

Assessing the Role of Culture on School Leadership in the UAE

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of culture on school leadership in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE is a country characterized by diverse cultures which is invariably reflected in most aspects of the country's life particularly, in the education sector. The theoretical framework is based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the GLOBE study framework, particularly on how power distance, religious beliefs and collectivism affect leadership practices in schools. The study employs a qualitative research method, using a systematic literature review and analysis of research articles, UAE specific case studies and policy documents. The findings of this review show notable differences between Emirati and expatriate school leadership practices. The analysis highlights the difficulties many school leaders face due to cultural expectations and recommends responsive leadership approach as a potential most effective model in culturally diverse countries like the UAE. The paper also recommends that more relevant professional developments on cultural awareness should be organised for school leaders and policy makers in the sector.

Keywords culture, leadership, responsive leadership, diversity, expatriate

1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been going through rapid educational transformation in an aim to be one of the leading countries globally (KHDA, 2024). Throughout this change, the UAE always made sure that its cultural identity was preserved. Simultaneously, educational leadership has evolved, mainly influenced by the national reform agendas Vision 2021 and We the UAE 2031, which have a primary focus on high quality education (UAE Government, 2023). Accordingly, and as part of these changes, school leaders are expected to adopt leadership styles that help in growth and reform. These expectations include the preservation of Emirati culture and blending it with expatriate influences. Hence, this duality creates a challenge for leaders who must manage between cultural expectations and effective educational leadership (Al-Khatib, 2019; Abu-Ayash, 2023; KHDA, 2024).

The UAE is a culturally diverse country and so are its schools, particularly private schools that have a diverse community of teachers and students. As for the public schools in the UAE, they are mostly rooted in Islamic values, Arabic language and Emirati population (Nasr, 2017). However, whether in private or public schools, leaders must still address cultural expectations related to hierarchy, communication and collaboration (Heenan et al., 2023). Hallinger (2018) posits that the leadership process operates within a context, arguing; “Leadership does not occur in a vacuum; it is embedded in the institutional, societal, and cultural context within which it is enacted”. In societies where power distance is high (like most gulf countries), leadership usually tends to be more

hierarchical and centralized while reforms push towards distributed leadership and shared decision making (Alteneiji, 2015).

“While cultural and leadership styles have been debated and discussed globally, little is known about the impact of culture on leadership styles in the UAE” (Al Ammari, 2021). Cultural values can play a dual role; they can be an aid in reforms, or they can be a constraint. Due to the lack of local leadership models, many school leaders continue to adopt Western frameworks even though they might not be fully aligned with the cultural realities of the UAE (Al Ammari, 2021).

Although it is evident that research on school leadership has grown, yet those that particularly examine the role of culture in shaping leadership practices in the UAE are limited. Majority of research focuses on western contexts; hence this gap is essential to work on given UAE’s cultural blend which creates a distinct leadership environment. Accordingly, this study is necessary to deepen the understanding of how culture plays a role in UAE’s educational landscape to provide grounded evidence that can help in leadership development. By addressing this gap, this research contributes to an in-depth culturally responsive body of knowledge on school leadership in the UAE.

Research aim and question

In view of the above, this research aims to examine the influence of culture on school leadership in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The research seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How does culture influence leadership practices of school leaders in the UAE?
- 2) What are the cultural challenges school leaders experience working with traditional norms and modern expectations?

This paper is composed of three elements. Firstly, it would explain Hofstede's cultural model and how it is used to analyze the influence of culture on school leadership practices in the UAE. Secondly, it analyses how leaders from different cultural backgrounds navigate their day-to-day roles. Lastly, this research considers the repercussions of culturally responsive leadership on professional development and education policy in the UAE. By analyzing Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the paper will identify how cultural values can affect leadership styles and practices. Accordingly, this analysis can provide a deeper understanding on why leadership in the UAE differs from leadership in other western countries. By using Hofstede's dimensions this study will highlight how cultural values shape leadership expectations and behaviors. This analysis will provide a deeper understanding why leadership in the UAE can be different from western leadership. When analyzing the different ways leaders from different backgrounds navigate their roles, we will be exploring how they adapt their styles to match cultural expectations. Finally studying the effects of culturally responsive leadership on policies and professional development can help in identifying gaps between cultural leadership and local needs and therefore support in educational reform.

