

**Unseen Forces or Ignoring Facts?**

**Leadership Challenges in an International Baccalaureate School in Saudi Arabia**

Maysam Al Msharrafieh

Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta

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Dr. Jonathan Anuik

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### **Abstract**

Leadership in an International Baccalaureate (IB) school in Saudi Arabia faces plenty of challenges that prevent student learning, especially in the Diploma Program (DP).

Recognizing the effects of culture on school leadership practices in this context, this capping paper identifies leadership aspects that can support better student learning and achievement.

The paper focuses on the importance of cultural awareness, distributed leadership, and leaders' ability to navigate the complexities of the Saudi Arabian culture while balancing the expectations of the international and national community. The challenges leaders face in this context include the need for sex segregation, managing parents' expectations, and market-driven goals. The paper brings to the forefront the leadership development program offered by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) to support leaders in multicultural school contexts. Leaders' contextual literacy and the distributed leadership approach are characteristics that foster overall school success. The paper concludes that leaders' flexibility, adaptability, and cultural awareness are perspectives that enhance student learning in IB schools.

*Keywords:* Leadership, International Baccalaureate school, Saudi Arabian culture, contextual literacy, cultural awareness, distributed leadership, adaptability.

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### **Leadership Challenges in an International Baccalaureate School in Saudi Arabia**

Second to teachers' direct instruction is school leadership in affecting student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008). School leaders have the responsibility to improve learning in schools. This includes supporting positive relationships to foster a culture of learning through teachers' agency, as highlighted by Marsh et al. (2014). The impact of school leaders on students' achievement and how leaders can make a difference have to do with factors such as school organization, school culture, teachers' work, and student engagement (Bruggencate et al., 2012).

As an International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) science teacher, I encountered over a period of five years of teaching several issues related to student-learning outcomes. The purpose of this scholarly review is to discuss and analyze the issues of school leadership in an international school that follows the rigorous International Baccalaureate (IB) programs: Primary Years Program (PYP), Middle Years Program (MYP), and the Diploma Program (DP). The DP is a curriculum framework designed by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)<sup>i</sup> for students in the last two years of high school. What is distinct as an international school is that school leaders and teachers are of different nationalities, and the students of this school are from Saudi Arabia. One of the key characteristics in international schools is the mix of cultures represented among the staff. Creating culturally responsive leadership (Brown et al., 2021) and awareness of the complexities of cultural issues and perspectives remain a leadership challenge in private international schools.

This paper focuses on the cultural aspects that affect leadership practices in an IB school in the context of Saudi Arabia but generally extends to the IB schools in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries<sup>ii</sup>. The expansion of IB schools in the GCC countries in

general, and Saudi Arabia in particular is due to the effective strategic and marketing plans of the IBO for the schools' potential growth in this region (International Education, 2024). In addition, the undergraduate recruitment of students at well-known universities worldwide represents a regional insight into the continued spread of IB schools in Saudi Arabia. Apart from the benefits of this curriculum in enhancing the learning, skills, and confidence of students in an ever-changing world, the program also fosters a global community of teachers and learners (Saxton & Hill, 2014). However, there has been minimal research to provide feedback about the issues related to culturally responsive IB school leadership practices in this context (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and International Mindedness (IM) are important aspects of the IB programs (Ferguson & Brett, 2023) especially the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP), the two-year pre-university secondary program. The GCED and IM emphasize the interconnectedness of the global community and the awareness of global issues, including cultural diversity, human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability (Chernoff, 2023). The concept of international mindedness enhances international awareness and cooperation of an explicitly international aspect and is an established aim for the IB program. The IBO offers high quality and challenging educational programs for a worldwide community of schools. Therefore, the IB educational programs has gained prominence in international and national schools (Chernoff, 2023). Bringing an international perspective and global awareness to education systems is therefore essential in the IBDP. Leaders, therefore, must develop attributes of cultural awareness perspectives as well as insightful leadership practices within the complexity of this context. However, as observed through personal experience, not all students who choose the IBDP pathway adopt a genuine attitude to such aspects of learning and therefore cease to fulfill the completion requirements of the IBDP through refraining from the external IB examinations, although the school is an accredited IB school.

