

Roles & Responsibilities of the Women Leading American Islamic Schools

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Literature of educational leadership often fails to represent the experiences of faith-based school leaders, particularly women. This study seeks to position the experiences of American Islamic school leaders in a larger context of educational leadership roles, responsibilities, and practices. This national, qualitative study utilized an Islamic and feminist methodology, prioritizing the constructed lived experiences and narratives of 13 women leading American Islamic schools. Through semi-structured interviews the participants described their leadership experiences and priorities, drawn from their daily tasks, professional expectations, and community relationships that impact the nature of their leadership. The findings indicate unique routes to school leadership, a multiplicity of assumed and assigned school roles, and overbearing relationships with their independent school boards. The participants described leadership practices consistent with the principles of collaborative leadership styles as seen in their interactions with other school administrators, staff and faculty, and community members. The results of this study contribute to a comprehensive description of faith-based school leadership which incorporates the lived realities of American Islamic school leaders.

Introduction

Educational leadership research is often conducted in the sphere of public education (Oplatka, 2014), and white men are often the primary subjects of leadership studies (Blackmore, 2010). This leaves female, faith-based school leaders with leadership definitions rooted in an alternate school context with diverging experiences and priorities. Attempts to produce faith-based educational research is often limited to small studies in Christian or Catholic school settings. Grace (2003) reviewed previous studies conducted in faith-based schools and found that there is a “general absence of large-scale and sophisticated investigation of faith-based schooling” (p. 150).

American Islamic schools are theologically unique (al Zeera, 2001), they operate in a landscape of Islamophobia (Esposito, 2011), and they are young, decentralized organizations with organizational policies modeled after public school contexts (Rashid & Muhammad, 1992; Merry, 2005). Across faith-based institutions, women don't often assume positions of leadership possibly due to religious traditions or gender bias. This researcher suggests that women who lead American Islamic schools possess unique educational leadership experiences, due to the contexts and priorities of faith-based schools. In the absence of any defining research on American Islamic school leadership, the single question directing this study is: *How do women leading American Islamic schools describe their roles and responsibilities?*

Background

Islamic schools are located across the nation in both large and small Islamic communities, for the purposes of providing a religious educational experience grounded in the understanding of Islamic principles. Islamic schools began in the late 1970s as a movement to offer a curricula and pedagogy based upon the teachings within the Nation of Islam. Years later, in the mid-1980s, immigrant Muslim communities began to build Islamic schools to teach Islam as they practiced it in their home countries. Some schools were founded in areas by families who opposed public education, and others were formed by those who wanted to promote an Islamic worldview within the education context. To date, Islamic schools are located across the nation in urban, suburban, and rural Muslim communities to provide a religiously grounded education experience.

Literature Review

Faith-Based School Leadership

The roles and responsibilities of school leadership have been well-documented in studies centered in public school contexts. Camburn *et al* (2010) identified nine domains of responsibility from their mixed methods study of educational leaders in urban schools. But research demonstrates that private school leaders differ in their roles and responsibilities compared to public school leaders (Jorgensen, 2006). Faith-based principals need to achieve their schools' primary mission of maintaining and elevating their schools' spiritual nature. Boerema (2006) described such mission statements as individualized and focused upon character excellence, beyond academic achievement. Sullivan (2006) documented the need for community service, interfaith relations, community building, and the role of prayer and worship. Sayani

(2005) published an essay to expand the role of a school leader as one who “creates dialogical spaces in schools for students to explore their spiritualities”. Those who are leading American Islamic schools must build their leadership practices on models that emphasize character development and spiritual obligations, more so than increasing academic achievement.

Faith-based school leaders often live, work, and worship with the members of their school community. These school leaders “have the additional challenge of leading a faith-based school community in which their personal lives, faith commitment, and religious practices are placed under scrutiny by [Church] authorities” (Dorman & D’Arbon, [eds.], 2003). School leaders must be leaders of their faith community and practice the faith in a “traditional, overt fashion”, often establishing high behavioral expectations beyond what a typical public school leader would bear (Dorman and D’Arbon [eds.], 2003). Faith-based school leaders are charged with the responsibility of creating a sense of community within their schools (Houston, 2008). These additional responsibilities impact faith-based school leadership. Capper *et al* (2002) explored how the “intertwining of spirituality and community support can constrain leadership for equity and justice” (p. 77) in the context of a faith-based school.

