Using classroom debates to elicit views on educational reforms

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Abstract

Purpose – This classroom-based qualitative study explored the effectiveness of the debate learning strategy in female postgraduate education in Saudi Arabia, which is implementing its recent national development plan, *Vision 2030*. Educational reform is key to its transition to a modernized, knowledge-based economy. The debate format was used to elicit views on educational reforms and necessitated forming and articulating well-reasoned arguments and logic.

Design/methodology/approach – At a Saudi Eastern Province university, 13 female postgraduate students (preservice teachers) participated in a student-centered learning environment conducive to debates. Documents prepared for the debate underwent a qualitative content analysis.

Findings – Data were readily classified into five categories: educational reforms should meet 21st century skills, achieve educational outcomes, ensure Saudi Arabia's knowledge-based economy, prioritize the role of the university and recognize the impact of both teachers and curricula. As key players in the nation's future, participants affirmed the ongoing need for educational innovation and modernization.

Originality/value – While debates are an authentic part of Arabian heritage, they are less utilized in Saudi higher education settings. Findings affirm that debates are a beneficial learning strategy for bolstering future educators' participation in Saudi Arabia's educational reform.

Keywords Debates, Educational reform, Higher education, Curriculum, Teacher education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Higher education is at the heart of a nation's innovation and progress. Postgraduate study programs in particular should simultaneously ensure and reflect a nation's scientific, economic, cultural and social gains (Najafi, Motaghi, Nasrabadi, & Heshi, 2016). This paper arose from an interest in the role educational reform plays in a country's national development plan, which depends on education and on reasoned input from education experts, stakeholders and advocates (McGregor, 2019). Of particular interest is the importance of university students being taught how to debate issues relevant to educational reform.

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) recently embarked on an ambitious initiative to transition from its long-standing oil-based economy (since the 1930s) to a knowledge-based economy. In that spirit, KSA higher education stakeholders and officials have prioritized reforming university education (Quamar, 2021) with special emphasis on the development of higher-order thinking (i.e., related to reasoning, logic and argumentation). This requires educators using active learning strategies that support self-directed learning via critical and creative thinking, dialogue and debate. Active learning depends less on the amount of knowledge a learner has and more on how proficiently he or she can use it (Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021; Rutten & Soetaert, 2016).

Harris and Jones (2019) argue that teacher leadership plays a central role in educational reform and change and affirm "…the way in which teachers contribute to the change and actively participate in 'leading the change' has been shown to be central to the success of any reform effort" (p. 123). Therefore, educators' ability to look at educational systems, curricula and learning programs critically cannot be underestimated. The present study focuses on instilling in Saudi female graduate students (teachers in training) an appreciation for the merits of learning and how to effectively debate controversial issues, so they can contribute to the educational reform that will ultimately affect their professional career. Teacher education programs are offered at the graduate level in KSA, and as the future KSA educational leaders, students' voice is more likely to be heard if they can learn to develop and deliver sound, convincing arguments that engage in discourse with ongoing educational reforms.

Literature review
Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and educational reform
Over the last 15 years, the KSA has attached great importance to its education curriculum by introducing newly updated curricula, deleting and revising content in keeping with educational goals and planning, and constantly evaluating its curricula and adjusting them. Quamar (2021) documented the changes and reforms within Saudi Arabia's educational system and acknowledged the "sociopolitical and economic rationales that paved the way for the reforms" (p. vii), with the most recent being the political and economic decision to transition from an oil-based economy to a knowledge-based one (KSA, 2016). The latter requires an educated citizenry that can think independently using higher-order thinking skills. Also, it needs such educated populace to contribute to political debates (Allamnakhrah & Evers, 2020). In particular, Allamnakhrah and Evers (2020) affirm the importance of Saudi educators' voices being heard in political debates about educational reforms.

