


Research on school principals in the Gulf states: A systematic review of topics and conceptual models

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Abstract

In view of the growing emphasis by educational leadership and management (EDLM) scholars on diversifying the existing knowledge base in the field, this review of research analysed topics and conceptual models employed in 104 studies on school principals from the Arabian Gulf states published between 2000 and 2019. Systematic review methods were used to identify relevant studies documented in Arabic databases hosted by Dar Almandumah. Information was extracted from the articles and analysed using quantitative methods. The results revealed similarities between the data set under review and EDLM research from other developing countries in terms of research topics and conceptual development. Weaknesses are highlighted and recommendations are offered for strengthening future studies on school principals in the region.

Keywords

Arab, educational leadership, Gulf states, principals, review

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed the emergence of postcolonial critiques calling for greater representation of knowledge traditions and research contributions from non-Western societies (e.g. Saffari et al., 2017). A similar trend has been noted in the field of educational leadership and management (EDLM) which has seen a growing recognition of the limitations of its global knowledge base. Specifically, there has been increasing agreement among EDLM scholars that the practice of school leadership is shaped by institutional, political and cultural factors that differ from country to country (Bailey et al., 2019; Bajunid, 1996; Hallinger and Hammad, 2019; Walker and Hallinger, 2015) and that fuller understanding of EDLM practices and challenges requires close examination of how leadership is conceived and practised in different educational contexts (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017; Day and Leithwood, 2007; Hallinger and Walker, 2017). Hallinger and Heck (1996) highlighted this point, stating: 'There is still much to be learned about how leadership is expressed across the wider sphere of national-cultural boundaries' (p. 75). This has given rise to a growing body of EDLM literature coming from developing societies as evidenced by recent research reviews (e.g. Asuga et al., 2016; Atari and Outum, 2019; Bush and Glover, 2016; Castillo and Hallinger, 2017; Flessa et al., 2018; Gumus et al., 2020; Hallinger and

Bryant, 2013; Hallinger and Hammad, 2019; Hammad and Hallinger, 2017).

School principalship is one of the EDLM research areas that has received greater attention over the past two decades (Kılınç and Gümüş, 2020). Interest in researching this area has been fuelled by a growing realisation among scholars and practitioners of the importance of school principals to school effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2010; May and Sanders, 2013; Robinson and Buntrock, 2011) and their crucial role in improving and sustaining student achievement by supporting good teaching in schools (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2010). Research on school principals is needed in order to understand how principals are prepared and nurtured, how effective they are in doing their job, what challenges they confront and how to support them (Walker and Qian, 2006). This has become even more important given the growing complexities and intensifying demands associated with the roles expected of today's school principals (Lumby, 2014).

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Despite dramatic increase in the number of studies on school principals over the past 20 years, the field has been largely dominated by researchers from Anglophone countries, with only minimal contributions from non-Western contexts (Aravena, 2020; Kılınc and Gümüş, 2020), including Arab societies (Hammad and Hallinger, 2017). Lack of research from non-Western societies creates a knowledge gap because building a rich, global corpus of knowledge on school principalship requires the inclusion of research evidence from a more diverse range of international contexts. Research from developing societies is particularly needed because evidence suggests that many organisational and cultural obstacles are facing school principals in these societies and hindering them from bringing about school improvement (Oplatka, 2004).

This review has been conducted in an attempt to bridge this knowledge gap. It forms part of a larger research project aimed at analysing EDLM research in the Arab region (see Hammad et al., 2020). Reviews of EDLM research from different contexts are needed because they help 'identify the state-of-the-art and set markers for knowledge building'. This is vital for building a strong, more diverse knowledge base in the field (Walker and Hallinger, 2015: 564). It is envisaged that this review will contribute to the growing body of work on non-Western approaches to educational leadership by examining school principalship literature in a non-Western region – in this case the Gulf states – which is largely under-represented in global EDLM research (see Hallinger and Hammad, 2019). To this end, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

- (1) What topics represent the focus of research studies on school principals in the Gulf states?
- (2) What conceptual models are used to guide studies on school principals in the region?