Studies conducted to describe the impact of social culture on school leadership, suggest that today’s school leaders incorporate the forms and shapes of local cultural contexts (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Shah, 2005; and Hofstede, 2005). Eagly and Chin (2010) wrote “the growing diversity of [*sic*] among followers challenges all leaders to take into account the perspectives of people representing backgrounds, beliefs, and mores different from their own” (p. 216). Leithwood *et al* (2004) identified elements of successful school leadership associated with the school’s context. Their study articulated the ways in which leadership practices influence student achievement, often underestimated in research literature. Leithwood *et al* (2004) wrote “research about the forms and effects of leadership is becoming increasingly sensitive to the contexts in which leaders work and how, in order to be successful, leaders need to respond flexibly to their contexts” (p. 22).

Researchers have conducted studies of a variety of leadership styles as they are practiced in faith-based schools (Williams, 2006). Spiritual expertise, often housed in faith-based schools, may be manifest through a leadership style known as servant leadership, coined by Robert Greenleaf (1991) as those who are “servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (p. 7). Because these principals are charged with the responsibility of promoting the school’s vision, Greenleaf (1991) wrote “a mark of a leader, an attribute that puts him in a position to show the way for others, is that he is better than most at pointing the direction” (p. 9). Sergiovanni (2005) extended this concept of leadership as one “in which leaders strengthen the heartbeat of their schools when they have faith in their cause, change hopefulness into reality, are trustworthy, and show love through servant leadership”.

Women in educational leadership

Ahmed’s (2011) innovative study of Muslim American women’s leadership furthered our understanding of a different leadership style, that of a scholar-activist. By centering a study on women who are in positions of community-based leadership, Ahmed (2011) was able to identify key processes for forming leadership decisions rooted in their female, Muslim American identity. This extended our knowledge that the practice of school leadership is influenced by the leaders’ gender (Eagly and Chin, 2010). To date, educational leadership remains a male dominated profession (Litmanovitz, 2011), with a weak pipeline (Lemasters and Roach, 2012), and few

administrative role models (Sperandio and Kagoda, 2010) contributing to the low number of women in positions of school leadership.

The literature points to the conclusion that those responsible for leading America's faith-based schools have a unique set of roles and responsibilities, attributed to their school culture and spiritual obligations. These obligations impact the manner by which they make their leadership decisions, as such influencing their leadership styles.

Methodology

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) wrote that educational leadership can only be strengthened through academic research studies when culture is incorporated within the research design. Al Zeera (2001) detailed an Islamic methodology that will be incorporated into this study design, essentially stating that research, conducted from an Islamic perspective, is an act of worship when its purpose is to gather knowledge to serve humanity. This study places an Islamic research design as the central component of its methodology.

A basic qualitative design organized the research using semi-structured conversations with a national set of 13 participants. Each participant reflected upon their leadership experiences in an American Islamic school. The process of reflection can assist a research participant in their ability to understand their past, simply by retelling the experiences to another listener. The Islamic research design includes "reflection on personal experiences..., as learners, to understand past experiences and reconstruct them in the light of new knowledge or experiences" (Al Zeera, 2001, p. 85).

This study incorporates a feminist theoretical and methodological design that is centered in women's experiences of their socially constructed realities. Blackmore (2010) described the key function of feminist research as one to capture women's individual experiences. "While studying women is not new, studying them from the perspective of their own experiences so that women can understand themselves and the world can claim virtually no history at all" (Harding, 1987, p. 8). The research question that shapes this project is neither seeking to add women to an existing framework, nor is it taking an oppositional look at a previous study focused on male Islamic school leadership. Instead, in keeping with feminist research studies, this research seeks to be grounded in a feminist epistemology, studying the ways in which the female participants raise issues and gain insights from their socially constructed reality (Crotty, 1998).