In the KSA, women's education was under scrutiny by both national and international bodies. Back in 1956 (i.e., 24 years after the unification of Saudi Arabia), women were not entitled to education. Today, Alghamdi and Al Dossari (2021) assert the great transformation that Saudi education has undergone, with the most notable being women's education. Now, over half (56%) of the Saudi graduate population is women. Their voices are important in KSA's transition to a knowledge-based economy. In fact, women have been recognized as a "great asset" to KSA's national development (KSA, 2016, p. 37).

With regard to educational reform as a long-term process, Alnahdi (2014) suggested that whatever changes are made to Saudi's education system, the resultant curricula should be "balanced, flexible, and sophisticated to meet the needs of students, the requirements of national development plans, and the needs of the labor market of the future" (p. 5). Furthermore, as many researchers have observed, the process of educational change can be complex, difficult and gradual, and it involves competing priorities relating to teachers, students and curricula (Alnahdi, 2014). Which should be reformed first – the teacher or the curriculum? This issue has strong political overtones, and proposals on how to resolve it will impact future educational reform initiatives.

Student-centered learning
Student-centered learning is essential for ensuring student educators' voice is heard in political debates on educational reform. Student-centered learning stands at odds with teacher-directed learning, where a teacher is the fountain of knowledge and guides the learning process, while students are in a passive mode (Aladawi, 2020; Schweisfurth, 2013). Debates are a prime example of a student-centered, self-directed pedagogy. In such a learning environment, while the teacher's actions can influence how students relate to the curriculum, the learners play an active role and assume greater responsibility and accountability for their learning than in a teacher-centered classroom (Aladawi, 2020; Francom, 2010; Grow, 1991; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003).

In a student-centered environment, the teacher–student relationship is characterized by interdependence and mutual respect, whereby teachers function as facilitators, mentors, guides and resources for learning and students actively participate in their educational experience (Aladawi, 2020; Lea *et al.*, 2003; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). With this in mind, Grow (1991) delineated a progressive, staged model to transition from teacher-directed learning to self-directed learning. The model, still in use today, assumes that teachers must learn how to match their approach with where the student is relative to being a self-directed learner: (1) dependent on the teacher with low self-direction; (2) interested with a moderate sense of self-direction; (3) involved in their own education with an intermediate sense of self-direction and (4) totally self-directed. Respectively, the teacher moves through the roles of authority/coach, motivator/guide, facilitator and consultant/delegator. Using debates as a learning strategy is part of this progression model.

Using debates as a learning strategy
As a teaching and learning strategy, debates enable students to practice making critical decisions and judgments about controversial issues by using reasoning, logic and argumentation (Scotece, 2012).

The debate process involves two sides developing respective positions on an issue. Usually, one side takes the con position (i.e., reasons against it) and the other the pro (i.e., in favor of it). Debate participants are expected to draw on the opinions of credible and respected thinkers, scholars and experts to develop their arguments and anticipate counterpoints. They then present their respective positions to the other side, and maybe an audience, with this process mediated by a neutral third party (Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021; Mumtaz & Latif, 2017; Oakley, 2012).

The intent of the debate is to present the most convincing argument, which is achieved by listening carefully to what the other side is saying and developing or raising counterpoints to advance one's own position. Either the moderator declares a winner or the debate teams can come together and debrief as they discuss which side presented the most convincing and sound arguments (Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021; Jiménez, Perdiguero, & Suárez, 2011; Mumtaz & Latif, 2017; Silberman, 2005).

Debates have many benefits as a learning strategy, with the most salient being (1) deeper understanding informed by an array of perspectives and anticipation of counterpoints; (2) augmented higher-order thinking and reasoning, organizational skills and enhanced perceptions; (3) honed research skills in concert with innovative and often spontaneous argumentation and (4) metacognition (people learn about their own mind and how it works) (see Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021; Doody & Condon, 2012; Lustigová, 2011; Najafi *et al.*, 2016; Puchot, 2002; UNESCO, 2012; Williams, 2010). Debates used as a learning strategy in a Saudi higher education classroom for female preservice educators are also empowering (Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021).