## **Rationale and Importance**

This scholarly literature review is beneficial to the knowledge and practices in IB school settings and informs policy decisions in the context of Saudi Arabia's international schools. Rigorous studies that examine the impacts and outcomes of the IB program in K-12 schools are therefore required. Exploration of leadership characteristics affecting students' achievements in IB schools is reviewed in this paper. Leaders' cultural awareness and best leadership practices are the focus of this review.

A brief overview of the problem is presented, as provided in the broader literature review of developing leaders in IB schools, the IB history and philosophy, and the dissonance between the liberal international educational approaches and the conservative culture of Saudi Arabia. According to an article by Shechter (2011), marketing practices in Saudi Arabia during the first oil boom in 1974 helped shape a neotraditional Saudi Arabian society with contradictions between traditions and modernity. Local and international enterprises were integrated, the international enterprises depended on Saudi sponsorship, and local enterprises depended on expatriate labor (Shechter, 2011), reflecting a blend of global and local influences. In its contemporary attempts to adhere to global standards, Saudi Arabia is attempting to calibrate its goals to reach international levels in all aspects: commerce, business, diplomacy, tourism, and education, as one can see in Saudi Arabia's Economic Vision 2030 (Vision 2030, n.d.). An educational reform package was mandated through an educational development program, from 2007 to 2013, focusing on school improvement (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2019). Amid all these reforms, openness to international education becomes a foregone conclusion.

How much such an environment would affect leaders' focus as educators in IB schools is discussed. This paper has been drawn upon from personal observation of an IB school in the capital of Saudi Arabia: Riyadh. My interest in exploration of leadership in

international schools with rigorous curricula such as the IB stems from my professional experience. I was an IB school teacher who observed slow or no progress achievements in students' involvement in learning the IBDP. This affected their involvement in IB external assessments, and hence they gave up on graduating with an IB diploma certificate. The culture and values of the context were different from any previous experiences I had in international schools, especially concerning student achievements. The school is an urban private school with the majority of students being nationals, that is, Saudi Arabian citizens. The school was founded with the vision of establishing a national institution with an international character. With the rise of international schools, international curricula started being integrated into national curricula, resulting in the "denationalization of education systems" (Resnik, 2012, p. 249).

Leadership and management practices are complicated with challenges pertaining to high rates of staff turnover and adapting to the culture of the host country. Additionally, there can also be misconceptions because of the mixing of students and staff from different cultures (Brown et al., 2021). This realization and previous experiences directed this literature review to address the impact of the host country culture on school leadership.

### **Question**

An abundance of literature discusses school leadership, emerging from national systems of education with western assumptions. Less literature observes this perspective through an international or global lens (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018), and fewer studies are present on the perspectives of leadership in IB schools (Dickson et al., 2018). This paper contributes to the knowledge of the challenges that face IB school leaders in the GCC in relation to the cultural barriers that affect students' achievements in an IB curriculum. Western approaches to leadership were proven to weakly apply as remedies to educational issues in the GCC (Bailey et al., 2019). The more liberal approaches of international curricula

do not necessarily harmonize with the more conservative culture of the students, which can cause disharmony between curricular requirements and students' learning.

Most studies in the field of international schools in general and IB schools in particular focus on the interculturally competent school leaders (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). However, educational leadership standards and practices cannot be universally applicable. Most research in school leadership is based on the Western assumptions which cannot be equally applied in all international contexts.

Since school leadership has significant influence on student learning after classroom instruction (Bruggencate et al., 2012), this paper attempts to review the literature in order to answer the following question: What leadership aspects might inform better practices in an IB school within the conservative Saudi Arabian culture to support better students' learning achievements?