The current review was geographically limited to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The reason is that while they share many cultural, social and political characteristics with the rest of the Arab countries, the Gulf states have some specific features that make them distinct from these countries, especially with regard to their patterns of economic growth and social development (Ally and Alshahrani, 2018; Bailey et al., 2019). Economically, despite the fact that many of these states are quite young (e.g. the UAE and Bahrain forming in 1971), the Gulf states, given the wealth they have accumulated from their oil revenues, have been able to engage in comprehensive and rapid nation-building, part of which involves establishing many higher education institutions and the infrastructure needed for teaching, research and scholarship (Ally and Alshahrani, 2018). Historically and politically, the Gulf states have more in common with each other than with the rest of the Arab region, and the Middle East in general, due to their shared history and political (monarchical) systems (Al-Yousef, 2017; Bailey et al., 2019). Since they play a

vital role in shaping education systems (Hofstede, 1986), these features need to be taken into consideration when trying to understand educational developments and practices in these societies. This has particular relevance in the field of EDLM where more empirical research is warranted in order to conceptualise EDLM practices in the GCC states and to build a contextually relevant knowledge base that can support educational transformation efforts in the region (Bailey et al., 2019; Stringer and Hourani, 2016). Research on school principals is particularly needed because relevant empirical evidence from this part of the World is relatively limited (Hammad and Hallinger, 2017).

The current review was purposefully focused on the Gulf-related literature written in the Arabic language. Recent years have seen increasing calls for extending EDLM research reviews to include articles published in non-English-language journals (see Atari and Outum, 2019; Hammad et al., 2020; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013; Hammad and Hallinger, 2017). Reviewing national language EDLM literature is important as it facilitates drawing a clearer picture of the regional literature under investigation (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013). An additional factor is that Gulf-related EDLM literature published in international journals is very scarce. A recent review of this literature found only 25 studies about the Gulf states published between 2000 and 2016 in nine core international EDLM journals, of which very few were on school principals (Hammad and Hallinger, 2017). Conversely, another review of the Arabic-language EDLM literature from the Gulf states found that 129 out of the 272 articles reviewed were about school principals in the region (Hammad et al., 2020). Moreover, our focus on Arabic-language literature in this review responds to Kılınc and Gümüş' (2020) recommendation to conduct reviews of non-English-language research on school principals in order to enrich the existing global knowledge base in this particular area of research.

Conceptual framework

In order to identify conceptual models used in studies about school principals, we employed a conceptual framework suggested by Hallinger (2018). According to this framework, EDLM studies are classified in terms of four broad domains. As shown in Figure 1, the first domain, labelled A, refers to either contextual or personal antecedents. Contextual antecedents include cultural, political, economic and institutional features of the educational setting. Personal antecedents refer to leader characteristics, including gender, education and experience. The second domain, labelled B, relates to leadership and management roles, behaviours and practices, while the third domain (C) refers to organisational factors such as school culture, school climate and teachers' attitudes. The fourth domain (D) focuses on school outcomes, including student achievement, school effectiveness and school improvement. Using this framework proved useful in coding the studies and in grouping the topics according to

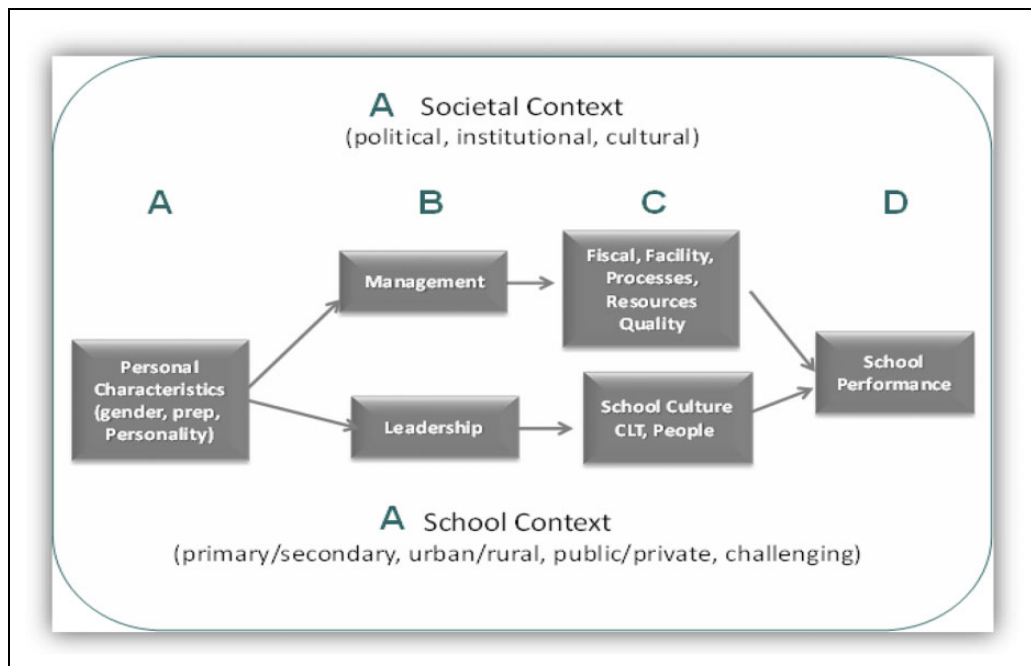


Figure 1. Conceptual framework (from Hallinger, 2018). A refers to personal and context antecedents of leadership, B refers to leadership and management variables, C refers to variables that mediate leadership/management effects on school performance and D refers to variables measuring school performance.

