

To Adopt Or Not To Adopt? Challenging the Hegemony of Western Educational Innovations

¹Rawiya Alansari, ²Samuel Miller

¹Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia

²University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which there is an alignment between the theoretical assumptions of self-determination theory and cultural practices and beliefs of preservice special education teachers in Saudi Arabia. The cultural practices and beliefs of twenty-six Saudi preservice special education teachers were compared with national, university, and local school documents to further assess their alignment, allowing the researcher to triangulate data across data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A sequential exploratory case investigation was used to interpret and understand preservice teachers' perceptions of their nation's culture, relationship to educational practices, and alignment with stated national policies from the Minister of Education (Ward et al., 2018). By analyzing the participants' interviews and archival data, findings revealed Saudi preservice special education teachers preferred a collectivism versus an individualism orientation; consequently, the adoption of self-determination theory by Saudi Arabia would require modifications relative to this orientation.

Keywords: Western Educational Innovations, Challenging the Hegemony, national, university.

1. INTRODUCTION

Countries look to Western nations for ideas to improve their educational systems. Implicit in such practices is a belief that what works for an often-undefined group of learners will produce similar effects with other students, especially lower achievers, within the adoptive country. This assumption is not frequently challenged, even when the two countries' cultural values differ considerably (Ellis & Bond, 2016; Hofstede, 1980). Stated differently, even though the official rationales for an adoption are sound and plausible – improve educational outcomes by adopting a certain instructional framework—differences in cultural values, unless examined carefully, might impede any positive outcomes for a particular educational program (Ellis & Bond, 2016). Saudi Arabia falls into the category of a non-western country that readily adopts educational practices from the United States.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over a twenty-five-year period, starting in the 1970s, an unimaginable of studies---197,086 in general education and 25,785 in special education---documented self-determination's ability to improve students' achievement and motivation across a wide range ages and education settings (Alsuhaibani, 2018). Accordingly, Wehmeyer (2007) believed self-determination offered valuable opportunities for educators to influence special education students' independence by increasing their competence through the promotion of autonomy, independence, and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

A subsequent evaluation by Shogren (2011), questioned the blanket adoption of educational programs across Western and Eastern countries. Researchers from various psychological and anthropological perspectives offered theoretical frameworks to support her concerns. Hofstede's (1991) seminal study of business cultures classified Eastern and Western societies according to the extent to which they promoted, respectively, either collectivist or individualistic perspectives. Iyengar's

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(2000) studies of the why individuals across different cultural settings make everyday decisions further provided evidence for identifying cultures according to these two dimensions. Consistent with this framework, albeit with different terminology, independent versus interdependent, Markus & Kitayama (1991) claimed a greater value is placed in Western cultures on the need for students to “become independent from others and to discover and express one’s unique attributes” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p.226), whereas Eastern cultures place greater value on interdependency, with an expectation that “the nail that stands out should get pounded down” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p.224).

Briefly, according to these researchers, Eastern societies emphasized the importance of relatedness, an ability to consider others’ thoughts, feelings, and actions prior to actions, whereas independent or individualistic Western societies encouraged individuals to be independent from each other, to discover unique internal attributes, even if it violated societal and cultural norms. Individualistic, or independent cultures placed a greater emphasis on self-reliance, independence, and freedom of expression whereas collectivist or interdependent cultures place greater value on belonging to a specific group and considering its cohesiveness over personal interests (Markus, 2016). Such differences raised questions about the adoption of educational programs across Western and Eastern cultures without fully examining and understanding underlying cultural values and norms. This study explored the extent to which an alignment exists between self-determination theory’s assumed values and the cultural practices and beliefs of special education teachers in Saudi Arabia. Whereas an overwhelming amount of evidence supports the emphasis on individuals in Western cultures, no study has viewed if or where Saudi educators might fall on the pre-stated continuum. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. Research question #1:

How do preservice special education teachers’ understanding of their country’s cultural goals align with the theoretical assumptions of self-determination theory?

a. Research questions:

1a: How do special education teachers’ understanding of their nation’s cultural priorities align with collectivist or individualistic cultural orientations?

