Does Saudi Society and the School Community Affect the Improvement of Critical Thinking Skills in Saudi Arabian Elementary Schools?

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Abstract: The intent of this explanatory sequential mixed-method study is to examine Islamic teachers' thoughts on improving critical thinking skills in elementary schools in the Southwestern province of Saudi Arabia. This study involves the collection of quantitative data and an explanation of the quantitative results with qualitative data. In the first phase, a survey was administered to Islamic teachers in Saudi elementary schools to assess their opinions on improving students' critical thinking skills and to identify the factors that influence or hinder their implementation of critical thinking instruction. In the second phase, qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews with a number of Islamic teachers in order to explore more fully their perceptions toward improving students' critical thinking skills in Saudi elementary schools. The study's findings suggest there is a need to also examine female Islamic teachers' perceptions toward critical thinking in the Southwestern region of Saudi Arabia in order to identify the similarities and differences between the perceptions of male and female teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is the highest mental activity concerning human interactions with daily life enabling them to engage in the process of making meaningful decisions (Howie, 2011). There is an ongoing theoretical debate among researchers as to the definition of critical thinking. Influencing this debate are issues related to

individual understandings of terms, research needs and interests, researchers' cultural backgrounds, and the educational philosophies of the researchers (Alazzi, 2008, Ozkan-Akan, 2003; Sa-U & Abdurrahman, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to define what this study means by critical thinking because "if educators and psychologists do not know what critical thinking is, how can researchers improve it. Considerations of critical thinking have remained largely in the realm of theoretical speculation, working assumptions, anecdotal observation and pedagogical discussion" (Robinson, 2005, p.26). It is also necessary to define critical thinking in order to help the reader understand the study's concepts. Literature devoted to thinking skills overall, and critical thinking exclusively, has offered a variety of explanations of critical thinking and its categories.

In respect to the definition of critical thinking, scholars have defined critical thinking from different perspectives. For example, Facione has made major contributions to the subject of the philosophy of critical thinking, and defined critical thinking as "habitually inquisitive, flexible, orderly in complex matters, and diligent in seeking relevant information" (p. 75). He also found "that the interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation were the cognitive skills at the core of critical thinking" (as cited in Smith & Stitts, 2013, p. 75). Halpern's (1996) and Paul and Elder's (2008) definitions were essentially consistent with Facione (as cited in Klein, 2011). They defined critical thinking based on the analytical process, either theoretically or practically. Halpern (as cited in Klein, 2011) defined critical thinking as "purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed – the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions" (p. 1). However, he pointed out the word

> *critical is not meant to imply finding fault, as it might be used in a pejorative way to describe someone who is always making negative comments. It is used instead in the sense of 'critical' that involves evaluation or judgment, ideally with the goal of providing useful and accurate feedback that serves to improve the thinking process.*
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> *(Halpern, 1996, p. 451)*

In this study, the term critical thinking is defined as a different learning method from memorizing knowledge and facts. It involves differentiating one thing from another based on observation and collecting real evidence. By implementing critical thinking strategies, educators improve students' abilities in terms of comparison, contrast, classification, making assumptions, and applying knowledge in new situations. In this study, the term critical thinking refers to how a student shows that he or she is able to think. The following section identifies the similarities and differences among critical thinking, problem solving, and creative thinking.

2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

During the last decades of the 20th century, the importance of developing children's thinking skills has increased because the increasing complexity and shifting realities of modern life increased the need for generating new knowledge, comprehension, judgment, and evaluation skills in order to deal with job market requirements. Furthermore, critical thinking has recently become an essential qualification demanded by employers seeking solutions to unexpected problems and strategies for successfully competing in the global business market (Alazzi, 2008; Bataineh & Alazzi, 2009). Therefore, improving critical thinking has become a significant school task in the 21st century. G. F. Smith (2002) contended that the importance of developing learner critical thinking skills has been increased in the past decade because they are essential core life skills.