themes. For example, the model A-B would describe a study that explores the relationship between principal characteristics and leadership/management actions, whereas the model B-D would represent a study looking into the impact of leadership/management on school outcomes. A tripartite model such as A-B-C would correspond to a study examining the relationship between leadership/management and organisational variables in a specific cultural context.

Methodology

The current study followed guidelines for undertaking systematic reviews of educational research (Gough, 2007; Hallinger, 2013; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). It employed quantitative methods aimed at identifying topics and conceptual models used in studies about school principals in the Gulf states. Descriptive statistics were used to achieve this objective. Similar methods were used in previous reviews of EDLM research from other contexts (e.g. Castillo and Hallinger, 2017; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013; Hallinger and Chen, 2015; Hallinger and Hammad, 2019; Hammad and Hallinger, 2017).

The first step in conducting this review was to identify relevant sources. Researchers have used different strategies to locate relevant articles. While some have employed Google Scholar to find EDLM sources published in the English language (e.g. Hallinger, 2018), others have limited their search to a specific set of international EDLM journals (e.g. Castillo and Hallinger, 2017; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013; Hallinger and Hammad, 2017; Hammad and Hallinger, 2017). Since the

focus of this review is on research literature published in the Arabic language, we decided to use the Arabic network Dar Almandumah since it was considered more suitable. The network includes a number of Arabic databases such as EduSearch, EcoLink, IslamicInfo, AraBase and Humanindex which are specialised in social sciences and humanities. Our search for potential sources was guided by the following criteria: (1) articles focusing on school principals; (2) articles from/about Gulf states; (3) articles published between 2000 and 2019; (4) articles published in journals affiliated with universities or educational research institutions/associations; and (5) articles available in full text format. A keyword search was carried out within the databases using Arabic terms translated as 'educational leadership/administration', 'school leadership/administration', 'principal', 'school leader', 'organisational' and 'decision-making'. More than 120 sources were initially identified. We then excluded articles that did not have clear/detailed research methods and those taken from research students' dissertations from the review. This brought the final number of sources to be reviewed down to 104 research articles.

The data analysis process involved scanning the articles in order to extract information relevant to answering the research questions. These included school level, research topics and conceptual models. Extracted data were entered into an Excel file and codes were used for the purpose of quantitative analysis. For example, in order to analyse the studies according to their school level, primary schools were coded as 1, middle schools as 2, secondary schools as 3, multilevel as 4 and system as 5. Graphs and tables were produced to present the findings. Trends identified

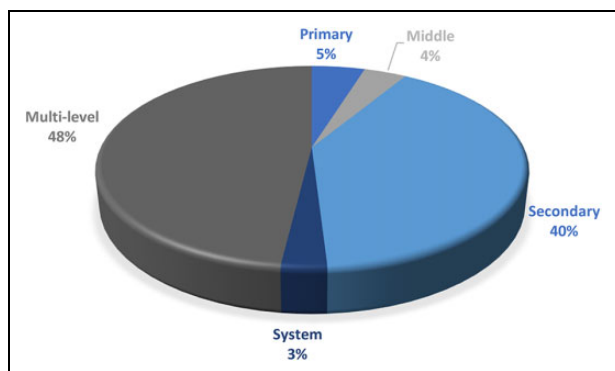


Figure 2. Classification of papers according to school level.

were compared with those found in previous EDLM reviews.

Results

In this section, we present the findings relevant to the two research questions outlined earlier. Specifically, the results focus on research topics and conceptual models featuring in studies about school principals in the GCC region, drawing upon a data set of 104 research articles documented in Dar Almandumah.