1b: How do special education teachers’ understanding of various educational problems align with collectivist or individualistic cultural orientations?

2. How do special education teachers’ understanding of their country’s cultural goals align with national and regional policy statements?

3. METHODS

Participants

Twenty-six female preservice special education teachers, ages twenty-one to twenty-five, in the final year of undergraduate education in a western Saudi Arabian university were interviewed. Participants were selected with a non-probability sampling strategy (Maxwell, 2013), a logical approach that allows the researcher expects “to use his data not to answer questions like ‘how much’ and ‘how often’ to discover what occurs, its implications, and the relationships linking occurrences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.96). The selected number of participants allowed for coding to reach a level of redundancy or saturation (Azungah, 2018).

Research Design

Case study was used as the methodology. It is a particular qualitative research approach that is defined as “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). The rationale for the use is its descriptive approach to inquiry was that it allows researchers to generate rich views of complex issues in its real-life context (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). Its ultimate purpose is to answer questions regarding context, relationship, processes, and practices where place, time, and activity form its bounded system (Hamilton et al., 2012). The meanings attributed to respondents’ views are thus determined iteratively, as the findings evolve, by identifying patterns related to the phenomenon of interest. These patterns determine the extent to which they are aligned with national and local policy statements regarding Saudi educational practices (DuBois et al., 2018).

Researcher Positionality

The first author is an instructor at the participating university. As an instructor and life-long resident, she is aware of developing broad national trends in teacher education in special education. Her professional special education expertise focuses on learning; planning, preparing, and delivering lessons; providing educational and social guidance to students; and preparing them for the rapid development of the work environment (Becirovic, & Akbarov, 2015). Given her experiences in both Saudi Arabia and nine years in the United States, she served as an important conduit between the two countries. The second author is a professor at his university whose research focuses on student motivation. His studies mainly involve longitudinal studies with elementary classroom teachers in the areas of literacy and teacher education. Data for this study came from the first author's dissertation, which the second author served as advisor.

Measures

Interview

The first three semi-structured interview questions are drawn from Hofstede's studies of national culture whereas the second set of four questions are based on Markus' and Kitayama's (1991) research. Each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes.

Archival National and Local Policy Documents

The first document was a Minister of Education policy document which included policy statements regarding the underlying dimensions and goals for pre-K-12 education. The second was developed by the Ministry of Higher Education and outlined the country's educational goals. A third was developed by administrators and faculty in the department of special education at the participating university. The rationale for collecting this information was to evaluate the extent to which policy statements from national, local schools, and the participating university supported the underlying cultural values as noted in continuums included the literature review, allowing the researchers to triangulate across sources by comparing interview data regarding national goals and local educational practices with accepted national cultural documents.

4. DATA ANALYTIC STRATEGIES

Interviews

The study involved four steps of data analysis for the interviews: reading the transcripts, labeling relevant information, coding data, and connecting the categories (Quartiroli et al., 2017) The coding process consisted of open coding, axial coding, secondary coding, and naming the categories (Patton, & Schwandt, 2015). Each author read a half of the interview statements, randomly selected, to develop the five categories, then individually coded the remaining statements with an estimated agreement of ninety percent, with any disagreements resolved through discussion. Each interview question was coded separately. Then, the codes of the first three questions (i.e., regarding the national goals) were combined to identify the themes. Similar procedures were conducted for the educational practices interview questions.

Policy Documents

These documents listed and provided brief statements of the educational objectives, goals, and development visions. To triangulate the data, each of these criteria were aligned with five categories of responses offered by the preservice teachers. The researcher compared archival research with the interview responses (Heng et al., 2018).