Throughout the 20th century, studies have emphasized the importance of improving cognitive skills in young children because of their high capability of learning basic knowledge, values, aptitudes, and general competencies. Fisher (2014) stated, "most of the growth of the human brain occurs in early childhood: by the age of six, the brain in most children is approximately 90% of its adult size" (p. 1). McGuinness (2005) stressed the importance of teaching critical thinking skills to children to enable them to become higher-level thinkers, thereby producing creative thoughts that prepare them to become tomorrow's leaders. Similarly, Fisher (2014) insisted that teachers should take children's mental development into account at an early age because it "may be more effective than waiting until the brain is fully developed. Cognitive challenge is important at all stages, but especially in the early years of education" (p.1).

It is essential to improve thinking skills in general (Burke, Williams, Skinner, 2007; Kowalczyk, Hackworth & Case-smith, 2012; Marlow & Inman, 1992), and critical thinking skills in particular, in elementary school students (Ozkan-Akan, 2003; Sa-U & Abdurrahman, 2008; Stedman & Adams, 2012) and secondary school levels students (Alazzi, 2008; Bataineh & Alazzi, 2009; Furtado, 2010; Zeteroglu, Dogan, & Derman, 2011). Several studies have stressed the importance of improving students' thinking skills in higher education such as in high schools, colleges, and universities (Alwehaibi, 2012; Bensley, Crowe, Bernhardt, Buckner& Allman 2010; Innabi & El Sheikh, 2007).

Although the significance of developing students' thinking skills is becoming understood, there are several factors that hinder and impede the progression of critical thinking abilities. These factors are society (Bataineh & Alazzi, 2009), educational background, social-class, school involvement of parents, (Lauer, 2005; & Maiorana, 1992), teaching methods, and learning material (Beyer, 1984; & Brookfield, 1987) that depends on factual knowledge that limits judgment and evaluation skills, classroom environment (Howie,

2011; Kelly, 2009; Kowalczyk. et al., 2012; Moore, 2009; Stedman & Adams, 2012; Zeteroglu et al. 2012), and teacher perceptions (Alazzi, 2008; Bataineh & Alazzi, 2009; Burke et al., 2007; Fisher, 2007; Ozkan-Akan, 2003). Additionally, barriers impeding improvement of critical thinking in the classroom include the educator's lack of necessary skills to assess and allocate the students' critical thinking skills and resources to implement critical thinking strategies within classroom environments (Aliakbari & Sadeghdaghighi, 2013; Kowalczyk et al., 2011).

In the Middle East, society and community culture are considered the most common obstacles to improving critical thinking and instead favor harmony and security in the community (Alazzi, 2008). Therefore, "questioning authority figures such as parents, teachers, and school administrators, and politicians is interpreted as disrespectful behavior and opposing the accepted ways of doing things so that critiquing and questioning knowledge and authorities is not promoted in their societies" (p. 10). In less developed countries, the role of school curriculum is to deliver the culture of the society to the learners in terms of initiating students into the norms of their cultures and teaching them the common cultural heritage because they think it is an essential way to protect their communities from external influences (Bataineh & Alazzi, 2009).

In a Saudi context, culture is an important resource for reforming and building school curricula because it represents the different aspects of society, such as religion, economy, and customs. However, culture is one of topics that conservative leaders and politicians deem off limits to criticism and questioning. Therefore, students are discouraged from questioning, challenging, or critiquing the ideas of authority figures, such as teachers, elders, parents, and politicians. Students often try to avoid such topics for critical discussion because they would be subject to failing in their academic courses or social exclusion (Allamnakhrah, 2013). Authority figures are another cultural aspect in these types of societies that often attempt to create the hypothetical subliminal political ceiling in an effort to control citizens' questions. However, this leads to the limiting of people's freedom and affects people's identities. These figures often thwart people from practicing critical thinking in their daily lives (Allamnakhrah, 2013; Bataineh & Alazzi, 2009).