The paper will proceed to have the different parts. The first being literature review on culture and educational leadership in the UAE context. The second part will present the research methodology. The third part will discuss key findings and analysis. Fourth part to discuss implications on policy and practice. Finally, the fifth part will have recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

Culture and leadership are complex terms when they come in educational contexts particularly when focusing on practices and outcomes. According to Schein (2010), culture refers to shared beliefs, values and behaviors by a society. Therefore, when referring to culture in education settings, culture encompasses principles around authority, communication, role of education and student-teacher relationship.

As for leadership in education, it includes the ability of school principals, administrators and school leaders to guide and influence schools to reach educational goals (Bush, 2011). In rapidly changing cultures like the UAE, understanding how culture shapes leadership is important for having effective educational environments. According to Halling and Leithwood (1996), effective and successful leadership is highly related to cultural setting.

2.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

A widely used culture framework is Hofstede's (1980,2001) cultural dimension framework. This framework helps in understanding how cultural values can affect leadership and behavior. This model encompasses six dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, long-term orientation and indulgence vs. restraint.

High power distance is prevalent in hierarchical structures in the UAE, it's evident in respect for authority and seniority (Hofstede's insights, 2024). This affects school leadership through boosting top-down decision making and following principals. Another evident trait is collectivism, where loyalty is shown to the school community. School leaders are expected to promote harmony and collective wellbeing. In the middle

east region, where the culture is collectivist, the decision-making process is usually top-down centralized, leaders often value the collective wellbeing (Thaher et al., 2022). For example, an Emirati principal in a public school might feel obliged to maintain harmony among staff to preserve group cohesion, even when performance issues arise. Expatriate leaders may consider this inefficient, which highlights that there is a lack of cultural sensitivity in their leadership practices. “Expatriate school leaders often perceive local collectivist leadership practices as inefficient or overly hierarchical, revealing gaps in cultural sensitivity that can hinder effective leadership in diverse school settings” (Al Aleeli, 2021).

Although Hofstede’s cultural dimensions have been used to explain leadership behaviors generically, they offer a limited view on how cultural factors affect the diverse educational context in the UAE. A large number of the current synthesis focuses on power distance as the main factor that influences leadership not taking into consideration how these factors interact with the diverse cultural blends in multicultural school populations. Therefore in educational landscapes like the UAE, power distance and collectivism can sometimes be navigated in everyday leadership practices rather than treating them as fixed traits. For example, a school principal in the UAE may intentionally create committees for decision making accommodating the multicultural expectations rather than keeping it unilateral.

2.2 The GLOBE Study and its Relevance

Based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavioral Effectiveness) study examined leadership across 62 cultures.

The study highlighted that while some leadership traits are universally acknowledged, such as visions and integrity, others are influenced by culture (House et al, 2004). In middle eastern countries such as the UAE, leadership is usually influenced by autocratic tendencies and high-performance orientation. This is also implied in educational leadership in the UAE. For example, many school communities value leaders who have a vision yet still maintain order, especially in public schools where Islamic and Emirati cultural values are part of the school governance. “UAE school leaders face the challenge of delicately balancing the endorsement of education reform while safeguarding its Arabic culture and Islamic principles.” (Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023).

According to Raza et al. (2021) although school communities value culture, yet some private international schools are demanding participatory and team-oriented leadership styles.

While the GLOBE study provides valuable insights regarding culturally adopted leadership behaviors, it can sometimes overlook the culturally diverse school environment in the UAE. The GLOBE study focuses on power distance and collectivism, which are relevant, yet they are usually enacted by school leaders who seek to balance cultural expectations in multidiverse school populations that are found in the UAE.