5. RESULTS

Identification of Nation's Cultural Values

Preservice teachers offered responses to questions related to the identification of their country's national goals for a total of seventy-eight responses, each of which fell into one of five categories. The first category, Government Support for Religious Practices and Beliefs, included statements related to their country's cultural goals and included any references about Islamic values and law and its practices, such as the recommended treatment of fellow citizens and charity. Twenty-five responses were in this category (32%). The second category, Justice and Equality Through Human Rights, referenced issues related to justice and equality among citizens regardless of gender and social standing. Eleven responses were in this area (13%). The third category, Social Practices of Saudi Cultural Lifestyles, included references pertaining to historical, generational,

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societal, or family practices and customs. Sixteen responses were in this area (21%). The fourth category, Expected Moral Behaviors Regarding the Treatment of Others, included statements regarding the treatment and care of others and acts of generosity, courage, honesty, and truthfulness. Seventeen responses fell into this category (22%). The final category, Primacy of Family and National Belonging, included references to the need for citizens to practice and value those behaviors and values that supported the role of the family and the nation. Nine responses fell into this category (12%).

The overwhelming majority of preservice teachers, 24 of 26 (92%), fell within the first category. Additional comments were spread across the remaining categories, with no two from an interviewee falling within the same category. This pattern underscored the uniformity of responses among interviewees across inductively identified categories.

Within the category, Government Support for Religious Practices and Beliefs, preservice teachers referenced accepted religious practices. "We are based on an adherence to the Islamic religion. We are the country that most adheres to the Islamic religion, our country's legislation is based on it." Others called on the need for government officials to endorse the primacy of Islamic religious activities, identifying fasting during Ramadan, welcoming of pilgrims to holy sites, and obligatory calls to prayer, with the need to close restaurants and shops during these periods. They further emphasized a call for the government to emphasize the need for citizens to apply Islamic principles in their daily lives. They referenced how the personal practices of Islam extended to everyday practices, obligations that must be followed by all citizens, as evidence of their faith.

The main emphasis in Justice and Equality Through Human Rights was on specific populations --- the rights of people with special needs, protection of children from social media and abuse, women's rights, citizen's voice in social media, and possible acts of racism between Islamic religious sects, Shiites and Sunni. One preservice teacher emphasized the need for equal treatment between special needs individuals and others, noting how, "Each person has qualities that make him different from the other, distinguishing characteristics which must be supported." Another linked the benefits of women's rights: she stated, "Saudi people respect women's rights, also justice and equality. We have more opportunities to earn higher education degrees than are offered in many countries. Education and medical care in Saudi Arabia are free and women are positioned with many opportunities in different fields, which are open to women. The woman's voice is becoming more and more heard."

Within the category, Social Practices of Saudi Cultural Lifestyles, comments focused on community cultural traditions and how the country needed to support them while at the same time recognizing how such practices differed by geographic region. Traditions included everyday activities such as drinking coffee, a daily family ritual, to tolerance for different accents, food, clothes, and recipes. Implicit in each of these identifications was the need for citizens to adhere to and celebrate cultural traditions, many of which have a religious foundation. This community focus also was obvious within the Expected Moral Behaviors Regarding the Treatment of Others category. One preservice teacher captured the sentiment of others by stating:

I treat people the way I like to be treated. This behavior increases intimacy among community members and affects my country's development. Generosity increases familiarity and love among people, limiting the spread of hatred and hatred among society. Giving and generosity reduces poverty in the country."

Another discussed generosity in Saudi culture as giving away money without announcing the giver's name, putting others before yourself, and avoiding selfishness. Another teacher provided examples of honesty and truthfulness in conversation with others in Saudi as indirectly based on Islamic belief, "We treat people with good morals as Islam encourages us to do so. I mean, not to talk about other people's beliefs, to use good words. We must adopt good moral behaviors, rather than treating people based on their beliefs."

In the final category, Primacy of Family and National Belonging, responses centered on the value of connectedness and the sense of belonging to the family and country with the emphasis on the relationship to the family and the country. An interviewee emphasized how an individual is part of a family, "We are attached to family and relatives. We are also more attached to the family community than in any other country." She added that the person is part of the country as well and how the government treats its citizens, "We are in a safe country, and we are ruled by a Royal Family that cares for its people. It treats us as if we are its children and sons." The government's care of citizens underscored Saudi pride in their country."