Conceptual Framework

Three distinct concepts are represented in this study: faith-based school leadership, Islamic leadership, and Islamic education. The first component is defined as faith-based school leadership, those charged with the authority to lead religious schools. The second one is termed Islamic leadership. It is rooted in the principles of the Quran and modeled by the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. There is a traditional view of Islamic leadership which is recognized as a "shared influence process," highlighting the importance of shared decision making, consultation, and collaboration as required acts of worship for leaders (Ali, 2009). The third conceptual area to be connected is termed Islamic education. This is a philosophy of education in which the pursuit of knowledge is a divine process, in both secular and religious studies. Islamic education is centered in using knowledge gained from the world to better understand mankind's relationship to The Divine.

Epistemology

The foundation of this study is based on a perspective that knowledge will be constructed from the experiences of the participants. The research design is informed from a social constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998). Qualitative inquiry can be a tool to collect and represent data in a manner that is consistent with social constructionism, because it is a design that is rooted in individual's connections to their own experiences. The data that is produced through this design represents knowledge that is formed from the participant's interactions with the world around themselves through social constructionism.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study will confine itself to interviewing a small number of women currently leading American Islamic schools. Some feminist methodologies support this type of delimitation in social science research to help highlight the roles and responsibilities of female leaders. The goal is to create a clear opportunity to bring forth the voices of women in positions of power and influence. This purposeful sample procedure decreases the generalizability of this study to other faith-based school leadership populations, or other female school leadership populations. Limiting this study to the perspectives of female school leaders also reduces the likelihood that this study can result in a full description of American Islamic school leadership. This study will be limited to an American perspective with the results incorporated into a larger body of European, Asian, and Middle Eastern research findings of Islamic school leaders.

Results

The participants contributed to a full and complete description of leadership in the context of an American Islamic school. Some of the roles and responsibilities they represented are consistent with a public school context: facility management, student supervision, academic achievement, curriculum and instruction, and staff support. But there were four key results that diverged from the experiences of public school leaders, these are their routes to school leadership, professional expectations, multiplicity of roles, and their relationships with their school boards. What follows is a presentation of the data that supports these findings.

Thirteen women contributed their time, energy, reflections, and sentiments to document their experiences as American Islamic school leaders. Together, these women reflect the geographic, racial/ethnic, age, and professional diversity of the Muslim community. To mask the personal identifiers of the participants, I reference them using self-selected pseudonyms and summarized their demographics in the following table.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Category	Results (Total 13 participants)
Geographic	North (1) Mid-Atlantic (3) Southeast (1) Midwest (7) Not identified (1)
Racial / Ethnic	White (6) Asian (5) Other (1) Not identified (1)
Country of Origin	USA (3) Pakistan (3) Afghanistan (3) Egypt (1) Hyderabad (1) India (1) Not identified (3)
Age	60-69 years (2) 50-59 years (3) 40-49 years (6) 30-39 years (1) Not identified (1)
Educational Background (highest earned degree)	Doctorate (1) Masters of Education (5) Masters (2) BA / BS degree (2) High school / college credits (1) Not identified (1) * Masters of Education in progress (1)
Years in current position	11-15 years (2) 6 - 10 years (4) 0 - 5 years (7)
Participant Job Title	Director / Headmaster (1) Principal (6) Assistant Principal / Vice Principal (3) Division Head (1) Administrator (1) School Board member (1)

Routes to Leadership

American Islamic school leaders rose to their positions through either promotions or professional appointments. Some ascended from the teaching staff through a promotion as an effective

instructor. The transition to the administrative team was a bit challenging for Aim since she was previously a teacher at the same school. She said,

It was more difficult for me in the sense, that people who were my colleagues first, now I'm supervising them. Now I'm evaluating them, now I'm advising them. So that took some time, and I gave it some time, I did, this is what I read, and this is what I found out, I was trained, through my academics that, you're not supposed to make any changes all of a sudden if you are in a certain position.

Another study participant stated that she joined her school as "just a parent." She narrated, "So I guess I got there because I went from being the lunch lady, to being a substitute, and then I was also teaching classes here, and I was on the school board, and then an administrator." One of the participants was among the few school leaders that planned to enter school administration as a leader. She wanted to move out of the classroom so that she could have a greater impact, and more power to change her school. She theorized,

Because I worked in an Islamic school as a teacher, and I knew that the power of changing an Islamic school, or an Islamic environment in the school, or making it a better school, really was in the hands of the administration. A teacher can only influence what's in their circle. An administrator has more power behind them to influence a larger circle, which would be a total school.