2.3 Leadership Styles in Educational Settings

Leadership in education has been heavily studied, and the most prominent leadership styles were found to be transformational, transactional and distributed leadership.

Transformational leadership mainly focuses on vision, inspiration and staff development. Transformational leadership is widely encouraged in the UAE when

promoting educational reform especially that it is aligned with UAE vision 2031. School leaders are expected to be champions in innovation and digital transformation which are indicators of transformational leadership (UAE Ministry of Education, 2022).

Transactional leadership usually focuses on formal authority, compliance and rewards. It is very much aligned with hierarchical models. “Dubai school principals exhibited more transformational than transactional leadership attitudes and behaviors” (Ibrahim & Al-Taneiji, 2013).

Distributed leadership, a third leadership style, promotes shared responsibility and collaboration among staff. This style is becoming more adopted in private schools in Dubai, where principals are expats (Harris, 2008). For example, in private schools with IB, British and American curriculums in Dubai this leadership style is fostered. Leadership teams, subject coordinators and teacher-led initiatives are adopted which reflect a flatter organizational culture. According to O’Brien and Murphy (2016), there has recently been a trend to flatten the hierarchy through a distributed leadership model, that is more delegation through leadership teams and teachers aiming to promote collaboration and shared decision making.

In policy rhetoric in the UAE, transformational, transactional and distributed leadership are often adopted, yet their actual implementation is usually influenced by cultural factors such as high power distance and expectations of strong hierarchical authority. Although transformational and distributed leadership approaches highlight empowerment and shared decision making, yet at many times leaders tend to depend on

transactional methods to ensure stability and meet accountability goals (Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023).

2.4 Research on the Effect of Culture on Leadership

Many studies have examined the role of culture on educational leadership with an increasing focus on UAE contexts. According to Hallinger and Leithwood (1996), leadership is influenced by culture, that is what works in one place doesn't necessarily work in another.

Research on educational leadership in the UAE highlights the complexities that leaders face when trying to balance between traditional values and education reform which is a priority in the 2030 vision. A study conducted by Al Khatib (2024) examined the leadership styles adopted by Emirati female school principals. The study revealed that the principals' practices are highly influenced by cultural values. Accordingly, these leaders are often trying to navigate between traditional expectations and contemporary leadership styles. Another research by Graces-Bascal et al. (2021) studies teachers' views on diversity in UAE schools. The research concluded that culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to identify and address different languages, races, ethnicities and socio-economic status. In private schools, expat principals usually report "culture clash" between local values and western leadership models.

2.5 Culturally Responsive Leadership in Diverse Education Settings

UAE is a culturally diverse environment which requires a leadership style that is both culturally sensitive and adaptable. According to a study conducted by Rai and Beresford-Dey (2023), they found out that in the UAE school leaders play an important role in negotiating cultural differences by adopting inclusive environments and

facilitating training that are based on intercultural competences. Going back to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Sowmya et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of recognizing power distance and collectivism in forming a leadership style, especially in the Gulf area. Altogether these findings point to the importance of having a culturally informed leader to ensure relevance in the UAE's diverse school setting.

2.6 Leadership Adaptability and Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has been considered a vital qualification for educational leaders in the UAE. CQ refers to a person's ability to function effectively in diverse cultural contexts (Ang et al, 2007). UAE is embedded with cultural diversity, therefore leaders face the challenge of getting to know and understand cultural differences and adapting accordingly, this is cultural diversity (Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023). Provided the high diversity of educators in the UAE, particularly private schools, educational leaders should adapt their strategies to cater to the different cultural norms (Ridge, 2014). Hence CQ is not just another interpersonal skill but rather an essential leadership competency that school leaders need to navigate different challenges they face in UAE educational settings.