Common to the responses in each of these five categories was a value placed on family and community relationships among children, parents, and extended family members. As stated by one respondent, "Loyalty to parents exists in our culture. When a girl grows up, this does not mean that she will separate from her parents. Parents are responsible for children even after the age of 18." Other participants mentioned the value placed on kinship: daily phone contacts as well as the practice by some families of setting aside a day per week to gather at their grandparents' house were common traditions. This valuing of kinship and support, not striving for independence from families, for related cultural activities and values were central to the preservice teachers' identification of national values.

In the first two categories, preservice teachers looked to governmental and other officials as accountable whereas individual citizens and families were viewed as accountable for supporting for practices noted in the remaining three categories. The activities, values and cultural traditions and activities mentioned by the preservice special education teachers during interviews were viewed as central to their instructional responsibilities--they should be the focus of daily instruction. Islamic values were critical because they represented expectations for individuals, families, and sects. The following quotation captures the overall message: "Islamic law, it is our religion, and all Saudis are Muslims. Beginning at home, the individual must learn about religion at home and schools. The person must see these habits in schools so that the home is not a different environment from the school or vice versa." Classroom teachers thus serve as role models who need to teach Islamic values and its history.

Responses in each of the five these categories support collectivist or interrelational views as opposed to independent or individualistic orientations. Implicit in the noted responses is a distinction between activities and practices related to religion and those related to customs. This distinction will become more apparent in those questions related to preservice teachers' views regarding expectations for students in school settings.

Cultural Classroom Practices

The next set of questions focused on future instructional responsibilities and roles. The first asked the extent to which teachers should help students to fit in with the cultural norms of their family and community or if they should encourage students to stand up for what they believe even if it upsets others in their social and family circles. Preservice teachers made a distinction between activities related to customs versus religion. They believed individuals should have rights under certain circumstances to express opinions and beliefs. One preservice teacher stated, "Students need to know the cultural norms of a country, then opinions and insights can be looked at with logical reason. If there is a change that enhances the country's development, it can be adopted." Others supported freedom of expression within the parameters of the country's cultural standards. Without guidance from teachers regarding these parameters, students could cause 'frequent arguments' within the classroom or community. Preservice teachers viewed themselves as the first line of defense against students expressing opinions that were contrary to Islamic traditions. If they were contrary, teachers could immediately work to align them with more desirable outcomes. As one participant stated, "contentment (among community members) is important and anger at anything (for the sake of expressing an opinion) does not lead to a good result." Another provided stated, "Students should not be an anomaly from society as people will then see him as different from them and he will not be welcomed." Even though Saudi preservice teachers recognized the need for societies to change based on the expression of one's opinion or beliefs, they did not welcome its expression if it overtly violated established cultural norms.

This distinction underscored Saudi preservice teachers' identification of behaviors which would either help students to become successful in life. For example, one respondent listed tolerance of others and cooperation as two positive behaviors and displays of anger and arrogance as negative, drawing a relationship between these traits. Anger and arrogance were linked to disrupting community cohesion, causing a lack of cooperation and a lack of tolerance. As stated in the preceding question, however, tolerance was earned within the community. Preservice teachers did not expect everyone to display tolerance if behaviors or beliefs did not fall within the expected parameters identified with national cultural goals. Another preservice teacher listed flexibility and the need to reinforce a students' strengths as traits to be promoted whereas shyness and an unwillingness to try new things were behaviors that should be addressed and changed. These behaviors are related directly -- students will not try new things and display flexibility if teachers permit shyness and closed mindedness to prevail. One preservice teacher's comments provided elaboration: she stated, "Thinking positively ensures success in life and keeps you away from negative people. Gaining new experiences and not being afraid of failure helps because having new experiences in life is a beautiful thing and a person can then learn from his mistakes."