As mentioned above, improving young learners' critical thinking abilities is a questionable topic among educators and policy makers in education as there apparently seems to be some cultural and social resistance. To date, no study has examined the effect of Saudi society on the improvement of critical thinking in Saudi Arabian elementary schools. The intent of this study is to examine whether or not Saudi society influences improving learners' critical thinking abilities in Saudi elementary schools by answering the following question:

1. To what extent, does the Saudi society affect the improvement of critical thinking in Saudi Arabian elementary schools?

3. METHODS

In present study, an explanatory sequential mixed-method study was used in order to reveal the study participants' views toward the research problem. This strategy "is a popular strategy for mix methods design that often appeals to researchers with strong quantitative leanings. It is characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results" (Creswell, 2009.p.211). The impetus for using the explanatory sequential mixed-method design is to get a better understanding of the Islamic teacher's perceptions toward improving critical thinking skills among students in Saudi elementary school than would be obtained by either method alone.

3.1 Participants

3.1.1 Questionnaire Participants

A total of 192 male Islamic teachers who taught in elementary schools in the Southwestern region of Saudi Arabia were invited to complete and return the survey. Eventually, 138 completed the mailed survey and submitted their responses. The study's sample was limited to examining male Islamic teachers' because of the Saudi Ministry of Education's regulations. Table 1 shows the personal characteristics, demographic information, educational backgrounds, and teaching experience of the study's sample. For example, a large number of Islamic teachers (60) worked in the public schools in Abha city (43.47%), while only 10 worked in Al-sawda (7.25%). As well, 10 Islamic teachers worked in Prince Sultan Bin Abdul-Aziz city (7.25%), and 8 teachers taught in Al-qraa area (5.80%). Additionally, 50 teachers worked in Khamis Mushayt city, which represents 36.23% of the study's participants. Essentially, Al-sawda, Prince Sultan Bin Abdul-Aziz city, and Al-qraa are more rural and conservative areas while Abha city and Khamis Mushayt city are more densely populated and affluent.

As far as educational background, the majority of the participants (n=68) hold a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies, which represents 49.27% of the study's participants. Additionally, 40 Islamic teachers hold an associate's degree in Islamic studies, representing 28.99% of the study's sample. The remaining participants of the study's sample (21.74%) hold a bachelor's

Table 1: Distribution of the Study Participants by School Location, Educational Background, and Teaching Experience

Variables		Frequency	Present
School Location	Abha city	60	43.47%
	Al-sawda	10	7.25%
	Prince Sultan Bin Abdul-Aziz city	10	7.25%
	Al-qraa	8	5.80%
	Khamis Mushayt city	50	36.23%
	N=	138	100%
Educational Background	Associate degree	40	28.99%
	Bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies	68	49.27%
	Bachelor's degree in other disciplines	30	21.74%
Teaching Experience	5-10 years	50	36.23%
	11-15 years	35	25.36%
	16-20 years	30	21.74%
	21-25 years	14	10.15%
	Over 25 years	9	6.52%

degree in different disciplines such as language arts, history, geography, physical education, or science. This is due to the lack of specialized teachers and the location of schools. With regard to teaching experience as a variable, 50 of 138 (36.23%) Islamic teachers who completed the questionnaires have 10 or fewer years of teaching experience in elementary schools, and 35 (25.36%) Islamic teachers have taught for 11 to 15 years. Approximately 30 (21.74%) Islamic teachers had between 16 to 20 years of teaching experience, and 14 (10.15%) teachers had teaching experience between 21 to 25 years. A total of 9 Islamic teachers (6.52%) had more than 25 years of teaching experience.

3.1.2 Interview Participants

The qualitative data was gathered through the purposive sampling of 10 Islamic teachers selected to be interviewed by me and my assistants who are three faculty members in King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The participants were selected based on four criteria:

1. Agreeing to voluntarily participate in the study by completing the consent form.

Table 2: Background and Characteristics of Interviewees

No.	Name of Teacher	Educational Background	Years of Teaching experience	School location
1	Salah	Associate degree of Islamic Studies	10	Abha
2	Khalid	Bachelor of Islamic Studies	25	Abha
3	Rashd	Bachelor of Islamic Studies	15	Abha
4	Marzuk	Bachelor of History	7	Abha
5	Ahmad	Bachelor of Islamic Studies	5	Al-sawda
6	Mohammed	Bachelor of Geography	13	Al-sawda
7	Ali	Bachelor of Islamic Studies	18	Prince Sultan Bin Abdul-Aziz city
8	Yahya	Associated degree of Language Arts	28	Khamis Mushayt
9	Ibrahim	Bachelor of Islamic Studies	12	Khamis Mushayt
10	Taha	Bachelor of Islamic Studies	21	Al-qraa

2. Completing the study's questionnaire.
3. Having experience teaching Islamic studies at the elementary school level.
4. Representing a range of Islamic teachers' responses to the questionnaire items, educational backgrounds and schools' locations.

Table 2 displays the educational background, and teaching experience, and school location.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The quantitative data was collected through a survey. Basically, the study's survey included two sections. The first section was designed to gather demographic characteristics of the study's participants such as school location, educational background, and teaching experience. The second section was designed to examine participants view's on the Saudi society and school community's influence on the improvement of critical thinking skills in the Saudi elementary schools. The questionnaire instrument consisted of eight-items which are adopted from Ozkan-Akan's (2003) study regarding teachers' perceptions on improving thinking skills in general. Participant responses to

each statement were in the form of a five-point Likert scale that "assesses attitudes toward a topic by presenting a set of statements about the topic and asking respondents to indicate for each other whether they strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree" (Ary, 2010, p. 209).

To ensure the validity and reliability of questionnaire, I conducted a pilot study in order to check the language of the survey and decide whether the study is feasible and whether it is worthwhile to continue. The respondents offered some helpful suggestions and feedback in order to determine if any modification of the survey's statements were necessary to ensure they would be understandable. At the same time, the researcher gave questionnaires to three Saudi professors at King Khalid University, King Saud University, and Al Jouf University to assess the survey's statements in terms of their wording and relevance of the items to the study and to review the content for accuracy in the translation of the statements. Furthermore, the researcher calculated the reliability analysis of the questionnaire by SPSS 19.0 so that the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.856 presented the degree of internal consistency of the questionnaire's items. Ultimately, the questionnaire was determined to be valid, reliable, and ready for distribution to the study's sample.

Face-to-face interviews were aimed to extract participants' opinions about the study's topic to determine their understanding of the survey's statements. Therefore, its questions were developed based on the survey's results and in light of the study's questions, which assisted me in obtaining a holistic picture of their perceptions and thoughts. Ten male Islamic teachers, who responded to the questionnaire, were selected for interviewing in December 2013. The primary language used in the interviews was Arabic in an effort to make interviewees comfortable and to help them better understand the interview questions. The average duration of each interview was 20 minutes. These interviews were videotaped for accurate recording of data.

Regarding credibility and reliability of the interview questions, three academics proficient in both Arabic and English reviewed the translations to ensure they would be understood by the interviewees. They provided me with meaningful suggestions. The researcher trained his assistants to be qualified in interviewing the study's subjects and in recording the semi-structured interview data independently and separately, to be able to discuss interview themes, and to resolve any recording discrepancies. After recording and transcribing the interview data, the researcher sent the interview themes to the interviewees to check the originality and authenticity of their interviews and to get their final permissions for analyzing the qualitative data. These procedures helped me to produce 100% reliability, which is a high degree of agreement on the recording data among the interviewers.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Questionnaire

Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for the eight-items in the questionnaire. The questionnaire included items on whether Saudi society and the school community influence improving learners' critical thinking abilities in Saudi elementary schools. These items generated the strongest agreement with the negative roles Saudi society and the school communities play in the fostering and promoting of students' critical thinking abilities.

The first item focuses on the positive effect the development of critical thinking skills has on different aspects of society (M= 4.26). The second item asked whether Saudi society valued and supported the process of promoting students' critical thinking skills (M= 4.07). The third statement addressed the notion that Saudi society hinders efforts in accelerating students' critical thinking ability because of the potential effect on society (M=4.07). Based on this result, questioning people in authority may be interpreted as discourteous and disrespectful behavior (M=3.85).