2.7 Evolving Leadership Models in the UAE

Educational reforms in the UAE highlight that there is a shift towards embedding cultural coexistence, global citizenship and tolerance in curriculums. These curriculum changes are aligned with UAE's national agenda for promoting social harmony. In addition to that, the Ministry of Education and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) have introduced frameworks to improve leadership capacity among

educators. They introduced frameworks such as the Teacher and Educational Leadership Standards (TELS) and the licensing program which focuses on improving the professional skills of school leaders to adopt inclusive and equitable learning environments (Ministry of Education, n.d., KHDA, n.d.). These reforms in the UAE highlight the country's commitment to include best practices to educational leadership while still reinforcing cultural values (Massouti et al. 2023).

Hence the relationship between culture and educational leadership is complex and dynamic. Studies highlighted the importance of leaders to develop cultural intelligence and to adopt culturally responsive practices to effectively navigate the diverse communities and expectations (Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023). Although the region is continuously evolving, leaders must still balance between modern educational reforms and cultural expectations to have inclusive learning environments.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative theoretical research design through utilizing critical literature review methodology. For this study in particular, qualitative research worked best because it aided in giving a deep understanding of perceptions, subjective experience and specific context factors that affect leadership in culturally diverse communities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). "Qualitative research methods are particularly well-suited for exploring complex cultural dynamics embedded in social interactions, offering rich, contextualized insights often missed by quantitative approaches." (Given, 2023).

The study involved in-depth analysis of scholarly articles and case studies that investigate the effect of culture on educational leadership. This study referred to Hofstede's dimensions of culture and the GLOBE leadership model to explain leadership behavior in the UAE context. The analysis drew on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and GLOBE leadership model to interpret the behaviours of leaders in the UAE context. Comparative analysis was utilized to examine differences and similarities between Emirati and expatriate leaders. This research is interpretive and does not include empirical data collection as it aims to develop insights through document analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The systematic Review Process:

A qualitative systematic literature review has been employed to collect data that will answer the research questions. The below criteria were taken into consideration:

- 1- Search strategy: academic databases such as google scholar and EPIC where searched using keywords such as cultural leadership, responsive leader, UAE, Hofstede, and GLOBE. Additionally reference lists of key studies were also reviewed to identify additional resources.
- 2- Inclusion criteria:
 - Studies focusing on educational leadership and cultural influences in the UAE and GCC.
 - Peer reviewed articles, book chapters and policy reports published between 2006 and 2025.
 - Sources published in English.

3- Exclusion criteria:

- Studies that are not related to leadership and culture.
- Articles that are purely quantitative and do not include any qualitative insights.

Data Analysis:

The process initially identified 37 articles. A review of the 37 articles was employed taking into consideration topic relevance, peer reviewed articles. Additionally, full text review was done for the remaining articles to assess eligibility and relevance to the study. Following this process, 12 articles met the criteria and were retained for the final synthesis. The methodological quality of the 12 studies included was assessed using thematic relevance criteria. Each study was evaluated for relevance, credibility and conceptual clarity, hence only studies meeting the minimum quality were included in the final synthesis.

The selected literature review was analyzed based on thematic coding, using themes such as cultural dimensions, cultural challenges and leadership styles. The findings were then analyzed and to highlight theoretical implications.

4. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The systematic review identified a range of key articles and case studies that provide insights on the influence of culture on educational leadership in the UAE. These sources emphasized the challenges and the strategies of leadership within culturally diverse education settings. The table below summarizes the identified literature detailing authors, publication years, titles and summary of relevant knowledge.