The final question within asked Saudi preservice teachers about the extent to which parents should decide on what students should study regarding possible occupations. As with the preceding questions, responses favored the need to either fit into family or community needs versus going against collectivist norms and expectations. Because students needed to study for extended periods to reach career goals, respondents believed that students needed a relatively high degree of freedom to decide on the direction of their studies. Parallels between the freedom to select an area of study in a preferred career were drawn with the need for women to have a veto in arranged marriages. In both instances, customs were changing, and preservice teachers approved of allowing individuals to make choices. As stated by one interviewee, "Because times change, some customs and traditions are not the same over the years." Consistent with responses, she further explained how such customs should not go against religious dictates: change is progress and should be allowed but they should not violate religion. Another preservice teacher's statement captured this sentiment by stating, "Customs and traditions are not as important as religion. A person does what he thinks is right. There are positive and negative customs and traditions. We should enhance the good customs and traditions and not the negative ones."

In the last set of interviews, responses were most like what is associated with Western individualistic or independent views. When making statements to promote the need for individual expression, particularly as they related to making important career and life decisions, Saudi preservice teachers expressed the importance of the personal choice and right to decide on a career. One teacher stated, "The student must follow his desire. Because he is the one who will work and get up every day and go to work or school, so it is best for him to choose what he wants. His desire might not be the same as parents' desire." Additionally, another stated, "Parental advice is welcomed but it is not mandatory." While such statements support an individualistic orientation, they need to be viewed within the context of the preservice teachers' overall interview responses, which strongly supported the collectivist and interdependent orientations.

6. DISCUSSION

Saudi preservice special education teachers were interviewed regarding their beliefs about national cultural values and related expectations for educational practices. The intent was to determine the extent to which their responses supported a collectivist and interdependent versus an individual and independent cultural orientation. The reason for this inquiry was to evaluate the extent to which such views aligned with the assumptions for the adoption of a popular motivational program, self-determination theory (Ryan et al., 2011), which has been adopted in many Eastern countries. This program was developed in the United States and makes assumptions, which other researchers have found to be central to Western cultures, namely its emphasis on the need to promote intrinsic motivation through the development of autonomy, independence, and competence (Ryan, & Deci, 2002). Consistent with an individualistic or independent cultural orientation, educators then would allow students to have as much free choice as possible and provide them with challenging tasks while offering supportive feedback.

While Saudi preservice teachers supported the need for challenging tasks and supportive feedback, they questioned the value of allowing free choice given their country's cultural values. In other words, when evaluating preservice teachers' responses regarding choice, one must first consider the context within which Saudi teachers and students make decisions. When describing this context, regardless of whether respondents were referring to rights of special needs populations; the protection of children from social media and abuse; women's rights and a citizen's voice; or daily activities such as drinking coffee with friends and family, religious and cultural values provided the main rationale for an individual's actions. Their focus was primarily on collective and interdependent orientations, as demonstrated through Islamic values. The collective was reflective of the extent to which individuals belong to a community because of their participation in religious practices and cultural activities: no reference was made for the need for learners to discover unique internal attributes apart from these parameters (Michael et al., 2016).

When defining future expectations and responsibilities for themselves as teachers, preservice special education teachers cited how they were governed according to Islamic principles. In turn, they viewed government officials as responsible for supporting religious practices and beliefs based on the Sharia law and its religious tenets as outlined in the Qur'an (Bradley, 2005). Moreover, when referring to the implantation of policies and practices related to human rights, they underscored the need for the government to support the rights of everyone within the community as mandated by Islam. The government was held accountable for this support and protection, both of which are based on a study of the prophet Muhammed's speeches and Islamic law. Preservice teachers' intentions and expectations for students were focused primarily on the

collective, consistent with Islamic principles. Instead of individuals discovering unique internal attributes independently, individuals had to make this discovery within certain religious and cultural parameters.