Contrary to this supportive view, only 5% of the respondents stated that improving critical thinking may help society's leaders and decision makers to improve the Saudi community. The same respondents asserted that teachers in general, and Islamic teachers in particular, should focus on teaching essential skills such as communication, leadership, and social coexistence with others at the elementary school level. They thought that critical thinking is a suitable

Table 3: Mean Scores of the Questionnaire Items

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Improving CTS thinking skills leads to improving Saudi society.	4.26	.737
2	Saudi society does not value CT.	4.07	.948
3	Improving CT affect the Saudi of society security.	4.07	.948
4	It is disrespectful to question people in authority.	3.85	1.050
5	Islamic teachers fear parental disapproval.	3.66	1.496
6	Islamic teachers fear administrative disapproval.	3.60	1.363
7	School administrators and teaching supervisors do not support improvement of CT in the classroom.	3.29	1.471
8	Improving CTS is not included in teaching supervisors' observations.	3.007	1.264

and welcome skill for mature people, but not for young learners because it requires employing a number of higher-ordered thinking skills. Instead, teachers should focus on providing students with solid theoretical knowledge in different subjects such as Islamic studies, math, science, history, and geography. Moreover, they believed it important to delay practicing critical thinking skills to the high school level when students are mature enough to evaluate and make wise decisions.

As displayed in Table 3, the majority of participants strongly agreed that improving critical thinking skills leads to improvements in Saudi society in terms of providing citizens with opportunities to speak up about issues such as health care deficiencies, economic crises, and political corruption. It shows that over 85% of the respondents strongly agreed that Saudi society does not value improving critical thinking.

However, only 12% of the Islamic teachers thought that Saudi society appreciates and encourages the improvement of young learners' critical thinking skills by elementary school teachers. This opposite view claims that Saudi society appreciates and encourages elementary school faculty to improve young learners' critical thinking skills. The reasoning is that the current elementary school students are the future leaders responsible for the employment of critical thinking skills by other citizens either in school or at work. They emphasized the consequence of the teacher's role in encouraging students to express gently and politely their opinions and beliefs and to question people in authority in order to produce productive and wise leadership.

In regard to the school community's influence, the questionnaire contained five items focusing on the positions of Saudi school administrators and parents. The first statement was about the unenthusiastic view school administrators and teacher supervisors have toward accelerating critical thinking skills of learners in the classroom (M=3.29). Such learning was not emphasized in their observation notes (M=3.00). Therefore, teacher supervisors usually force Islamic teachers to cover the Islamic studies content (M=3.52), which causes them to avoid administrative disapproval for teaching critical thinking at the elementary schools level (M=3.60). The teachers also fear parental dissatisfaction for allowing their children to practice critical thinking in the classrooms (M=3.66).

As Table 4 shows, more than half (55%) of Islamic teachers thought that the school staff, administrators, and teaching supervisors for both pre-service teachers and in-service teachers do not always provide support for improving critical thinking in the elementary schools in terms of strategies, techniques, and activities. Moreover, more than half of Islamic teachers insisted that teaching supervisors do not emphasize the improvement of critical thinking

Table 4: The Extent to Which Islamic Teachers Agree or Disagree with Statements Regarding the Influence Society Has on Improving Critical Thinking Skills (CTS)

Statement	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean M	Standard deviation SD
Improving CTS thinking skills leads to improving Saudi society.	37.0	58.0	0	4.3	0.7	4.26	.737
Saudi society does not value CT.	34.1	52.9	0	12.3	0.7	4.07	.948
Improving CT affect the Saudi of society security.	34.1	52.9	0	12.3	0.7	4.07	.948
It is disrespectful to question people in authority.	28.3	49.3	2.2	20.3	0	3.85	1.050

skills in their observation comments and notes. They also pointed out those teaching supervisors usually force Islamic teachers to cover the Islamic content according to the scope and sequence of the subject.