Several schools recruited these women to join the school administration out of sheer necessity, borne out of a school-related crisis. One leader was at a professional teachers' conference and she told how the school board chair recruited her directly over the phone.

The way I was selected to be the principal of the school, it was very unexpected because I was a teacher and I was the team leader at that time, and actually I was on vacation and the Board Chair calls me and said, 'Sister, you need to help us out cause our principal has resigned.' And I think that there was something political going on which I was not aware of because my job was just to teach and lead my team.

Without any administrative preparation, or time built in for a transition period, she recalled, "So that was extremely challenging for me to switch roles from a teacher to administrative role."

Professional Expectations

Typical school leaders enter a position with a clearly defined job description, outlining the professional expectations they are required to assume. Not all of the women in this study referenced a formal job description that defined their position at their specific school, many of the study participants described an unstated expectation that they were responsible for doing whatever was necessary to successfully run the school. Sumayyah attempted to summarize this expectation, "And so, really more so than ever, everything seems to fall on the principal."

The women who are leading American Islamic schools epitomize the idiom "the early bird catches the worm." Each one starts her school day with an early and immediate start to her administrative responsibilities. Aim said, "A typical day starts around, I'm usually here around 7, 7:30. And the work starts right there, you know." Sakina summarized this when she said, "I'm the last one to leave and I'm the first one to come."

Many of the participants described their personal pursuits of higher education as a form of fulfilling professional expectations. Six participants earned a Masters of Education degree during their tenure as a school leader, to solidify their leadership skills and increase their

capacity as a school principal or assistant principal. Khadijah A. joked that she was earning the degree after gaining the job, and that this was not the standard order of actions. Asfar said, I decided to go back to school. So while I'm being a principal, I'm going back to school to get my Masters in Educational Leadership. So I have grown to be in a position that I would like somebody to be in. And, *alhumdulilah* [all praise to God], I feel that right now I'm much more confident and I am where I want a school to have that kind of a leadership.

Multiplicity of Roles

American Islamic school leaders often function with a slim administrative staff and few support staff members. The absence of support personnel doesn't eliminate the additional responsibilities that need to be filled in their schools, it simply means that these women assume these responsibilities in addition to their role as a school leader. Sumayyah described the school as "short-handed."

You know, but not so in here [Islamic schools]. It becomes your responsibility in the sense that there's multiple roles that we have to play, cause [*sic*] we don't have designated people for all those different roles to play with. (Aim)

Female Islamic school leaders often assume reception tasks. Aim described, "I'm in the front office, working as, working on the phones if a secretary or somebody is busy or not there." She also described times when she has to print or photocopy for the male school principal because the secretary is busy with another task. The participants said that they often substitute for staff and faculty positions during unexpected absences. Hafsa said,

There are times when the cook calls and says, 'I can't come today' or 'I don't have a car' or something. And I'm thinking, okay, let's cook. And then there was a while, what happened? The cook gave us a short notice, 'I found another job, I'm not coming'. I'm like 'oooh!', so I covered until we found someone else.

Khadijah A. said, "So I couldn't get a sub for the whole day, so I could only get a sub for like three periods. So then I had to go in for silent reading at the end, I had to go in for lunch and recess duty that day." Although some perceive this as a burden, Hafsa enjoys this opportunity of temporarily returning to the classroom. She stated,

This past year I really have not done a lot, myself, have not done a lot of substituting but I love that, I enjoy going to the classes and subbing for teachers once in a while. It really gives us a different perspective and it tells a lot. How a teacher is teaching and where they are, and how far they are, and are they covering everything and making sure that they are, with their line of the curriculum and all that. And only get that when you're in the classroom, when you see what the students tell you, I really enjoy that.

In the absence of a school counselor, the school leader often steps in to support parents, families, and students that require additional resources. Two of the participants were trained as counselors. Mariam said,

Because of my counseling background. . . I will help in that role. To guide the parent in obtaining other, what do you call it? Services to help their child, be a... school psychologist, or independent psychologist in the community.