IB schools spreading in Saudi Arabia in response to the economic and labor market demands (Hammad & Shah, 2018) are tangled with how best leaders can fit the school within the conservative national culture. IB schools emerging in this context are therefore explored by reviewing the history and definition within an international school perspective (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Resnik, 2012). To provide effective school leadership practices within this context, it is important to define culture. The Saudi Arabian context is known for its conservative culture and therefore defining culture is relevant for this review. Culture is recognized as a system of people, places, and practices (Causadias, 2020) in the literature review. This section will also consider the distributed leadership style and an IB development framework, including the seven claims for effective leadership practices in different contexts (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). The discussion section will cover the contextual factors within the IB school observed in Saudi Arabia based on what the literature identified. The paper ends with a conclusion that provide suggestions to answer the question presented.

## Literature Review

### International Education and the IB Perspective: Definition and History

Understanding the concept of international schools and setting their boundaries have been and remain a challenge to this day. Various definitions delineating internationalism in education have been assumed, based on globalization and capitalism as rationales of growth of international schools. International schools are known to “offer social and cultural reproduction for the globalizing and cosmopolitan privileged” (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018, p. 149). An international orientation imparts great relevance to the choice of the school curriculum, which is believed to enable students to receive an exemplary academic education and to develop skills to embrace the challenges of the changing world, either locally or internationally. The history of international schools’ dates to 1876, in England, with the establishment of the International College in Spruce Grove, London, England. At the same time, similar school settings started in France and Germany (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018), to encourage exchange of knowledge and trade among students spending time in these schools (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). Following the First World War, international schools were established to provide education for the children of expatriate diplomats and employees of transnational organizations (Hayden, 2011). In 1924, the International School of Geneva was established, and intercultural awareness started to be taught to seek and to maintain world peace. Hayden & Thomson (2013) stated that the concept of international schools is “relatively ill-defined” (p. 9). The concept of IB originated in 1968 as a program that offers students the ability to apply to post-secondary institutions, no matter where they studied around the world (Hayden & Wong, 1997). Therefore, IB education originated in international schools as a two-year pre-university program, the Diploma Program (DP) (Resnik, 2012). Thomson et al. (2003) suggested that a baccalaureate-style curriculum model has the following features: it serves as a school-leaving examination, qualify students for



university admission, enable entry to employment, and provide a strong foundation for lifelong learning. In addition, the program includes a wide ranging and well-balanced curriculum, comprising of compulsory core elements along with elective elements.

Nowadays, the International Baccalaureate offers four educational programs which were created in the following order: the Diploma Program (DP) in the 1970, the Middle Years Program (MYP) in 1994, the Primary Years Program (PYP) in 1997, and the Career-related Program (CP) created in 2012. According to Hill (2012), these programs incorporate attributes of world-class education such as the concept of interdependence between nations, the importance of shaping attitudes, the relevance of curriculum content and teaching methods, and the significance of an international perspective. IB programs are implemented in many schools worldwide, and they follow the same international standards of knowledge, skills, and attitude. As a result, IB is a globally recognized world-class international education (Hill, 2012).

### ***Contextual Factors***

International schools in Saudi Arabia are accredited by governing bodies such as the IBO and the Council of International Schools (CIS) (International Accreditation, n.d.). The Ministry of Education inspects all international schools to ensure that they comply with local customs including gender segregation. IB schools in this region are private, independent schools and have a certain degree of self-direction since they are accredited by the IBO and the CIS. Students in these schools usually take external examinations and earn a degree after completing the requirements of the IB Diploma Program (IBDP).

The number of international schools in Saudi Arabia increased steadily since 1999, in response to the growing need for education of foreign children who accompany their parents working in the country. As per the IBO (2021), there are currently 29 schools in Saudi Arabia offering at least one of the IB programs: PYP, MYP, and IBDP. Due to the increase in

demand for international education, there has been a significant shift of Saudi Arabian students towards international schools, away from the national schools (Alfaraidy, 2020).