Furthermore, debates (their preparation and execution) create deep learning spaces rich with chances to inquire and gain new knowledge and then communicate critically in the face of anticipated pushback (Minch, 2006). Debates also qualitatively refine participants' political behavior and sharpen their understanding relating to the political context and arena (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013).

In the higher education context, using debates as a learning strategy allows students to focus on educational processes and understanding rather than just course material and textbook content. It also emphasizes students' attainment of deep learning and comprehension through an interactive and negotiated relationship with the teacher and the curriculum (Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021; Mumtaz & Latif, 2017; Gibbs, 1995; Lea *et al.*, 2003). Students gain opportunities to transfer their knowledge and study skills across a variety of situations and practice proactive learning habits characterized by motivation and a greater retention of learning (Adeyemi & Oderinde, 2019).

Using debates in Saudi universities

Previous research has affirmed the success of using debates in student-centered university learning environments (Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021; Mumtaz & Latif, 2017; Kember, 2009; Scott, Buchanan, & Haigh, 1997). Onen (2016) encouraged "academic staff in universities to consider using debate since it is perceived not only to encourage active learning, but to equip learners with additional competencies" (p. 110).

In particular, debate at the postgraduate level represents an effective teaching tool for enabling students to practice public speaking, critical thinking and analytic skills and to ensure professional engagement with their peers. The debate learning strategy helps students develop a solid understanding of a controversial problem, and it creates a feeling that they have collectively participated in and own new insights into the issue (Mahmood, Tariq, & Javed, 2011; Onen, 2016). In a recent study by McGee, Pius, and Mukherjee (2020), after completing six debates, pharmacy university students experienced improved confidence in their knowledge level, research skills, critical thinking, communication, public speaking and teamwork (McGee, Pius, & Mukherjee, 2020).

The practice of debating is an authentic part of Arabian heritage. Saudi debating assemblies were first formed in the time of Mohammed in *Dar Al-Nadwa*, a place in Makkah where the Quraysh clansmen congregated to confer about and decide various issues (Paret, 2020). However, using debating skills as a teaching strategy to serve educational purposes came later (Al-Hajory, 2019). Alasmari and Ahmed (2013) declared that "debating is a practice that inspires learners to open their mouth, get into discussion, defend their own positions, place counter arguments and also conduct research on related issues" (p. 147).

That said, employing debates in Saudi higher education is a recent phenomenon (Al-Hajory, 2019). Najafi *et al.* (2016) asserted that the "consequences [of debating] and how it works in the field of education and training is unknown [in the Middle East]" (p. 212). This lacuna is slowly changing. In a recent study about using debates at Saudi universities, Alaqeel, Alghamdi, Balkhi, Almazrou, and Alaujan (2021) reported that male and female students' perceptions of their confidence in reasoning and communicating their arguments improved after participating in an in-class debate.

Similarly, Mumtaz and Latif (2017) reported that debating helped female medical students improve their argumentation skills as well as their ability to analyze research related to the debate issue and effectively learn about controversial issues. Even in language learning, Fauzan (2016) found that, through a series of three debates, Saudi English as a Foreign Language students gradually improved their ability to find data related to the debate topics and express their thoughts and opinions through reasoning and argumentation. The current study contributes to this nascent and emerging body of scholarship by examining the

effectiveness of debating as a learning strategy with female postgraduate students in Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

This classroom-based, qualitative exploratory study was conducted at a public university in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

Participants

The convenience sample comprised 13 female M.Ed. graduate (preservice teacher) students who were taking a module in *Curriculum Planning and Development in Light of 21st Century Skills*. Participants were aged 25–45 years with bachelor's degree specializations in arts, education, business administration and basic sciences.

Data collection and procedures

During the fall semester, the graduate students participating in the study were involved in a debate focused on the issue of "*Should Saudi educational system reform start with the teacher or the curriculum*?" This topic was couched within the overall theme of "Educational System Reform and Curriculum Development in Saudi Arabia." No readings were assigned about KSA education, educational reform or *Vision 2030*. Students were expected to research these issues on their own in preparation for the debate. However, they were assigned an Arabic version of Johnson's (2007) book on creative controversy in the classroom, which included the use of debates and dialogues as learning activities.