Sweet Pea said, "Counselor. But that's a second passion, I have a minor in counseling. It's a, I can talk to people and, you know, just, I'm a very good listener."

There are some leaders that assumed financial responsibilities beyond budget oversight. Sumayyah stated the impact that this role has on her position as a school principal,

I wasn't asked to collect the money, but overseeing those who were collecting it, yeah. And it's a big distraction from the instructional leadership, all the way around, I think.

One of the study participants held a degree in accounting, she was one of the leaders who described the most extensive business management responsibilities, embedded within her principal role. She described her fiscal roles at her school,

I am also responsible for paying all the bills. I mean, this is a small school, I am responsible for collecting all the bills, I mean, literally, everything. The whole bill stack. Every month I take it, you know, basically, pay the bills online. And I'm also responsible for payables, for the teachers. . . All the accounting was done by me, even paying taxes, everything.

Hafsa solicited funds for struggling families by directly approaching members of the school community.

Then we went and asked around, I, myself, and a couple of other people in our school, asked around community members and see if they can afford just a few dollars here and there. So we talked to several people privately, not mentioning their names, there is a family who is, a community member, they are going through hardship, and would you like to pitch in? They said, yes, actually a couple of people said 'we will cover the whole fees all the way to the end of the year.' So, *Al humdulillah* [praise God], I try to find a sponsor for situations like this.

School Board

Each of the school leaders in the study described overbearing responsibilities they have in association with their school board. Many of the school principals are required to attend all board meetings to provide feedback about conditions at the school. Khadijah A., a former board member for 3 years, realized that she has "insight on the board. . . of the 9 elected, there's no education members on the board." Because of the composition of the school board, Khadijah A. finds herself explaining educational issues or school concerns to the board members when they don't have their own first-hand knowledge of the particular situation. Sumayyah functioned in schools that have a more challenging board-administration relationship. She recalled that communication is not a simple process when directed to the school board, she finds that she must justify and defend her decisions before they are accepted by the members of the board.

Having to check all of the time and get permission for things is the thing that a lot of the principals have to deal with an issue four or five times because they deal with it when they, themselves are making a decision and then they have to explain their decision to a board member and another one, and another one. And they can't just take the decision and be done with it, and after everybody talks about it and mulls it over and maybe even argues about it and disagrees with the principal, why is it back in the principal's lap to do something about? And it should have just been there in the first place to be taken care of by the person in the role in the first place.

Sumayyah theorized that this type of miscommunication is rooted in the board members' misunderstanding of their role within the school organization, "Because boards don't understand their role so they confound and confuse the principal role." But, she also acknowledged that some of the miscommunication is rooted in resistance from board members, "You have a lot of resistance from the board, in some cases, to buy what is needed or do what is necessary, or hire the right person, because of control that was taken by the governing body." No matter what is causing the communication damages, Sumayyah recognized that she doesn't have control over situations with the board and she reflected, "It's just an example of a decision you have to live with, you can fight it and fight it and fight it, but you have to live with it." When commenting on her school board, Shanti said, "This is one of the biggest challenges that I've been facing for quite a few years now." Hawa, the only board member in the study, acknowledged that her school, like others across the nation, has a damaged board-administration relationship. She considered that this is rooted in the lack of trust between the school leaders, "So if there is no trust, so that's where we lack, there is no trust between board and the principal's office." She added that poor communication is also an internal conflict between board members.

I think it's just the personal relationships that is, that is more, the unprofessional behavior at every level. That kind of ticks me off a lot, because you're in a professional environment and you are expected to act professionally. That's the biggest, you know, you see the emails, you see the announcements, you see people behaving so unprofessionally, that's just is the most hardest [*sic*] thing for me. It affects, how do I teach them to be professional?

Most commonly, the women leading American Islamic schools considered an early resignation as a response to a poor working relationship with members of the school board. Sweet Pea left one school because of the school board. She said, "I loved the school, just loved it. But, it's usually a board conflict, something in the board, and it's not usually the community, usually the board, there's a very strong presence that doesn't agree with your philosophy." Khadija B. began to search for a new position after a frustrating situation with her school board, but after some time she simply resolved to remain in her position and work through the difficulties. Asfar smirked, with a bit of a chuckle, when she was asked about her working relationship with her school board. She said, "The school board is very, well, I, what should I say? The school board is there. [chuckles] And it's a support for me. And that's about it."

