

## **An investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on school leadership in Dubai**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a historic global event, which impacted the education sector at all levels and directly affected more than 90% of students around the world (Al Darayseh 2020; UNESCO 2020 in Flack et al. 2021). Within the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), on the 8th of March 2020, every single school in Dubai was mandated to close by the government, and all pedagogical practices transitioned to an online, virtual environment (Abdelaziz & Elsheikh 2022). School leaders were caught in these chaotic circumstances and their leadership roles were increased exponentially as they were required to adapt school policies, protocols, and procedures in order to provide a safe, compliant, and satisfactory educational experience for their students (Harris & Jones 2020; Masoud & Bohra 2020 in Moussa 2021). In an attempt to gain an insight into their experiences, the aim of this small-scale research project was to explore the challenges that principals have encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and the solutions they made to overcome these challenges. This was deemed significant because authors such as Alfalasi et al (2021) highlight the fact that very little research has been conducted specifically about this topic in Dubai, UAE; and the findings could be informative for future educational leaders in the region. In order to collect meaningful data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2017); their responses were transcribed, and a thematic analysis of their comments led to several key findings, which are presented and discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Leadership, COVID-19, Principal, Challenges

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 Overview*

According to research, schools depend on leadership throughout the organization to create a positive school environment and improve academic performance to promote success for schools even in challenging circumstances (Senge et al. in Marks & Printy 2003). Prior to the COVID-19, principals were responsible for students' safety, reporting any concerns regarding students' wellbeing to the superintendent, and notifying any contagious disease outbreaks to the appropriate authorities (Pollock & Hauseman 2015 in Pollock 2020). In other words, principals' leadership was taking charge of several factors such as policy, local context, program reform, and many more (Pollock 2020a). Building on their existing responsibilities due to the pandemic, changes in school regulations drew principals' attention to remote learning and virtual school leadership (Pollock 2020b). School principals were required to not just use their current skills and experiences to tackle the challenges posed by the pandemic during the sudden transition to online schooling, but also to develop new skills and revitalize some of their existing roles (Pollock 2020c).

### *1.2 The Rationale of the study*

In the UAE, there has been widespread school closure to promote social distance while maintaining a high level of safety (Abdelaziz & Elsheikh 2022). Since the 8th of March 2020, all educational institutions were mandated to close by the UAE's government, and all pedagogical practices were conducted online (ibid). Distance learning was extended until the end of the school year. In the meantime, the government started collaborating with school principals to pursue online and remote education (Houalla 2020 in Abdelaziz & Elsheikh 2022). Students and teachers from all over the world log onto the cyberspace of teaching and learning, hence, the academic planning process totally changed (Diez et al. 2020 in Pla et al. 2021). In my context, my old school's principal was forced to adjust the educational system over a short-term situation wherein modern methods of leadership and management were required to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The rationale of this

research is to elucidate the impact of COVID-19 on principals' leadership in Dubai. It will start with a review of some of the important research that has previously been published. the methodological design is then discussed.

### *1.3 Problem Statement*

At short notice, the COVID-19 pandemic turned into a global emergency that brought about extraordinary challenges in different aspects of life such as the fear of infection and lockdown measures that have radically changed people's daily routines. COVID-19 affected many organisations and sectors all over the world, and this led to extensive research. Education is one of the primary industries that has been influenced by COVID-19 (Burwell 2021 in Moussa 2021). Most governments suspended the educational institutions temporarily to halt the COVID-19 pandemic's spread that affected more than 60% of students around the world (Al Darayseh 2020). Due to the pandemic, considerable changes in school policy and the education system to comply with government policies were required (Fotheringham et al. 2020). School leaders were caught in these chaotic circumstances as they relied upon guidance about COVID-19 responses, protocols, and procedures; thus, school leaders played a primary role as they are the main authority that sets school policy (Harris & Jones 2020). The school leaders' role has increased in Dubai because of the educational system's alteration and policy along with the adaption of necessary safety measures (Masoud & Bohra 2020 in Moussa 2021). This research is an attempt to delve into the perceptions of educational leaders, specifically school principals in Dubai concerning the issues they encountered during compulsory distance education.