Another important finding is that over 55% of respondents usually fear administrative disapproval for teaching critical thinking in the classrooms and for using unusual teaching methods, such as field trips and focus groups. In

Table 5: The Extent to Which Islamic Teachers Agree or Disagree with Statements Regarding the Influence School Communities Has on Improving Critical Thinking Skills (CTS)

Statement	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean M	Standard deviation SD
School administrators and teaching supervisors do not support improvement of CT in the classroom.	26.8	29.0	8.7	18.1	17.4	3.29	1.471
Improving CTS is not included in teaching supervisors' observations.	57.2	8.7	0	11.6	22.5	3.007	1.264
Islamic teachers are forced to cover the content of textbooks.	29.0	25.4	21.7	17.4	6.5	3.52	1.256
Islamic teachers fear administrative disapproval.	38.4	16.7	21.7	13.8	9.4	3.60	1.363
Islamic teachers fear parental disapproval.	39.9	31.2	0.7	12.3	15.9	3.66	1.496

addition, they are apprehensive of parental disapproval for concentrating on critical thinking skills. This stems from parents thinking that students who employ critical thinking may be isolated from their community because they viewed critical thinking as negative behavior. On the other hand, 35% of the Islamic teachers who completed the questionnaire argued that the Saudi Ministry of Education, school administrators, teacher supervisors, and parents usually support teachers in general, and Islamic teachers in particular, to implement critical thinking strategies across all educational levels and disciplines. Furthermore, they mentioned that implementing critical thinking is one of the primary criteria in the annual assessment of teacher performance in the classroom.

4.2 Interview

The comments provided by the interviewees revealed two different views on this topic. The first view was shared by the majority of interviewees and contends that Saudi society does not appreciate or support the process of developing citizens' critical thinking skills for two reasons: 1) teachers and parents must teach students to respect the cultural ideas and accept them without question; and 2) a common misconception among elders and politicians is that improving critical thinking among young learners may affect the security and conformity of Saudi society. In other words, parents and leaders of society interpret questioning and back-and forth dialogue with people in authority as disrespectful and inappropriate behavior. Notably, Ali explained that

To be honest, Saudi parents need to teach children that others' views must be respected and appreciated. Also, questioning and arguing with a person in charge of something is inappropriate manner and unacceptable cultural behaviors. Saudi society has a negative effect on improving students' critical thinking abilities. Also, Saudi students grow up in an uncritical society because parents and teachers raise and teach children that others' ideas and opinions must be respected. Additionally, elders and people in authority usually attempt to limit children's, and even adults', freedom to discuss what they want to address. Therefore, parents and teachers sometimes train students to defer to powerful people because of the traditional belief that the community must be ruled and governed by the elites who have the leadership skills for making society flourish. Moreover, I have determined that it is difficult for Islamic teachers to enhance students to think rationally when their society hinders and limits citizens' mental ability. Also, it is unimaginable to ask students to critique the speech of societal leaders when they are not able to ask questions in their classrooms.

These findings are consistent with Allamnakhrah's (2013) and Alazzi's (2008) studies. They mentioned that the culture of Middle Eastern society

is considered the most common obstacle to improving critical thinking, and instead favors harmony and security. These studies found that authority figures in societies that value harmony and security often attempt to create a hypothetical political ceiling to control citizens' questions, but it leads to limiting people's freedom and affects people's identities. These figures often prevent people's ability to practice critical thinking in their daily lives. Interestingly, the current study found that teachers are unwilling to teach critical thinking at the elementary school level. They view critical thinking as an adult skill, and it is a waste of time for young learners to use higher-order thinking skills, especially at the foundation level. Another reason cited is that teaching critical thinking to either young or adult learners is not an important skill for taking and passing the national exams. These tests assess the students' ability in mastering the knowledge already being studied. These findings are reinforced in Alazzi's (2008) study. He found Jordanian teachers considered critical thinking to be a set of mature skills that teachers should not waste time teaching students, with practicing complicated and complex high- ordered thinking skills, especially at the foundational level.