Summary of Leadership Roles

Aim stated that all recognized school leadership models are taken from a public school structure, but that structure does not apply to Islamic school leaders. The school leaders in this study reflected on their roles and responsibilities through narratives, job descriptions, community expectations, and personal goals that drive their leadership activities. Their leadership roles and responsibilities demonstrate the complexity of strength, determination, and motivation that capture the uniqueness of their leadership experiences. Most remarkably, it represents the view that these women are responsible for *everything*, even if their schools struggle to obtain the resources to make *everything* happen.

Leadership Styles

In addition to defining the details of the roles and responsibilities, it was important to explore how these women carried out their leadership activities as leaders of American Islamic schools. The participants were asked to give extended reflections on their leadership experiences, their most celebrated moments as a leader, and the times they felt their decisions were not successful. They discussed ways in which the community perceived their leadership roles as well as their own self-reflections. The leaders described examples associated with visionary, research-based, assertive, and authoritative leadership in varying contexts. But, the prominent style of leadership represented across each of the participants was collaborative leadership which they claim has its roots in their Islamic faith.

Collaboration with other School Administrators

Several of the study participants shared leadership responsibilities with another school administrator. For those leaders, they provided examples of collaborative leadership practices across administrative roles. Aim, as an assistant principal, articulated numerous ways in which she collaborated with the school principal on leadership decisions. They meet together daily to discuss situations or upcoming parent meetings “to determine what we are going to do about it, about that certain situation.” When Aim is working on a situation independently, she says,

I brief him so that we’re both, know whatever is going on within the thing. If I need advice on something, oh, this is the situation, what do you think I should do?

Then we discuss some of those situations going on.

This enabled Aim and the school principal to implement collaborative leadership practices when resolving difficult situations. When Aim finds herself in a conflict between her and the school principal, she is comfortable stating her opinion and then allowing the decision making process to move forward. Aim described her typical response when collaborative leadership did not yield shared results with the school principal,

So there are those situations where that conflict has happened, rather difference of opinion has happened. I wanted to do in a different way, but he wanted to say, you know, I want to deal in a different way. And that’s what I said, I said, fine. You know, I just wanted you to know that this is what I wanted you to do with this situation.

Aim felt that her school has a strong system of teamwork that is shared by both her collaborative leadership practices with the school principal and their efforts to collaborate with other members of the school community.

Jamilah, as the leader in her school community, also described collaboration among the school administrative team. She stated that she deliberately established protocols for collaboration so that her administration would be recognized as transparent and fair by all members of the school community. Together, when emailing parents, all administrators carbon copy one another so that they give a clear community statement that the email message conveys a shared, collaborative decision. Jamilah described why collaborative leadership is so important to her,

The rule by one, I didn’t really like because nobody knew what was going on and I worked for two principals who never gave you all the information. And you were always kind of in the dark, but they expected you’d know what to do. . . But it’s

usually collaborative. I very rarely pull rank, and say, you know what, I'm the head of school and it's going to be this way. [I] very rarely have to go to this point. Jamilah proactively planned her leadership style in response to negative practices of leadership that she had previously experienced. She also felt strongly that a collaborative system of leadership benefits the school teachers who are empowered to make shared decisions with the school administration. She noted,

So it makes very strong teachers, so if anything happens with administration, I would be very comfortable with having the teachers run the school, for a short term. It's not something you would use in the school forever, but it gives them that strength. Some administrators are intimidated by strong teachers and staff. But, for me, it makes my life easier if they know their job and they are taking care of business.

Both Aim and Jamilah offered descriptions of ways in which collaborative leadership shares authority among school leaders.