Topical coverage

The first question focused on identifying research topics studied in the literature about school principals in the Gulf countries. We first classified the papers according to school level. As shown in Figure 2, it was found that almost half of the papers (48%) fell within the category ‘multilevel’, meaning that they relied on data collected from more than one school level. 40% ($n = 42$) of the papers focused on secondary schools, 5% ($n = 5$) on primary schools, and 4% ($n = 4$) on middle schools. This means that secondary schooling represented an important focus for principalship studies in the Gulf region as it emerged as the most frequently studied single level. In contrast, scholars studying school principals in the region showed lesser interest in primary and middle schools.

The research topics in the database were then classified drawing on a typology developed by Hallinger and Chen (2015) and slightly modified by the researchers to suit the nature of the Arabic literature under review. As charted in Table 1, school management roles/practices arose as the most frequently studied topic in this literature as it featured in 64 studies (61.5%). This category included studies examining the actualisation of certain management roles and practices such as those related to strategic management (Al-Azmi, 2013), the use of ICT (Al-Zeyod, 2012), knowledge management (Al-Tammam, 2016), change management (Al-Jaradat, 2013) and total quality management (Al-Ani and Al-Attar, 2017). The second most frequent topic was human resources which was covered in 21 studies (20%). Studies falling under this category focused on topics

Table 1. Topics covered in principalship studies in the Gulf region.

Topics	Count
Management roles and practices	64
Human resources: training, selection, development and career	21
Leadership	19
Organisational behaviour, climate and culture	16
Gender	13
Emotions: commitment motivation, satisfaction	10
Values, ethics	9
Leader characteristics and attitudes	8
ICT	7
Change, school performance and improvement	5
Governance: SBM, decentralisation	4
Decision-making	4
Quality	3
Parents and community	2
Teacher evaluation and supervision	2
Cultural contexts	0
Social justice	0
Curriculum and teaching	0

SBM: School-based management.

such as building professional learning communities (Ibrahim and Al-Shehoumy, 2018a), assessing principals’ performance (Al-Balwi and Tanash, 2017), principals’ professional development (Al-Ghaith, 2011), teachers’ professional development (Al-Qahtani, 2013a) and principals’ selection (Al-Sahlawy, 2000). Leadership has also been the focus of some studies ($n = 19$). These studies focused either on a particular principal leadership style such as instructional leadership (Al-Ghamdi, 2006) and transformational leadership (Al-Awadi and Al-Awadi, 2015) or on examining prevalent leadership styles/behaviours in general (Al-Qahtani, 2013b). Organisational behaviour/climate appeared in a number of studies ($n = 16$) addressing issues such as organisational conflict (Ghawanmeh, 2017), organisational justice (Abu Kareem, 2015) and organisational culture (Al-Meheilby et al., 2014). In addition to management roles and practices, human resources, principal leadership and organisational behaviour, a number of other topics appeared but were less frequently studied, including gender (Al-Ghamdi, 2016; Al-Saadi, 2014), emotions (Abu Kareem, 2015; Al-Ghaith, 2015), values (Al-Ajmi, 2017), leader characteristics/attitudes (Al-Sakka, 2013) and ICT (Ibrahim and Al-Shehoumy, 2018). Other topics were either absent or minimally addressed such as decision-making, quality, teacher evaluation and supervision, cultural contexts, social justice and curriculum and teaching.

Conceptual models

Following identification of research topics, we investigated the conceptual models that guided the studies on school principals in the Gulf region, using the conceptual framework presented earlier in Figure 1. In order to identify these

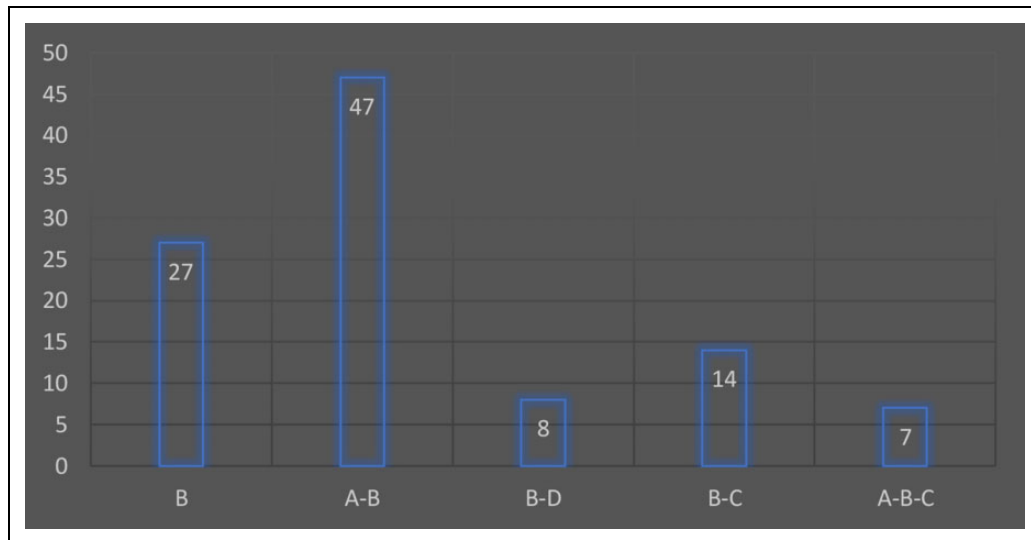


Figure 3. Composition of articles by conceptual model.