Table 1

Summary of Identified Literature

Author/Year	Title	Summary of Relevant Knowledge
Gallant and Pounder (2008)	The Employment of Female teachers in the United Arab Emirates: An analysis of Leadership, professional Development and job satisfaction.	The study highlighted the below: 1- effective and culturally sensitive leadership plays an important role in supporting female teachers' professional growth. 2-how cultural expectations influence leadership styles .
Saeeda Shah (2006)	Leading multiethnic school: A new understanding of Muslim Youth identity	The study stresses that leadership in multiethnic communities requires sensitivity to religious and cultural values that can affect student identity.
Wilson Heenan, I., De Paor, D., Lafferty, N., & Mannix McNamara, P. (2023)	The impact of transformational school leadership on school staff and school culture in primary schools—A systematic review of international literature.	The study concluded that: 1-transformational leadership is the most effective staff motivation, job satisfaction and commitment. 2-Transformational leadership also fosters a strong school culture through collaboration.
Nasr, I. (2017)	Leadership effectiveness of school principals and institutional development: The overarching role of leaders' national culture in Arabic schools in UAE	The study concluded that: 1- a principal's cultural background affects their leadership effectiveness and the development of their school.
Al Ammari, H. S. (2021)	The Influence of United Arab Emirates National Culture on Leadership Styles in Higher Education Institutions	The findings of this study show that: 1- cultural expectations in the UAE highly affect how leadership in higher education institutions is practiced. 2- leaders stated that the religious/Arabic values and norms affect leadership behaviors.
Rai, J., & Beres Beresford-Dey, M. (2023)	School leadership in the United Arab Emirates: A scoping review. Educational Management Administration and Leadership.	The study reveals that: 1-although school leaders adopt transformational and transactional leadership, yet hierarchical models are still the dominant ones. 2-appointments of leaders in UAE schools must take emotional and cultural intelligence into consideration.
Ibrahim, A. S., & Al-Taneiji, S. (2013)	Principal leadership style, school performance, and principal effectiveness in Dubai schools.	The study found that: 1- the most utilized leadership style is the transformational one. 2- there is a positive correlation between the leadership style and perceived effectiveness. 3-gender affects leadership style and effectiveness.
Al-Amri, A. (2019)	<i>School leadership in the United Arab Emirates: Exploring the impact of culture and context.</i>	School leadership in the UAE is highly influenced by cultural values. Effective leaders balance between islamic values, community expectations and expectations for modern education reforms.
Al Taneiji, S., & McLeod, L. (2008)	Towards shared leadership in UAE schools. <i>Educational Management Administration & Leadership</i>	UAE schools are moving towards distributed leadership, yet traditional hierarchical structures can limit implementation. Cultural sensitivity is vital for a participatory leadership in UAE schools.
Clarke, M., & O'Donoghue, T. (2017)	Educational leadership in international schools in the UAE: Cultural encounters and the clash of ideologies. <i>International Journal of Leadership in Education</i> ,	School leaders in the UAE face tensions between Western values and beliefs and local cultural values. Cultural clashes can affect leadership practices and decision making. A good leader in UAE schools is one who navigates those cultural differences with flexibility and cultural sensitivity.
Badri, M., & Mazroui, K.(2016)	School leadership in the UAE: Advancing values-based leadership.	Effective school leadership in the UAE is based on strong cultural values. Culturally rooted leadership frameworks help in promoting educational improvement.

Author/Year	Title	Summary of Relevant Knowledge
Al Dhaheiri, A. (2022)	Are school leaders culturally intelligent? Validation of the cultural intelligence (CQ) scale in the UAE	The use of the CQ scale in the UAE found that school leaders usually show high levels of cultural intelligence. It is essential to have cultural intelligence for effective leadership.

4.1 Cultural Dimensions and their Influence on Leadership Practices in UAE

Schools

Cultural values are deeply integrated in the fabric of school leadership, especially in rapidly changing societies like the UAE. Three cultural dimensions, from Hofstede's (2001) framework, have a strong impact on how leadership is navigated in UAE schools are power distance, collectivism and uncertainty avoidance.

In the UAE, high power distance fosters hierarchical structures where decision making is highly centralized and respect for authority is crucial. According to Al Amiri (2019), school principals in UAE public schools are seen as authoritative figures and are never questioned. Such leadership style contradicts with Western leadership styles that promote distributed leadership and shared decision making. Moreover, collectivism in the UAE context encourages loyalty to the group which leads to leadership practices that emphasize interpersonal relationships over individual innovation and criticism (Badri & Mazroui. 2016).