Collaboration with Teachers and Staff

Other school leaders described collaboration with teachers and staff as a regular leadership practice within their schools. In fulfillment of school policy, Samantha leads her school in a collaborative style. She works with the teachers at her school to resolve problems and initiate policies. Samantha recognized that collaborative leadership extends beyond consulting staff members on specific situations, it involves a back and forth to agree upon a plan, sufficient time to implement the plan, and reflective time to evaluate the success of the plan. Samantha described the give and take of collaborative leadership,

And you can't make new decisions or new rules unless you've heard from all of them, it can't be top-down. So, one, yes, I take feedback from all my teachers, say, here's a problem, what do you think we should do? And they'll say something, and I'll say, well, we can't do that because this, this, and this, because I know this and you don't, and that's why we can't. Let's come up with something else. So, okay, this one, well, we'll try it. So we try it, we implement it, and I make sure to follow up to make sure that it's being implemented, we come back to a meeting and we discuss it. What went wrong, what didn't go wrong, should we give it more time, should we tweak it? Anyway, that's my philosophy on leadership.

When working with the other school administrators, Samantha recognized that collaboration may lead to negotiation and compromise when all participants do not readily agree. During these times, she does not abandon her focus on collaboration, instead, she applies the Islamic principles of shared decision making as follows,

We all, we all have our opinions, we discuss, we may have one person feel very strongly, we will listen, but the decision is made based on *shura'a* [mutual consultation]. So I have to say, okay, I really feel strongly about it, but this is what all of you think, we're going to do it that way.

When she reflected on her leadership practices, Samantha asserted, "it's very rewarding to work with a team."

Collaboration with community members

Some of the study participants mentioned that they use collaborative leadership when working with the various stakeholders within their school community. Shanti recognized that each group of stakeholders wanted to be included in the decision making process at a school, and the process of inclusion is essential to the greater success of the plan. She used this stakeholder interest to structure her own collaborative leadership practices.

Each group of stakeholders, they know that they will be heard and they know that their feedback is very important. So, that's why I have this approach that I want to make sure that, yes, I want to have the idea that I have in mind. But I want them to be part of the idea, too. It's not that I said it and everybody do it. No. That's not who I am. I want it to come from everybody and then you're more successful when it's the feeling of ownership, you know, you give that feeling of ownership to everyone. . . . And the stakeholders don't take ownership, most likely you are going to fail. But when people have the sense of ownership that we all do it together, even if we fail together. Or we are successful together. So that is my personal opinion and *al humdulilah* [praise God], I have tried it and it has worked.

Khadija B. initiated a committee with school parents to address issues of curriculum and school culture collaboratively. Like Shanti, she felt that parent involvement in the decision making process would yield greater program results in the end. Khadija B. said,

So I lead that committee, and it's an entirely parent committee, made up of parents who really focus on school culture and curriculum development. So they help us do that, we basically meet once a month and we work on initiatives to help improve the school's culture and curriculum. Parents always want to be involved with the curriculum to some extent. And so this is a way that it would bring in all types of diverse parents, as opposed to that one or two parent that wants to know how to this, and why don't you do it this way? So we invite them and say, well, why don't you join the committee? And see how serious are they in regards to this. And then help them see more of a global view that it's not about just their child.

Both Shanti and Khadija B. embed their schools with collaborative leadership practices that involve members of stakeholder groups in the decision making processes at their schools.

There are times in which difficult situations present themselves and some leaders may be reluctant to lead collaboratively. Sweet Pea is one who embraced collaboration, even in difficult times within the school community. She described herself this way,

I do like to listen to all sides. I'm a negotiator. I like to, or compromise, or I like to have win-win situations, not win-lose or lose-lose. And, I think being a mom and having to navigate kids' arguing about things, I've been pretty good about how to solve the little issues. With respect for everybody, and that's a big thing with me, everybody is respected.

Sweet Pea said when a difficult situation arises, an effective leader is one who moves towards the challenge with the intention to resolve it by bringing together all involved parties. She provided an example when she described a school crisis with several students violating school rules and local laws. In this situation, she made an assertive decision in a timely manner to restore order and safety to her school setting.

Challenges to collaboration

As some of the study participants placed a priority on collaborative leadership, they faced difficulties building relationships with different stakeholder groups. Hawa remained frustrated by the unprofessional behavior through the school organization. She complained,

I think it's just the personal relationships that is, that is more, the unprofessional behavior at every level. That kind of ticks me off a lot, because you're in a professional environment and you are expected to act professionally. That's the biggest, you know, you see the emails, you see the announcements, you see people behaving so unprofessionally, that's just is the most hardest thing for me. It effects, how do I teach them to be professional?