The class was divided into two debate teams – one arguing about reforming the teacher first ($N = 6$) and the other arguing about reforming the curriculum first ($N = 7$). In each team, half of the students took part in debating the issue, while the other half were observers. The 45-min debate, which was held in Arabic and then translated into English, was followed with a 15-min discussion about the process and the debate strategy. Someone other than the course teacher moderated the debate. Class members voted which group presented the most convincing arguments (see also Jiménez *et al.*, 2011; Oakley, 2012; Silberman, 2005).

After the class was over, each student was required to submit to the instructor (via Blackboard Collaborate) the Arabic-language arguments she had prepared for the debate. Also, each debate team was required to submit any slides they had prepared as well as any other joint input. These uploaded documents were subsequently translated into English. Permission was obtained to use the students' journaled feedback on the implementation of the debate strategy as data for the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure students' anonymity and privacy.

Data analysis

The English-language version of the documents students submitted in preparation for the debate underwent a qualitative content analysis (QCA). The content of the debaters' journal entries about the debate was also examined. QCA creates categories and classifications rather than themes. Categories represent a collection of similar data, while themes represent the essence and meaning of data. Themes require a concern for context, while categories do not (Morse, 2008). The content of the documents was described (i.e., what was there) and presented as groupings of ideas (e.g., categories) (see Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

Results

Members of both teams actively contributed to the debate about reforming the teacher first or reforming the curriculum first. Seventeen arguments or positions were tendered in total.

Each student contributed at least one debate point, with some sharing two or three arguments. Table 1 describes what was in the documents that students developed to conduct the debate (i.e., their most salient debate points organized into five categories).

While Table 1 provides an overall profile of the five categories of arguments presented during the debate, Table 2 summarizes key arguments tendered by each debate team with representative data from respective team members. These data points affirm the ability of Saudi female graduate students to weigh in on this issue and participate critically and effectively in a debate context. They were able to construct reasoned opinions and offer ideas pursuant to the process of educational reform and, more broadly, Saudi Arabia's goals as per *Vision 2030* (KSA, 2016).

The QCA of the documents that students prepared for the debate revealed three significant discussion points regarding educational reform priorities embedded within their arguments and opinions: (1) an equal role for teachers and curricula in educational reform; (2) the integrated nature of the teacher and curriculum and (3) the need for ongoing educational reform in Saudi Arabia. Each of these categories is discussed in the following section.

Theme: Educational system reform
Debate topic: Should the Saudi educational system reform start with the teacher or the curriculum?

Start with the teacher	Start with the curriculum
1. Reform to meet 21st century skills The teacher's role has changed and is no longer confined to knowledge transfer but encompasses deep-rooted values, ethics, creativity, innovation and critical thinking. A competent teacher plays a key role in education and should be reformed first	The curriculum plays a key role in incorporating the skills of the 21st century to meet the needs of the modern world; therefore, its reform precedes any other parts of educational reform, including teachers
2. Reform to achieve educational outcomes A competent teacher can bring any curriculum to life, leading to student success as evident in some schools that outperform others although they all follow the same curriculum. Related teacher training programs are important	Any teacher will need an effective curriculum to prepare what and how to teach. The curriculum is a teacher's tool to help students reach their learning targets through differentiating their educational levels
3. Reform to ensure a Saudi knowledge-based economy A competent teacher is much needed amidst the onward march of technological progress, globalization and digital transformation in the modern world. The teacher is a key player in the knowledge-based economy	The curriculum is the brain of the educational process. It is a master at achieving success in building Saudi society and a knowledge-based economy. It does so by providing leadership, guidance and monitoring the implementation of educational plans
4. Universities' role in prioritizing the reform of the teacher or the curriculum Universities play a major role in teacher reform because universities form community partnerships with colleges of public education. They also play an important role in the preservice teacher selection process (enrollment)	Universities play a vital role in curricular reform by providing graduate programs and conducting educational research
5. Influencing: the role of teachers versus the curriculum A competent teacher is an influencer of his/her students. The teacher's knowledge and behavior can be exemplified. The teacher's contributions to the education process are valued in a professional community, which he/she helps build	The curriculum, a crucial part of the educational process, helps develop and influence this process to its fullest by guiding teachers to employ a variety of effective teaching methods and providing appropriate learning environments and educational facilities