Saudi understanding of cultural practices highlighted the importance of interaction and acceptance among the community members. Like the collectivist and interrelation frameworks provided by Hofstede et al. (2010) and Markus and Kitayama (1991), preservice teachers viewed themselves and students as a “we,” with direct ties to extended families, a universalist community, where every person—teachers, and students alike—followed the same standards. Preservice teachers noted the need for respecting cultural traditions within and across geographical areas and religious sects, this tolerance, however, did not undermine the need for everyone to act within society’s cultural and religious values and teachings. As a result, community members understood each other without explicitly explaining themselves daily expectations were culturally understood.

Within the classroom, preservice teachers, therefore, expected students to align their actions and behaviors according to these traditions as opposed to developing unique individual beliefs outside these parameters. Students were allowed to voice opinions and beliefs, but this expression had to fall within the guidelines of family and community values, which were based, either directly or indirectly, on religious and cultural doctrines. To act on one’s own often resulted in anger, which the preservice teachers viewed as ostracizing an individual from the community because such expressions caused social unrest. The greatest emphasis on individual choice related to whether parents should influence students’ career decisions. Striving for a career and education were viewed as the main steppingstone for Saudi accomplishment; therefore, students needed to be allowed to make decisions regarding selected careers with parents serving as guides. Once again, while the greatest emphasis on individual choice was found within this category, it was not a free choice: it had limited options or parameters based on a family’s religious and cultural traditions.

Given this context, questions arise as to how a particular education innovation, in this case self-determination theory, can be implemented across countries with contrasting cultural and religious traditions. As stated by Hofstede’s (1991), Iyengar’s (2000), and Markus & Kitayama (1991), this traditional confrontation contrasts the West’s reliance of promoting independence and individualism with minimal, if any, reliance on religion, with the East’s emphasis on collectivist cultural and religious orientations and inter-relational harmony. Quite obviously, based on any one or a combination of contrasts, the instructional parameters of this program are not aligned with Saudi cultural and religious values. Initially, it might be easier to argue for the need to stop such adoptions because of this stark contrast in values and practices.

Such a conclusion might be naïve in a world where nations strive to improve achievement with an eye on what other countries are doing (Miller et al., 2011). It may be more appropriate to ask how a program might be modified to fit a specific country’s context given its history and cultural values. As cautioned by Shogren (2011), educators need to examine a program’s values and beliefs, regardless of how implicit they might be. No program is without explicit and implicit assumptions and alignment between a program and its adoptive country can either preclude or promote educators’ expectations. Hofstede’s (1991), Iyengar’s (2000), and Markus’ & Kitayama’s (1991) frameworks can provide an important first step in this process. For example, with self-determination theory, caution would need to be exercised regarding its emphasis on autonomy, in that, in Saudi Arabia, it would have to be promoted within certain specified parameters, a major parameter of which is religion, a topic avoided in US public schools. Similarly, educators would have to determine how intrinsic motivation would be promoted in classrooms where expectations for historical cultural precedents are more explicit. To be successful, educational innovations need to be sensitive to the collectivist practices of Saudi Arabia, particularly religious and cultural expectations.

In this study, self-determination theory served as a proxy for Western educational innovations. It provided a clear contrast between those cultural values that separate Western and Eastern countries. As such, it is a limitation, in that, educational officials would have to determine the extent to which alignment exists between other Western educational innovations and an adoptive country’s values and expectation. We do believe, however, that self-determination theory provides an interesting contrast, from which educational officials in other countries can make their own determinations. Other limitations relate to the use of a limited sample with a particular interest, special educational practices, from one university in the Middle East.

To further understand how countries adopt educational programs, further research needs to be conducted with other participants, e.g., administrators and parents, from different countries with collectivist orientations. Such studies would

better inform educators about the extent to which other populations could help us to understand those values which impede or promote such adoptions. Also, longitudinal studies are needed to help educators evaluate the processes through which educational programs are implemented and sustained. Such studies would help to address this effort's limitations.

In summary, as stated by Shogren (2011), preservice special education students' comments underscore the need to examine the values, however, implicit, of an educational innovation given the adoptive country's cultural values and expectations. No innovation is value-free and such values set certain parameters that can undermine outcomes if not recognized at the start of a program's adoption.

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