### **Culture and IB Schools**

Causadías (2020) emphasized that the definition of culture is “fuzzy”, and it is important to improve it “to avoid misconceptions and biases that shape theory, research, and practice in applied developmental science” (Causadías, 2020, p. 310). Therefore, the author defines culture as systems of people, places, and practices. The author points out that the concept of culture as explained in other definitions is vague. Causadís (2020) argues that the meaning of culture changes depending on situations and groups. Culture is therefore a dynamic whole system generating and is generated by people, places, and practices. This model is applied here to study culture in the Saudi Arabian context as it affects leadership practices in an IB school.

### ***Culture as a System of People***

People generate culture through population dynamics, and social relations in groups such as families, communities, and nations. Culture and people are interdependent; there is no culture without people and no people without culture (Causadías, 2020). Population dynamics in this model are implied in the engagement of the population in individual and collective experiences. Considering the IB school context, and the previous experiences of different groups of stakeholders; teachers, students, and leaders, the IB school’s dynamics and the pedagogical perspective, all reflect the role of culture as a system of people. How that impacts the perceptions of teaching for teachers, and learning for students constitutes the population dynamics as an aspect of culture.

Strong leadership plays a key role in the successful implementation of the IB programs (Lee et al., 2012). Modelling professional behaviour and exhibiting good public relations skills are successful leadership practices (Lee et al., 2012). These characteristics

also contribute to change in the IB school population dynamics thus constituting a system of people (Causadías, 2020).

### ***Culture as a System of Places***

The second aspect of culture as a system is places Cuasadias (2020). Places refer to “ecological dynamics, institutional influences, and cultures in contexts, including homes, neighbourhoods, schools, and cities” (p.311). Culture as places in anthropology is what gives a certain location or a physical space meaning. Educational settings are included in the research on culture as anthropological places (Hammad & Shah, 2018). One aspect in the field of the anthropology of education, referred to as a field of cultural congruence, conflict, and discontinuity examines the relationship between schools and the community where students receive their primary socialization (Foster et al., 2003). The Saudi Arabian students do not fit within the IB school, thus representing cultural discontinuity. This is similar to observing that culture as a place include ecological influences of the formal education that shape the behaviour and cognition of students (Cuasadias, 2020). In addition, the context-specific national is what makes IB schools differ from country to country as Hammad and Shah (2018) presented in their study.

### ***Culture as a System of Practices***

The third essential component of culture as a system is practices (Cuasadias, 2020). Group dynamics, community collaboration, and involvement in cultural activities such as traditional rituals are all forms of cultural practices. Research in the field within the anthropology of education analyzes students’ cultural practices, beliefs and assumptions then contrasts them with dominant school practices to shed light on community practices that are either “recognized or acknowledged or devalued and discredited” (Foster et al., 2003, p. 264). The act of teaching, learning, and participating in everyday school activities and how this shapes the development of students is an example of a cultural practice. To what extent

the Saudi Arabian culture is present within the IB school context becomes a relevant question. Although the IBO mission statement promotes interculturalism and diversity, neoliberal education is the dominant ideology that reproduces western style democracies (Gardner-McTaggart, 2020), and therefore represents cultural hegemony. The research article by Gardner-McTaggart (2020) argues that IB schools despite promoting interculturalism and diversity, are predominantly staffed by white educators and perpetuate a form of implicit racism that is blind to and uncritical of whiteness power. In the context of IB schools, whiteness represents a cultural capital that is highly valued and associated with privilege and power (Gardner-McTaggart, 2020, p. 4). In addition, Gardner-McTaggart (2018) contends that international schools in general and IB in particular, are globally diffused and cater to a privileged demographic, promote a form of cultural domination that serves the interests of globalizing, white, cultural replication (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018), hence a form of cultural hegemony.

### **Leadership in IB Schools**

The major themes evident in the question in this paper are: the culture, and leadership aspects in an IB school context. Here, leadership characteristics that fit in the context of international schools in general, and IB schools in particular will be reviewed.

The research on the effects of leadership practices in IB World Schools conducted by Calnin et al. (2018), the study on the impact of leadership on student learning by Leithwood et al. (2019), and the distributed leadership style in the context of IB schools and are reviewed in what follows.