models, we analysed the 103 empirical studies which represented 99% of the data set. Classification of the studies was carried out using a three-level rubric as follows:

- Univariate studies (addressing only one domain such as A, B, C or D).
- Bivariate studies (combining two domains such as A-B, B-C, B-D or A-D).
- Multivariate studies (involving more than two domains such as A-B-D or B-C-D).

As shown in Figure 3, more than two-thirds of the studies ($n = 70$) employed bivariate conceptual models. The most frequent combination in this category was the model A-B which was used in 47 studies. These studies focus on how principal leadership and management practices/activities were influenced by contextual and personal factors (e.g. Al-Ghamdi, 2006; Al-Hamdan and Al-Shammari, 2008; Ashour, 2010). The second most prevalent bivariate combination was B-C which was employed in 14 studies. The focus in these studies was on the relationship between leadership/management practices/behaviours and organisational behaviour factors (e.g. Al-Shammari, 2015; Ghawanmeh, 2017). The combination B-D came in the third place with eight studies focusing on the impact of principal leadership and management on school outcomes (e.g. Al-Ani and Al-Attar, 2017; Al-Sharif, 2016).

Univariate studies emerged as the second most frequent category in this literature. These were represented by studies adopting the conceptual model B ($n = 27$). These studies aim to describe leadership or management practices/behaviours of school principals (e.g. Ahmed and Al-Ani, 2015; Al-Azmi, 2013; Al-Qahtani, 2013b). Only seven studies were classified as employing multivariate conceptual models. These were represented by the model A-B-C. These studies investigate the interrelationships between principal leadership/management, contextual or

personal variables and organisational behaviour variables (e.g. Al-Azmi, 2017; Al-Ghaith, 2015; Al-Ghamdi, 2016; Al-Sada and Ababneh, 2016). It was also noted that domain B was the most frequently observed domain as it was studied in all 103 empirical studies. This signals an overwhelming emphasis by EDLM scholars in the region on describing principal leadership and management practices/behaviours.

Discussion

The purpose of this review was to explore the nature of research on school principals in the Arabian Gulf region. Drawing on a database of 104 Arabic EDLM studies published between 2000 and 2019, the review focused specifically on identifying the research topics studied and the conceptual models guiding the studies. Our review found similarities between the literature under investigation and other literatures from developing countries (e.g. Castillo and Hallinger, 2017; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013; Hallinger and Chen, 2015) as well as the Arab literature published internationally (Hammad and Hallinger, 2017). Specifically, consistent with Hammad and Hallinger's (2017) finding, the topical coverage was found to be diffuse, with only a few topics studied in a large number of articles. These included school management roles and practices, human resources, principal leadership and organisational behaviour. Although it is positive to see that certain principalship-related topics are being studied extensively by scholars in the region as it facilitates knowledge accumulation (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, 2005), the absence of other important topics is a negative sign as it hinders developing a fuller understanding of the principalship phenomenon and associated practices and challenges. More particularly, the study noted that topics such as cultural contexts, leadership for social justice and teaching and curriculum did not receive any attention from scholars in the region. Other topics such as school improvement,

teacher evaluation and supervision received only minimal attention. Not a single study investigated the relationship between principal leadership and students' learning. Moreover, although we identified some human resources studies, very few of these addressed principal preparation and professional development. This is despite the fact that these topics have attracted the attention of scholars in other contexts (see Kılınç and Gümüş, 2020; Walker and Hallinger, 2015). Specifically, the area of leadership development was the focus of a recent book chapter where Karami-Akkary and Hammad (2019) highlighted the challenges facing Arab EDLM scholars in building a culturally appropriate knowledge base and discussed the implications of this on leadership preparation in the Arab region. Therefore, they invited Arab researchers to conduct more empirical research to examine how Arab school principals acquire school leadership skills.