Additionally, uncertainty avoidance is obvious, especially when some schools are unwilling to adopt unfamiliar reforms that seem to conflict with traditional or religious norms (Gallant & Pounder, 2008). Accordingly, the studies in the UAE suggest that school leaders are often navigating between progressive educational policies and cultural boundaries.

4.1.1 Expectations: Parents, Staff and Students

Expectations from the different stakeholders in schools are usually influenced by cultural values and beliefs. Emirati parents view leaders as idols who represent moral figures and reinforce religious and cultural values (Shah, 2006). Emirati parents usually regard leaders as moral exemplars who are not only responsible for academic instruction but also expected to instill moral and religious values (Al Khoury, 2024; Maitha Al Mazroui as cited in Gulf News, 2018). One Emirati parent said, “Moral education is perhaps the most important subject for our children to do well in life... they must learn proper discipline and rightful behavior” (Mazroui, as cited in Gulf News, 2018).

Teachers in the UAE come from different backgrounds and cultures, some are local, and others are expatriates hence each have different cultural assumptions. Expatriate teachers usually expect a transparent evaluation with open dialogue and involvement in planning and decision making. That said, it is mostly not the case in the UAE; it is usually indirect communication and deference; therefore, expatriates’ expectations are not always met (AlAmiri, 2019). A scoping review of UAE school leadership noted “the high context UAE culture depends more on nonverbal communication and behaviors where people speak less but consider other means of communication to be sufficiently complete and precise” (Blaik et al., 2023). As one expatriate noted, “in this culture, people don’t differentiate between criticism towards a topic and a person. Usually, a disagreement or a different opinion is understood as an affront against the person.” (Haa-Saheem, 2025). These cultural differences can create

tensions, especially when staff receive feedback from leadership that they consider rigid and doesn't match their expectations, potentially affecting their morale and collaboration.

Just like teachers, parents and leaders, students are also shaped by cultural dynamics. For example, Emirati students usually respond well to leaders who command respect and come from similar cultural backgrounds. An analysis of UAE classroom communication found that “communication tends to be more indirect and respectful... students might hesitate to speak up, especially in front of an authority figure.” (Britts Imperial Newsletter, 2025). Hence although this aligns with UAE cultural expectation, yet it contradicts with others. Accordingly, and as suggested by different studies in UAE on school leadership, school leaders must adopt more flexible communication strategies where they balance and cater to the different cultural backgrounds.

4.1.2 Leadership and Cultural Differences

This finding aims to answer research question 1. Having cultural value in mind, school leaders in the UAE established their own strategies by integrating best practices and local value. A widely used approach is “cultural hybridization”, in which leaders employ a global strategy and execute it through culturally sensitive mechanisms. According to Zrien et al. (2023), some principals give feedback through reflective conversations and try being mentors rather than giving formal appraisals, hence this approach aligns more with cultural values.

Another good strategy is the adoption of distributed leadership but still maintaining cultural expectations. In a Dubai private school, the principal built his team from individuals who were local and others who were expatriates to guarantee he has

different perspectives, “Recruiting diverse leaders and teachers... is a starting point for a more equitable and socially and culturally just leadership approach” (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017). Accordingly, decision making was regulated by respecting hierarchical boundaries but also encouraged collaboration.

Additionally, professional developments on cultural awareness for new expatriate teachers are very crucial so they comprehend and learn more about the cultural differences. Schools that provide similar training for their staff have reported to have a good school climate and better staff retention, especially that the staff is aware of cultural expectations and not surprised by them (Bailey, 2022).

Finally, a very important strategy is parental involvement. For example, according to Badri & Mazroui (2016) a school in Sharjah regularly invites parents to forums on Islamic teachings and Emirati values and makes parents feel that they are part of the decision making and things are not being imposed on them, they are partners. Hence, research studies in the UAE suggest that leaders need to be well informed about cultural diversity and expectations ahead of time for them to succeed.

