralized" one and for this reason, the laws governing the structure and content of education programs vary greatly from one state to another. Nonetheless, these programs seem remarkably similar due to common factors between these states, such as social and economic needs and the frequent mobility of students and teachers from one state to another. As a result, the experimentation and diversity in each state do not hinder a unitary educational system in America. Another thing I learned in U.S. schools is teaching in most classes is done in the English language, except in schools where for the majority of students whose first language is not English. In such cases, most classes are in a language comfortable for non-native speakers. Meanwhile, there are intense or focused courses aimed at making non-native speakers more proficient in English. Such readiness of the U.S. system of education impressed me since it showed its flexibility and readiness to adapt to the needs of diverse populations.

In general, the flexibility of the American system of education changed my perception of thinking that education systems are essentially static. For instance, I now have a rather critical position and skeptical opinion about the inability of the Saudi system of education to become more gender-neutral and progressive according to the requirements articulated in Saudi Vision 2030. I realize that teachers and education facilities can take into account the American model in order to

make learning more creative and collaborative. Despite the fact there are differences between both countries' education systems, they do not prevent the Saudi system from becoming more flexible and creativity-oriented. Such affairs will make it more inclusive and progressive, thereby leading Saudi students to better education outcomes.

Once I return to Saudi Arabia, I will communicate with the relevant local people who are in charge of the education system. With support from experienced professors and officials, I will establish a series of lectures for school officials where I will explain the importance of making the Saudi system of education more flexible and provide examples from the US version. The essential point about this plan is obtaining funding for my initiative. I will also establish an extensive network of communication that will allow me to reach a range of influential Saudi officials who are very familiar with how the country's system of education works. Finally, I will write articles and studies that will explain my viewpoint. I hope that with proper support, they will be published in notable Saudi and/or international journals.

When it comes to my perspective on the system of education in the U.S., it is rather positive. I admire the flexibility of the U.S. system of education in that it is rather progressive. I do not as yet recognize any notable weaknesses in this system. At the same time, as a person who grew up with the Saudi Arabian education system, I may have a more objective perspective on education in the U.S. After all, I can evaluate it by making comparisons in several aspects.

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