It was also noted that studies of novice principals were absent from the corpus reviewed. This observation aligns with Kılınç and Gümüş' (2020) finding that research on novice principals is dominated by Western researchers. This needs to be rectified because it hampers current efforts aimed at building a global knowledge base in the field (Walker and Hallinger, 2015). Moreover, novice school principals in developing societies are expected to face more complex challenges due to contextual and structural factors affecting their schools (Oplatka, 2004). This includes principals in the Gulf societies where educational systems are introducing significant changes that are expected to further complicate their work (Alsaleh, 2019; Alsharija and Watters, 2020; Stringer and Hourani, 2016). Most notable of these changes are more decentralised modes of educational leadership (Alsaleh, 2019) as well as changes in curriculum and teaching methodologies (Stringer and Hourani, 2016). More research is needed in order to determine how best these principals can be supported during change implementation.

Consistent with the features observed in EDLM research in developing societies, our analysis of the conceptual models employed in the database revealed that scholars in the region rely heavily on univariate and bivariate studies (e.g. Bellibaş and Gümüş, 2019; Hallinger and Chen, 2015; Hammad and Hallinger, 2017). Specifically, this finding is consistent with Hammad and Hallinger's (2017) observation that the Arab-related EDLM literature published internationally suffers from conceptual weaknesses, especially the lack of multivariate designs. Again, this presents a significant limitation because the lack of multivariate models may not enable researchers to address important issues relevant to the practice of principalship in the region (Hammad and Hallinger, 2017). Conceptually sophisticated designs are needed in order to unravel the complexities related to principals' work (Hallinger and Heck, 1996). It was particularly noted that the conceptual models employed in this body of literature have largely ignored school outcomes and the influence of management/leadership and organisational factors on student learning. This signals

that Arab scholars are more interested in exploring how school principals operate their schools than understanding the outcomes that these operations produce (Bellibaş and Gümüş, 2019).

It is important to indicate that the weaknesses identified in this study are not surprising as they align with the general features of the Arab-related EDLM literature documented in previous reviews. For example, in their review of the EDLM literature from Arab societies published in international journals, Hammad and Hallinger described this literature as an 'emerging literature' which is still in its early stages of academic development, thus suffering from methodological and conceptual limitations. Atari and Outum's (2019) review of Arabic EDLM literature raised similar concerns, claiming that the Arab scholarship in the field still lacks the conditions necessary for 'maturity'.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude this article with some recommendations to improve the quality of studies addressing school principalship in the Gulf region. Our first recommendation relates to the topical coverage found in the reviewed literature. We would advise scholars studying school principals in the Gulf states to address the gaps found in the principalship literature. One notable gap relates to the impact of culture on principals' leadership and management practices across GCC societies. There is emerging evidence suggesting that culture shapes how school principals conceptualise effective leadership (see Alqahtani et al., 2020) and that specific cultural contexts create specific challenges for school leaders in the region (see Alsaleh, 2019; Hammad and Shah, 2018). Other important gaps include the impact of principal leadership on school operations and outcomes, especially student learning and achievement, as well as the impact of principal leadership on teachers' professional learning and development. There is also a need for research that maps out principal leadership preparation and explores how school principals are selected, prepared and developed across GCC states. It is also recommended that Gulf EDLM scholars pay more attention to research that investigates novice principals' experiences and challenges (see Kılınç and Gümüş, 2020) as well as research that examines principal succession in GCC schools. According to a recent review, this latter area of research has been exclusively dominated by researchers from English-speaking countries (see Aravena, 2020).

In terms of conceptual models, we recommend that scholars in the region employ more complex multivariate designs in their studies instead of their heavy reliance on univariate and bivariate designs. This is highly needed if scholars studying EDLM in the region are to unravel the complexities associated with the demanding work of school principals in their respective contexts. It is especially recommended that Arab scholars choose conceptual designs that enable them to examine the effects of principal

leadership and organisational structures on school outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 1996). This is crucial if EDLM scholars in GCC societies want to produce contextually relevant knowledge that can transform education and make a significant contribution to current nation-building endeavours in the region.

Finally, it is important to note that the results of this review study should be understood and interpreted with its limitations in mind. The review only considered Arabic-language literature documented in a specific set of Arabic databases. The literature reviewed was limited to research papers published in refereed journals, thus ignoring other potential sources such as dissertations, books and conference proceedings. Another limitation is that the current review only considered research topics and conceptual models and did not analyse findings from the reviewed sources. We invite other Arabic-speaking scholars to take this further step and share their findings with the international community of EDLM scholars.



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