4.2 Cultural Challenges School Leaders Experience Working with Traditional Norms and Modern Expectations

This section focuses on answering research question number two (What are the cultural challenges school leaders experience working with traditional norms and modern expectations?).

4.2.1 Tension between Modern and Traditional Leadership Expectations

The UAE's aim to become a knowledge-based economy by 2032 has initiated reforms, especially in the education sector, such as teacher licensing and performance-based evaluations. These reforms compel the adoption of modern global leadership frameworks, such as distributed and transformational leadership (UAE Ministry of Education, 2022). That said, tensions come up when these leadership models collide with traditional values.

Different case studies have pointed out the above-mentioned contradictions. In a study conducted by AlTaneiji and McLeod (2008), school leaders in Al Ain have disclosed that they found difficulty in balancing traditional cultural expectations with performance driven expectations set by the Ministry of Education. According to one principal, "We must treat teachers like family, but we are told to evaluate them with objectivity. How do you evaluate your brother?".

Another example, Emirati principals are usually expected to adopt leadership styles that are rooted in Islamic values, prioritizing ethical behavior and social justice (Shah, 2006). Additionally, they are also expected to execute improvement plans that are data driven which are traits of western accountability, which doesn't really match with the UAE culture (Ridge, 2010).

This friction is even more evident in private schools, especially those that have adopted IB, British and American curriculums. These schools usually have expatriate principals with modern leadership styles who still must operate in an Emirati culture. In their study, Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) discovered that expatriate school leaders usually feel restricted by cultural expectations that they don't fully understand, which

results in a leadership “identity crisis”. Therefore, leadership in the UAE is complex since it needs to be of high standards when it comes to performance while also keeping in mind cultural expectations.

4.2.2 Examination of Local and Expatriate Leadership Approaches

The division of local and expatriate leaders in the UAE hints to a wider gap in culture, leadership style and expectations. In the UAE Emirati principals are usually placed based on seniority and community standing. Their leadership style is usually deeply influenced by Islamic values which highlight respect for elders and social harmony (Badri & Mazroui, 2016). They lead through managing government mandates with community expectations and are usually cultural mediators between policy and practice.

On the other hand, expatriate leaders who dominate the leadership positions in international private schools mostly have Western experience in school effectiveness focusing on distributed leadership and evidence-based practices (Clarke and O’Donoghue, 2017). Although they try to lead with this mindset, yet they often face resistance in culturally sensitive areas such as parental engagements and discipline.

A remarkable example is the management of behavior. While a British principal believes in and promotes independence and critical thinking, Emirati parents and teachers might not agree and consider it lenient; they would prefer a more teacher centered approach (Aldhaheri, A., 2017).

Another area of complexity is Emirati females in leadership positions. While having females in leadership positions is highly supported and encouraged by national

policies that promote gender equity, however, in some cases, female principals are facing pushbacks from their school communities who are used to having males in leadership positions. Although they face this discrimination, case studies of Emirati female leaders have shown their ability to blend a nurturing leadership with competence and still balancing between traditional and modern expectations (Gallant & Pounder, 2008).

Accordingly, it is noted, after a review of studies conducted in the UAE, that there are differences and gaps in leadership styles, especially for leaders who come from different cultures, and it is usually based on backgrounds and cultural values.

4.2.3 Repercussions on Policy and Practice

This finding aims to answer research question 2. The findings indicate several repercussions on the educational leadership policy and practice in the UAE. To begin with there is a need for leadership developmental programs that are especially tailored for the UAE context. These programs should have global leadership strategies integrated with cultural values and norms. Al Dhaheri (2021) suggests that culturally responsive leadership training is a must for both expatriate and Emirati leaders.

A second implication is evaluation systems. School improvement and performance appraisals must be adjusted to match cultural expectations and dynamics such as hierarchy, family involvement and collectivism. A one size fits all cannot work in such a culturally diverse context like the UAE (Ridge, 2010).