Table 1.
Summary of debate points organized into categories

Topic: Education reform: start with teacher or curriculum?

Debate team 1: Start with teacher reform
Fatima: Reform of teachers, who play a key role in the educational process, is essential. The teachers' skills and knowledge need to be developed so they can take part in designing the courses while taking into consideration various learning styles. Teachers' views and opinions are important because they are the ones who participate in the curriculum reform process

Nana: The teacher plays the most important role in the educational process. As an effective teacher, he or she manages the educational process with the least resources. If the resources are available, the teacher achieves the best outcomes by using the resources and adopting curricula creatively and effectively. A good teacher will try to innovate, to keep pace with the changes in curricula, advancement of technology and monitor students' progress

Samia: The teacher is the cornerstone and the first pillar in educational reform. The teacher is the one that makes the difference in students' hearts. Studies published in the *Planning and Development Agency* (the Committee for Teacher Preparation Development Program) in 2017 showed that there is a difference of two years of progress between a student who was taught by a competent teacher and one who learned from an incompetent teacher and such differences last. Therefore, the teacher becomes the priority when educational reform is required

Debate team 2: Start with curricular reform
Abrar: The curriculum plays an important role in the educational process, as it is the fertile source from which the teacher provides students with information and instills in them positive trends and values. Any curriculum must reflect the philosophy that a society believes in. Also, adjustments and development processes must be undertaken in order to meet the individual, social, economic, scientific and technological needs in an accelerating and changing time

Maram: The curriculum is a community tool to prepare individuals to successfully meet challenges. A good curriculum identifies methods and activities and takes into account various aspects of education and the learner. The curriculum determines the methods used for teachers' preparation and eligibility to teach. The curriculum, from my point of view, is the starting point for teacher development, excellence in education and learner creativity

Sara: As presented by the Saudi Ministry of Education (MoE), great importance is attached to the curriculum development process. Modifications and additions to the curricula have been carried out in KSA from its inception to the present time

Zahra: Our country has great aspirations and there are great changes ahead of us in various sectors and aspects, including education, which has the greatest influence on the strengths of Saudi youth. The reform of the curriculum should come first. Recent reforms in the curriculum did not reach what is required to develop education. The curriculum is still filled with monotony and lack of correlation between learning materials, and it is still separated from students' reality. . . the curriculum enables the success of learning. A good curriculum is also the teacher's tool. . .and the teacher's initial reference. The next stage of curriculum development is developing and producing qualified teachers. . . The inclusion of the acquisition of higher order thinking skills and leadership skills in the curriculum will enable our youth to move the country toward the great vision

Equal role of teachers and curricula in reform
First, when viewed collectively, the debaters' statements provided critical insight into their reasoned thoughts about the roles of both *teacher* and *curriculum* in the Saudi educational process and the importance of reforming both to achieve KSA's *Vision 2030*. Graduate student debaters varyingly described the teacher as a fundamental component of the educational system and a crucial component of innovation and change. Pro-reform-teacher-first debater Fatima argued that, "the teacher is essential since he or she plays a key role in the educational process."

A debate team colleague, Samia, described the teacher as "the cornerstone" in educational reform as the teacher influences students' emotional and mental well-being (their "hearts") as well as their academic achievements. Study participants argued that the teacher represents a

vehicle for reform that can influence and improve the curriculum and its delivery. To illustrate, Nana insisted that "the teacher plays the most important role in the educational process [and that] a good teacher will try to innovate, to keep pace with the change in curricula." Even pro-curriculum-first debaters acknowledged the role of teachers in their arguments.