### ***IB Leadership Development Framework***

The IBO designed a leadership development program responding to the challenges of school leadership in international contexts (Calnin et al., 2018). There is a dearth of research in the field of culturally diverse international schools (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). And when

available, research would only be a speculation rather than an actual reflection on practice. Leaders' characteristics in IB schools include building a clear vision, developing teachers professionally, leading through change, and improving students' learning (Calnin et al., 2018). Having flexible and adaptable school leaders who possess contextual knowledge is crucial for success. Despite numerous studies indicating the significance of cultural or contextual knowledge in shaping educational policy-making (Wiseman, 2010), leaders often ignore or are unaware of this fact. This is because educational leadership, which has its roots in Western contexts, cannot always be applied internationally (Van Oord, 2007; Hammad & Shah, 2018).

The IBO leadership development program emphasizes the adaptability of the leaders, their global and local engagement, and their commitment to creating a better world through education (Calnin et al., 2018). Since IB school leaders face complex and uncertain work environments which lessens the significance of previous leaders' experiences, the features of this program are underpinned by leadership intelligences such as learning about the school contexts, resolving problems, and reflecting on practices (Calnin et al, 2018). The framework is therefore based on an ongoing development of strategic thinking and practice. Cultural intelligence or open-mindedness is a cognitive aspect that is important in multicultural contexts. Entrepreneurial intelligence or active and creative engagement is a relevant market-driven approach to education. Relational intelligence is built around the work ethics of trust and respect. Heuristic intelligence emphasizes reflectivity on practice and creative decision-making in complex situations. The pedagogical intelligence, based on the pedagogical leadership approach, is also a leadership intelligence in the IB development framework. However, further research on actual leadership practices is suggested to enhance the understanding of leadership capacities and skills required in diverse school communities. Leaders have to accept and adapt to different cultural environments, in which previous

experiences might become irrelevant. For this reason, Calnin and colleagues (2018) suggest taking on one or more of the framework intelligences depending on the context.

### ***Leadership Practices Affecting Students' Achievements***

This paper focuses on the aspect of achieving student success in an IB school through effective leadership practices. Leithwood et al. (2019) examined seven claims leading to successful school leadership. The first claim concerns leadership practices that becomes “only second to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning” (Leithwood et al., 2019, p. 27). The authors’ wordings suggest direct or indirect influence of successful school leaders. Their evidence as whole is based on case studies that revealed leadership significant effect on school organization and on student learning. The second claim according to Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019), specifies that most successful leaders share the same set of fundamental leadership practices, yet their implications has not been fully understood. These practices as the third claim states that successful leaders are sensitive to the context but they “do not enact significantly different leadership practices as contexts change” (Leithwood et al., 2019, p. 9). However, cultural, economic, and contextual factors might restrict leaders’ actions, behaviors, and practices especially when school leadership in non-western contexts apply the international leadership perspectives researched and developed in western school contexts (Bailey et al., 2019). To uncover best leadership practices in international schools around the world, Pashiardis et al. (2016) study the tendencies to best practices, interventions, and identify common features for a successful international school leadership experience. They state that educational systems are micropolitical environments representing the cultures and the values of the people in context. For this reason, leaders have to be flexible and to be able to adapt to the different contexts and settings. They advise to follow obvious tendencies, specifically contextual literacy, that opposes fixed practices due to cultural specificity. In

other terms, understanding school's demographic situation as well as trends in international education emphasizes the leader's adaptation and flexibility in an international school setting.

The fourth claim considers school leadership effects on student achievements as indirect, as opposed to the direct influence of leaders on teachers' motivation. The authors lastly claim that school leadership greatly influence school and students when it is widely distributed. Hence, a distributed leadership style.