Lastly, research suggests that policymakers must consult with local communities and school leaders when implementing policy reforms to make sure that they are aligning

with local cultural values. Schools are considered as a cultural bridge that helps in successful reforms.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has highlighted the essential role that culture plays in shaping leadership practices in schools especially with a country like the UAE that has diverse populations. Evidence from this study has shown that not only expatriate leaders find it difficult to navigate leadership in communities with diverse cultures but also Emirati leaders as well. According to Hallinger (2018) Emirati leaders usually lead within traditional boundaries where hierarchy is highlighted and emphasis on authority, respect and collectivism that reflect cultural norms. As for expatriate leaders, they bring with them their western expertise that reflect distributed leadership and collaboration and try to tailor it so that it caters to the cultural expectation in the UAE (Romanowski & Du, 2020). Hence both, Emirati and expatriate leadership are under pressure to cater for local cultural expectations and also educational reforms and pressures for accountability.

These findings are essential for leaders, policy makers and teacher training programs. One implication of these findings is the need for leaders to be culturally aware of their community in order to adapt and navigate within the expected and accepted boundaries. Therefore culturally responsive leadership necessitates that school leaders respect and recognize the different cultural expectations in the school and work on integrating them. “Leadership needs to be responsive by continuously adapting to the fluidity surrounding culture and responsibility where any form of cultural oppression is challenged” (Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023). Leaders who are skilled in bridging cultures

are usually able to manage conflicts and build trust within their community and accordingly increase collaboration (Hammad & Norris, 2020).

School leadership professional development programs in the UAE should explicitly include culturally responsive pedagogy and strategies for navigating cultural differences so that the leaders are set to succeed in diverse cultural environments (Hojeij, Alsuwaidi, & Ahmed, 2024) . Having leadership training programs that expose teachers to the complexity of cultures is crucial for their success. Additionally, to deepen leaders' understanding on the effect of culture and the important role it plays in shaping leadership practices they should be exposed to real life case studies.

Based on these findings, the study suggests several recommendations for more successful and accepted leadership practices in a context with diverse cultures. To begin with, there is a need for developing and implementing a responsive leadership framework. Education authorities should work on a leadership framework that contains main cultural dimensions such as respect, hierarchy and collectivism and integrate them with innovation and collaboration. A second recommendation is the improvement of training programs for leaders. Ongoing professional developments that focus on intercultural dialogue, adaptive leadership and conflict resolution must be employed. “Virtual professional development on conflict management enabled school leaders to engage in critical dialogue and transformational learning, equipping them with adaptive leadership skills needed to navigate culturally complex challenges” (Irby et al., 2022). Additionally promoting a dialogue between Emirati and expatriate leadership can be very beneficial for both. It can be a platform where best practices are shared. It can also play an important role of consultation where expatriate leaders share their challenges and get

advice on what works best according to cultural expectations. Therefore, this dialogue will be a support and a base for culturally informed leadership. “Creating intentional platforms for dialogue between local and expatriate leaders is essential to promote mutual understanding and develop culturally informed leadership practices in diverse school contexts.” (Al Mazrouei et al., 2021)

Although this study provides an understanding for the role culture plays in school leadership in the UAE, yet it also highlights some areas that need more research. One area can be how cultural adaptations evolve through time and reforms.

In conclusion, culture is fundamental in shaping leadership practices particularly in schools where many stakeholders are involved. When a leader recognizes cultural norms and values and effectively integrates them in leadership practices then this makes managing diverse communities more effective. Through promoting culturally responsive leadership, the UAE can implement educational reforms that are of global standards and also have rich cultural understandings. According to Khalifa et al. (2024), “Culturally responsive leaders ensure that pedagogies are relevant to and reflective of the student body ... they work to build authentic relationships, combat systemic barriers, and elevate the voices of historically marginalized stakeholders.”

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