Notably, this finding agrees with Halpern's (1996) findings in which he pointed out that there is a common misconception about the word *critical* that is sometimes used to insult a person who is always questioning national figures, or making undesirable comments. In fact, critical thinking involves a series of mental skills with the purpose of reaching and providing valuable findings that would improve society as whole.

In respect to school community influence, the various responses to a question by the interviewees in regard to the school community's effect on improvement young learner critical thinking ability. Ahmad stated:

Saudi school administration staffs generally discourage improving critical thinking in the school sites because they do not value the benefits of developing thinking skills in students or in society. They also ask teachers to discipline students learning because they are afraid to have protesters in their schools.

These findings correspond with Allamnakhrah's (2013) and Moore's (2009) studies that emphasized the importance of stimulating student critical thinking through practical activities across different disciplines to foster and improve students' mental abilities. Also, Moore (2009) stressed that raising students' motivations in practicing thinking skills in daily life, such as making inferences, decision-making, and problem solving, would help them think effectively and become more productive citizens. Essentially, Allamnakhrah (2013) pointed out the advantage of critical thinking goes beyond the academic environment

to the real world in terms of increasing the quality of daily societal activities, as well as the competence of employees in the workplace.

In summary, considering the view of both opponents and proponents of the effect of Saudi society, I found that Saudi Arabia is flourishing and developing into a modern society by borrowing industrial notions and innovative ideas. However, Saudi society is very proud of the Islamic civilization and its culture. Therefore, the Saudi decision makers always attempt to ground any new social movement, or modern progress, into their local culture rather than importing another culture, including Arabian culture. In Saudi Arabia, it is the school's responsibility to socialize young citizens into the Saudi culture and coexist with other people regardless of their social class or economic status. This is achieved by teaching students to respect and admire the ideas and traditions that emerge from the culture and elders in the community. Thus, teachers and students act as defenders of the Saudi culture and ideas. In less developed countries, the school curriculum's role is to deliver the culture of society to the learners by initiating students into norms of their cultures and teaching them the common cultural heritage. This is to protect their communities from external influences, which is consistent with the Bataineh and Alazzi (2009) study.

5. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, Saudi society and the school community are viewed as significant obstacles to improving critical thinking in high schools and secondary education institutions (Allamnakhrah, 2013; Al-Qahtani, 1995; Alwehaibi, 2012). This is due to the societal structure and the value placed on harmony and security in the Saudi community. In a Saudi context, culture is an important resource for reforming educational systems in general, and designing school curricula in particular. However, Saudi culture is a topic not open to critique so that the conservative citizens and politicians deem it off limits to criticism and questioning.

Another consideration is the societal perception of critical thinking. The study's interviewees revealed that there is a common misconception toward critical thinking as a term and a mental activity due to the political agenda and the structure of society. For example, critical thinking has a negative connotation, one that implies opposing opinions and encouraging social revolution. Saudi citizens perceive critical thinking as a negative activity due to the subliminal political ceiling that is in place to control citizens' questions and desires. Allamnakhrah (2013) pointed out that critical thinking has been addressed by educational policy makers as an essential educational goal for

current students, but as a persistently taboo topic as far as political reforms or governmental decision are concerned.

These findings helped the researcher to answer an important question: Why did the recent reconstruction and redesign of the Saudi educational system fail to improve Islamic teachers' perception of critical thinking? Basically, if critical thinking is not influencing the cultural patterns of Saudi society, then Islamic teachers have to practice and learn to implement critical thinking during pre-service education programs and in-service professional training programs. Moreover, the faculty of educational colleges should instruct teacher candidates about the benefits of practicing critical thinking in daily activities because the effects of improving critical thinking go beyond the academic environment to the real world. Critical thinking can also be used to improve the quality of life throughout society and competency in the workplace (Allamnakhrah, 2013). Needless to say, reforming the Saudi educational systems around critical thinking cannot be achieved without normalizing critical thinking among Saudi citizens. Moreover, Saudi students are taught by knowledgeable and experienced educators but they will be unable to think rationally unless their teachers understand how to implement critical thinking strategies in the classroom.

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