### *Distributed Leadership Style*

The theoretical foundations of distributed leadership in educational contexts, effective processes to practice, the challenges, and implications for school improvement are explored by Nadeem (2024). The author argues that distributed leadership is based on a transformative framework that includes multiple stakeholders who make decisions and foster a collaborative approach to improve the school (Printy & Yan, 2020). In an IB continuum school including the programs PYP, MYP, DP, and CP, distributed leadership is observed through the work of mid-level leaders. They are subject area coordinators, coordinators of special educational needs, and grade-level leaders whose leadership activities consist of instruction and learning, organization and capacity building. In this case, interactions among senior, middle, and teacher leaders will occur, and will foster a collaborative environment. Distributed leadership in IB schools is a style of leadership that emphasizes shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making among all members rather than relying solely on top-down authority (Nadeem, 2024). Distributing the practice of leading through various roles and across different levels within the school community will ensure that each member contributes to decision-making processes and takes ownership of specific tasks. Decisions are made through collaboration and consensus rather than being dictated by a single authority figure. Individuals are empowered to take initiative and exercise autonomy within their areas of expertise. Trust is implemented in the abilities of all team members to contribute

meaningfully to the school's goals. The superintendent collaborates with the principals of the IB programs: PYP, MYP, and DP and in turn they communicate with teachers and staff within their departments.

The theoretical foundations of distributed leadership are rooted in the social learning theory and communities of practice (Nadeem, 2024). Hence a culture perspective (Cuasadias, 2020). Practical strategies for implementing distributed leadership include establishing a shared vision, distributing decision making authority, fostering collaborative learning communities, and investing in professional development (Nadeem, 2024; Printy & Yan, 2020).

## **Discussion**

### **Dissonances**

This paper focuses on issues of educational administration and leadership in IB schools in Saudi Arabia. The school under review is an International Baccalaureate school, in an Arab Muslim context. Since it is an international school program, it has an outward-looking objective, internationally. The school is sex-segregated, therefore girls and boys study in separate campuses. Students who are in grade 3 and up are taught by teachers of the same sex. The IB school in question is recognized by the Ministry of Education of the Saudi Arabian government, accredited by the IBO, and is a member of the CIS. Although the school is an IB-accredited school, the results of the students' IBDP external assessments are not considered one of the factors that measures school success. A number of issues challenge the school leadership approach, such as leading an international school in a non-Western region where market-driven goals are better attended to than student achievement. The article takes up three critical areas of concern: inability to achieve cultural harmony between the context and IB education thus affecting students' achievements, direction of parents toward the IB programs, and marketing and business-oriented approach of the school.



The cultural aspects pose serious challenges for educational leaders in these schools. Educational leaders have to be aware of and consider the contextual complexities. The cultural context in Saudi Arabia supports conservative values and ideals, thus creating a powerful influence on leadership practices in international schools. Educational leaders have to navigate this context and find ways to balance the expectations of both the foreign or expatriate teachers and the national students. One of these challenges include sex segregation which poses practical difficulties for school leaders and teachers. Boys and girls are present in separate buildings and activities must run separately and if joined create problems with parents.

In addition, the Saudi government has implemented a “Saudization” policy requiring international schools to hire a certain percentage of Saudi teachers “to help preserve and promote Saudi values and culture” (Hammad & Shah, 2018, p. 766). Leaders expressed concerns about the qualifications and commitment of Saudi teachers, and the impact on the quality of education as an internationally-minded school that adopts the mission of preparing Saudi students to become responsible citizens, locally and globally.

The majority of students usually drop from completing the external IB assessments, in the IBDP. What captured my attention was the remote role of the superintendent and principals towards teachers’ concerns: facilitate and achieve students’ learning. Their interest is more of appealing to the Board’s directions. No direct interaction was regularly observed between the teaching faculty and the leadership of the school represented by the superintendent. In addition, leadership practices diverged from the multicultural perspectives of the school community. Although distributed leadership is implemented, however, its practical implications do not achieve the goals: enhancing students learning and empowering teachers to take part in leading through involving them in making decisions.