Similarly, those assigned with arguing in favor of prioritizing curriculum reform first offered equally compelling insights into the role of curriculum within the education system. Abrar described curriculum as the "fertile source that provides students with information and knowledge and instills in them positive trends and values." She further asserted that curriculum must not only reflect Saudi society's philosophy and values but also change and adapt as the wider society modernizes.

Two pro-curriculum-first debaters likened the curriculum to a tool of vital importance to students, teachers and wider communities. Maram argued that the curriculum is "a community tool to prepare individuals to meet challenges successfully" and represents a "starting point" for teacher development and creative experiences for learners. Affirming these ideas, Zahra suggested that the curriculum "is also the teacher's tool. . . and the teacher's initial reference." She further insisted that reform must begin with the curriculum to attain quality education that will move Saudi Arabia toward its *Vision 2030*.

In assessing the comments made by both sides of the debate, it became evident that participants were convinced that both the teacher and the curriculum perform critical functions within the Saudi education system and the process of educational reform in the KSA should address both roles rather than privileging one over the other.

Integrated nature of curriculum and teacher

A QCA of the documents prepared for the debate revealed arguments pursuant to the interconnected nature of both the curriculum and the teacher within the Saudi education system. The debaters highlighted the inseparability and intertwined relationship between the teacher and the curriculum. Participants argued that, as part of the educational experience, the teacher shapes and influences the curriculum and the curriculum, in turn, enables and equips the teacher.

As Fatima argued on the debate team for pro-reform-teacher-first, "teachers' views and opinions are important, because they are the ones who participate in the curriculum reform." Likewise, Nana contended that the teacher "achieves the best outcomes by using the resources and adopting curricula creatively and effectively" and remains responsible for implementing changes and new forms of technology. The curriculum in turn shapes the methods and activities of the teacher. According to Maram (pro-reform-curriculum-first), "curriculum determines the methods of teachers' preparation and eligibility [and] is the starting point for teacher development."

Viewed as a whole, participants' comments indicated that reforming one role inevitably affects and leads to changes in the other – prioritizing teacher development will undoubtedly lead to revision of teaching content and material (i.e., curriculum), and prioritizing curriculum reform will provide teachers with updated resources and foster professional development. Their arguments collectively pointed toward the interconnected nature of the educational reform process owing to the intricate dynamic between both entities – teacher and curriculum.

Need for ongoing educational reform

The QCA also revealed participants' certainty regarding the necessity of ongoing change and reform to the Saudi educational system. Students on both sides of the debate indicated the importance of educational reform, regardless of their assigned priority point, and they tendered advantages that reform brings to teachers, learners and the broader society. To illustrate, start-with-teachers-first debater Nana maintained, "reform must include the entire education system and that the change in the educational institution must be complete,"

meaning keep going until finalized. She argued further that this state of completion is dependent on effective teachers who "keep pace" with changing curriculum and new technologies.

In arguing in favor of reforming the curriculum first, Abrar insisted on the ever-changing nature of educational revision: "Any curriculum must reflect the philosophy that a society believes in, [but] we do not stop at that." Her debate colleague Zahra likewise acknowledged the need for continued work to accomplish Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030* goals explaining that "recent reforms in the curriculum did not reach what is required to develop education. The curriculum is still filled with monotony and lack of correlation between learning materials and is still separated from students' reality."

Discussion and implications

Future debate around Saudi educational reform and how it links to *Vision 2030* (KSA, 2016) will demand educators who are experienced, independent thinkers. It is thus noteworthy that several participants on both sides of the debate referenced the connection between reforms and the vision. This is indicative of advanced political thinking and an encouraging finding for participants who are the future Saudi educators. Through delineating and debating various reasoned approaches for achieving educational reform, these future educators were afforded the opportunity to be part of a broader political conversation and the process of transformation and change in the KSA. This finding is in agreement with previous studies that found debates serve to sharpen people's understanding of the political process and refine their political behavior (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Mumtaz & Latif, 2017).