At the end of her complaint, Hawa questioned how she can lead her school organization to collaborate effectively. She stated this as her primary challenge to her school leadership effectiveness because it is a communication practice that is very important to her.

Shanti's biggest challenge is connected to her relationships with parents and board members. She finds that she has to convince others when she wants to initiate new ideas for the school organization. This causes her to struggle as a leader who seeks to lead collaboratively, wanting constructive feedback throughout the decision making process.

The biggest challenge that I had that I mentioned earlier was to educate the parents and the board. That anytime you want to implement a new idea or a new philosophy that is the most important part. That you have to educate yourself first, then your team, your, because we are stakeholders when it comes to parents, students, teachers, the community. That has been my biggest challenge. To sell any idea. . . . I think trust is the most important thing when it comes to any institution. It has to be there. You have to gain the trust of your stakeholders if you want to be successful as a leader of the school.

These are the challenges that weigh heavily on both Hawa and Shanti, and they consider themselves still in the process of resolving these difficulties as they persist in their efforts to lead their schools collaboratively.

Leadership Style Conclusion

The participants described their leadership practices as successful because of their ability to build effective relationships with the teachers, board members, staff, and parents at their schools. Mariam illustrated the ways in which the people in her school work together in one direction, "The circle is complete when the teachers, students, the parents are all in sync and the children are learning and moving forward, and everyone's moving forward together." Samantha noted the positive relations with her staff that have developed under her leadership at the school. She said, "I think the most rewarding thing would be my relationship with my staff. I think I have a really good relationship with my staff. . . . I consult them. It's not a top-down kind of way of doing things." The practice of collaborative leadership was strongly regarded as a contributor of leadership success within their American Islamic schools.

Findings

Faith-Based School Leadership

Returning to the urban-centered findings of Camburn *et al* (2010), the data confirms that women leading American Islamic schools do share responsibilities of academic achievement, operational supervision, and instructional leadership with leaders in public school settings. But, the strongest findings of this study bring to light unique responsibilities that are not common in public school models of educational leadership. These leaders had circuitous routes to their leadership positions, rarely seeking employment and more often solicited by board members who needed an immediate solution to a leadership void. These participants described professional expectations beyond supervision and administration, more similar to the responsibility of sustaining the entire institution. And, once many of them entered graduate schools of education, they came to realize that they bore the responsibility of carrying multiple roles at the school, beyond which a public school leader is typically assigned. Finally, the participants described deteriorating conditions between themselves and their school boards. As school leaders, they each exerted efforts to improve the situations, but the mistrust, miscommunication, and misunderstandings that contaminated their working relationships impacted their leadership effectiveness.

Collaborative leadership style

The women in this study conveyed professional preferences for leadership styles through their individual narrations of their leadership activities and decisions. Many of the women within this study described their leadership practices as collaborative. When describing her leadership style, Jamilah said, "It's usually collaborative. I very rarely pull rank." Eagly and Chin (2010) found that women prefer collaborative leadership styles because assertive and authoritative practices are perceived as too masculine. Sumayyah alluded to this reality when she described the community's negative response to her assertiveness, "Oh, you're so aggressive!" Eagly and Chin (2010) also found that women prefer developing work relationships which is consistent with the way the study participants described their collaborative style.

Discussion

Academia

Current scholarly literature does not incorporate the experiences of women leading American Islamic schools in the development of educational leadership descriptions. Existing findings should be revisited to confirm that they include the unique perspective of this leadership population, housed in a faith-based school context. Although the experiences of American Islamic school leaders differ from the experiences of other faith-based school leaders, their roles and responsibilities should be incorporated into a complex description of faith-based school leadership as practiced in America.

Practitioners

It is recommended that the findings within this study shape the practice of American Islamic school leadership. The women in the study stated that they attend graduate schools of education to seek training in educational leadership practices, but the models presented in their coursework is not consistent with their realities in an American Islamic school.

Policy

The results of this study should help inform the policy development agendas of American Islamic school boards. The descriptions of school leadership in this study should contribute to an accurate evaluation tool to measure the effectiveness of their leadership staff, provide resources necessary for school operations, and help produce comprehensive job descriptions for today's American Islamic school leaders.

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