The superintendent, administrative staff, teaching faculty, principals, vice-principals of the primary, middle, and high schools of both the male and female school sections represented a variety of nationalities: Saudis, Middle Eastern, from the United States, Canada, UK, Romania, Colombia, India, Egypt, and the Philippines. The school board is comprised solely of Saudi nationals who own the school. The board of school directors appoint foreign superintendents and school principals, who in turn choose the members of the administration, support staff and teachers.

The governance of the school is that in which the owners, who are the shareholders, are not separate from the management or the agent running the school, the superintendent. The superintendent does not have an informational advantage over the owners in strategic decision-making related to vision, mission, and values, the financial matters related to profit generation, and student enrollment. A key observation is the informational imbalance between the active school leader- superintendent and principals-and the board; the board rarely follows up on the information related to students' academic achievements, teachers' rights, and administrative and teachers' remuneration, which lead to low teacher, superintendent, and principal retention and high turnover. School leaders of western origins face ambiguous and uncertain roles with new bureaucratic, institutional norms, and dual roles being educators in addition to representing a marketing and business workforce (Kelly, 2022). International schools lack qualified school leaders since training and support in this sector is a contested space as context and culture.

### **Parents' Expectations**

A recent study by Alfaraidy (2020) revealed the influential factors that affected the choice of Saudi parents to choose international schools' curricula. There is the perception that the national education system is inferior to the curricula offered in international schools, such as the IBDP. In addition, post-secondary credit transfer and effective marketing practices of

international schools which influence parents' choices. However, different worldviews define or analyze these facts differently. For example, there is the understanding of denationalization of education that Resnik (2012) considered, where the international curricula are integrated into the national curricula. Westernizing the nation is a concept addressing the educational philosophy of the IBDP as overtly international at content level, but thoroughly western at the epistemological level (Van Oord, 2007).

Managing parents' expectations becomes an added challenge for leaders. Conservative religious parents assume religious expectations, and non-religious parents expect western educational practices. Balancing between the two is difficult and requires effective communication and awareness (Hammad & Shah, 2018). These challenges are specific for Saudi context or the GCC as a whole. According to Hammad and Shah (2018), leaders in international schools develop strategies of compliance and circumvention to navigate the complexity of the situation. Leaders comply to the rules and regulations set by the Ministry of Education to align with the conservative culture of the Saudi society. Their goal is to protect their jobs and avoid problems with the authorities and parents. At the same time, they circumvent when regulations are too restrictive or when trying to overcome practical difficulties. For example, working around the regulations and policies and discreetly finding alternative solutions to meet the needs of the school community. Leaders may appoint Saudi principals who deal only with the ministry regulations, or appoint Saudi teachers giving them minimal job requirements to fulfill the Saudization requirement.

The parents' preference for IB schools without concern to the rigor of the IBDP curriculum and to student readiness are also contested factors affecting students' achievements. The IBDP offers numerous benefits and opportunities for students. For this reason, parents enroll their kids in an IB school. On the other hand, parents do not realize the workload required by students, and the increased stress levels that accompany the

achievement of the academic requirements of this program, especially the IBDP. Parents tend to control students' choices and force their kids to be enrolled in the IB diploma program. As a result, students drop from performing the external assessments. When seeking western universities abroad, they are able to afford their studies when offered extra credit courses prior to their specialization. The school policy does not force students to graduate with an IB diploma. This is another scenario of circumvention: leaders adopt fluid policies that adapt to students' and parents' satisfaction, consequently increasing student enrollment thus focusing solely on market-driven goals.