The debate strategy employed in this study also generated deep and thoughtful comments from participants intimating two things: (1) they had developed a solid understanding of the issues via collectively engaging with their learning partners (see Fauzan, 2016; Mahmood *et al.*, 2011; Onen, 2016) and (2) the debate seemed to provide a rigorous learning environment where students could assume responsibility for their own learning (see Lea *et al.*, 2003; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005; Onen, 2016). Alaqeel *et al.* (2021) also found that debating improved Saudi female students' perceptions of their confidence in reasoning and communicating their arguments.

Evidence of Grow's (1991) progressive model was apparent in this study. In an educational context that is conventionally teacher centered (Alghamdi & Al Dossari, 2021), the researchers purposefully created a student-centered learning environment conducive to introducing the debate strategy. They, in effect, discerned that students were at stage 2 of Grow's model (interested with a moderate sense of self-direction) and ready for debates, if these were properly scaffolded. The instructor's intuitive pedagogical innovation was successful because participants effectively prepared and articulated arguments in favor of ongoing educational reform. They rose to the challenge of improving their argumentation skills and effectively learning about a controversial issue (see also Mumtaz & Latif, 2017; Onen, 2016). The findings of the present study confirm that partaking in the debate learning strategy prepared university students to engage with a controversial political issue and related developments. Participants argued for an equal role for teachers and curriculum in educational reform, a respect for the integrated nature of teachers and curriculum and the need for ongoing educational reform in Saudi Arabia. The debate appeared to have sharpened their understanding of the political context and arena (see also Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013).

Participants also identified other aspects of Saudi educational reform that need attention: meet 21st century skills (Alnahdi, 2014), contribute to Saudi Arabia's knowledge-based economy (Quamar, 2021), respect the role universities play in educational reform (both in teacher preparation and in supporting reform-related research) and make curricula more authentic and meaningful to students' lives (Alnahdi, 2014). Saudi policy makers and other

stakeholders are encouraged to heed the well-reasoned ideas tendered by these future female educators whose professional career will be directly impacted by educational reforms.

By and large, the study showed that having postgraduate students practice debating on topics relating to educational reform affords them an opportunity to both analyze the broader trends and discussions on reform nationally and globally and reflect on their experiences as graduate education learners within the educational system. As future leaders and participants in KSA's educational sector, participants benefitted from debate commentaries that offered insight and critical analysis into the educational reform process as it affects both Saudi curricula and teachers.

Conclusions

This classroom-based exploratory study found that the debate strategy was highly effective in enabling female graduate-level students (preservice teachers) to form and express their opinions about educational reform initiatives in the KSA relative to its visionary goals as per *Vision 2030* (KSA, 2016). The participants were 13 female postgraduate students who were undergoing teacher training. The details of the debate were examined via a QCA. The study showed that as a higher education teaching strategy, debates about contemporary events and social issues can enrich the learning experiences of novice educators as they are socialized into their future role. Findings also affirm that debates helped future teachers mature as independent thinkers who can form and articulate reasoned arguments. Preparing for and engaging in a debate also helped them acquire new knowledge about contentious KSA educational and political issues and agendas.

The current study was limited to one group of female students in a Saudi university. Future studies should focus on male graduate students, and the sample should be expanded to include universities in other KSA provinces.

Despite its small size, the study made a significant contribution in providing preservice teacher perspectives to the attainment of educational reform in the KSA and affirmed future educators' support for a KSA education system that meets 21st century skills, respects the role universities and teachers play in educational reform, makes curricula more authentic and bolsters Saudi's knowledge-based economy. Educational transformation in the right direction helps a nation thrive, while preparing educators to share their voices in the public debate about educational reforms is imperative.

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