### **Market-Driven Focus**

The IB in the GCC is primarily privately funded and caters to the elite class seeking an economically advantageous education for their children. GCC countries are well established economically and therefore, increasing IB access to education for a wider range of students is less challenging. The IB strategic plan and its expansion is favored in conditions of neoliberal education policies (Gardner-McTaggart, 2022), promoted by certain international organizations such as the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Bank. These policies include school-based management and the decentralization of education systems, which creates an environment conducive to the adoption of the international education programs (Resnik, 2012). In addition, the IBO strategic plan for growth and access envision the GCC region as a guaranteed potential for future growth in the IB programs (Gamal, 2023). Within the past two years, many schools which were categorized as international, are adopting the continuum of IB programs including the PYP, MYP, and the DP. However, no school in the region of Saudi Arabia is offering the fourth program, the CP, which is the career-related program (Our Mission, 2023). In the whole GCC region the number of IB schools offering the CP program is 13

schools out of 40 in the UAE, 1 out of 15 IB schools in Bahrain, none in Kuwait, Oman, nor Saudi Arabia (Find an IB World School, 2024).

According to Matsumoto (2019) in a review related to education reform in the UAE, there is a struggle to align market-driven academic goals with dominant cultural paradigms. This refers to the hierarchy of power and the strong emphasis on group-mindedness and social loyalties. The country is facing challenges in integrating the goals of the education system, whether in national or international schools, with the demands and expectations of the job market and economy within UAE. Although the culture is influenced by Islamic traditions and values, the emphasis is on international rankings and recognition, suggesting a focus on global competitiveness rather than solely meeting the demands of the local job market (Matsumoto, 2019). The same scenario can definitely be the reason of the contemporary expansion of international schools in Saudi Arabia. This expansion is market-driven, seeks international recognition, however, it is not based on academically-driven goals.

Amid all these complexities, expatriate leaders will definitely face complexities in applying their western educational experiences as leaders in the context of IB schools within this culture (Fisher, 2021). The attention to the political, cultural, and the social factors play a significant role in shaping the leadership practices. From what is presented, leaders lose the compass direction towards establishing a successful IB school and increase students' learning and achievements in the IBDP external assessments.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, the focus on the issues and impact of school leadership in an international school that follows the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in Saudi Arabia is reviewed and discussed. The review aims to explore the cultural aspects that affects leadership practices in an IB school and identify leadership aspects that can support better students' learning achievements in the conservative Saudi Arabian culture.

The impact of the school leaders on student achievement is influenced by various factors such as school culture, teachers' work, student engagement, cultural awareness, and leadership style. Effective leaders establish clear goals, create a positive school culture, provide support and resources for teachers, and empower them to improve student outcomes. In an IB school, distributed leadership allows for flexibility and adaptability in responding to the diverse needs of the school community. It enables quick responses to challenges and opportunities as they arise. Continuous professional development is emphasized to ensure that all members of the school community have the skills and knowledge needed to fulfill their leadership roles effectively. Overall, distributed leadership in IB Schools promotes a collaborative and inclusive approach to school management, fostering a culture of shared leadership, innovation, and continuous improvement.

However, the specific impact of school leaders on student achievement may vary depending on the context and the cultural factors of the school. Leaders of IB schools face significant challenges in navigating cultural differences between international and conservative national perspectives, balancing expectations of both national students and international staff, teachers, and managing parents' expectations and market-driven goals on international schools.

To address these challenges, leaders in IB schools must be flexible, adaptable, and knowledgeable about cultural contexts. They should develop cultural awareness and understanding, create collaborative environments, provide professional development opportunities, foster student engagement and motivation, and embrace distributed leadership.

IB schools have experienced rapid growth worldwide, and is expected to increase in the GCC region, especially in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is an oil-rich country in the Arabian Gulf, where the wealth generated from oil production developed healthcare and educational institutions. For decades, Saudi Arabia public schools were free of charge, and

Saudi nationals were not allowed to attend private schools. These restrictions have been relaxed and the new government initiatives are designed to increase private sector involvement including private schools. They have the resources to import expertise and knowledge to support the development of IB schools. Future research has to explore leadership experiences in IB schools in this region. Through this understanding, policy makers and educators provide the needed support leaders and hence achieve successful student learning in IBDP.

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<sup>i</sup> International Baccalaureate Organization is a non-profit educational organization based in Geneva, <https://www.ibo.org/>

<sup>ii</sup> The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf known as the Gulf Cooperation Council GCC, <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/Pages/default.aspx>