### *1.4 The Research Purpose*

The COVID-19 outbreak led to a high level of anxiety as more than 90% of young people around the world have not physically gone to school (UNESCO 2020 in Flack et al. 2021). To ensure that students' learning was not disrupted, all activities were carried out remotely

overnight (Department of Education 2020 in Burke & Dempsey 2020). Burke & Dempsey (2020) affirm that navigating through the pandemic was quite challenging as solving cryptic crossword puzzles without clues. The research purpose is to explore the challenges that principals have encountered in different contexts (pre and during the covid-19 pandemic) and the solutions they made to overcome these challenges.

### *1.5 The Research Questions*

The research purpose has been broken down into the following questions, which must be answered:

- What challenges did school principals face in the period before and during COVID-19?
- How did the principal leaders overcome the challenges they faced during COVID-19?

### *1.6 The Significance of the study*

As a result of the COVID-19, the education system affected by numerous challenges varying from changes in educational curricula to policies (Burwell 2021 in Moussa 2021). This research is significant as little research has been done in the UAE (Dubai) context (Alfalasi et al. 2021). Moreover, it will be beneficial for school principals in Dubai as it is imperative to gain a better understanding of the challenges they faced as well as the educational reforms' requirements to implement these reforms appropriately.

### *1.7 Conceptual Framework*

#### *Leadership:*

Leithwood et al. (1999 in Bush & Glover 2003) claim the concept of leadership is quite

subjective; thus, there is no agreed-upon definition as some definitions are more comprehensive than others but there is no set definition. In general, leadership is defined as an art and consequently, leaders seek to influence individuals and societies (Constantia et al. 2021). School leaders build the school's vision based upon professional values and strive to turn the school into a positive environment (Rapti 2013 in Constantia et al. 2021). The author adopted this definition because it included the characteristics of a good leader as follows; establishing productive relationships among teachers, parents, and pupils in addition to developing appropriate communication tactics with staff (Day & Sammons 2016 in Constantia et al. 2021). In short, the principal oversees school life organization, ensuring compliance with laws, policies, and ministry of education circulars (Edo et al. 2019 in Constantia et al. 2021).

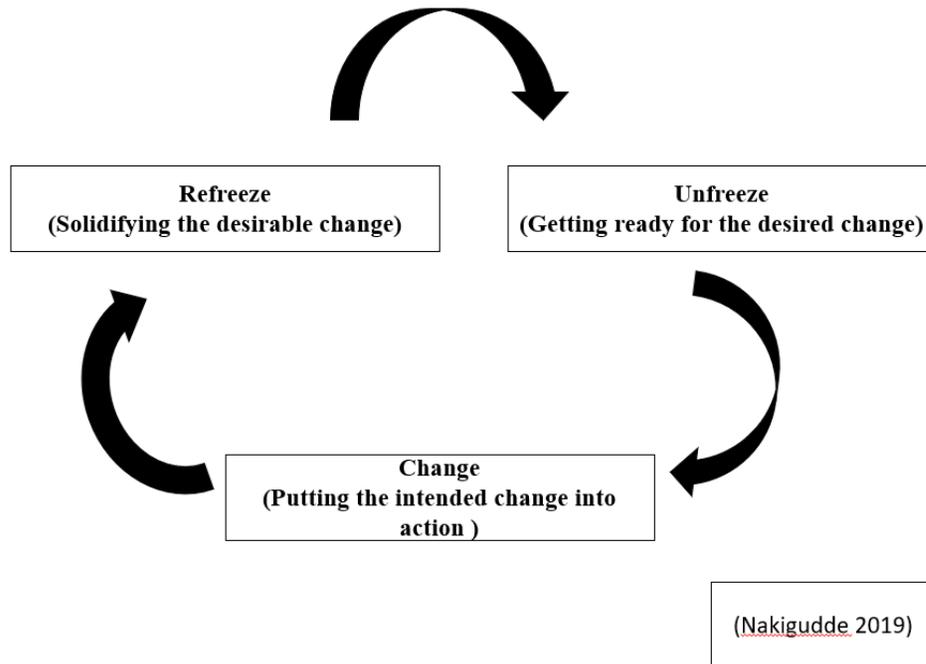
*School principals' challenges:*

Challenges are defined as challenging task that tests someone's skill or ability (Wise 2015a). One of the challenges of principals is keeping up with many responsibilities such as building maintenance, evaluation, and supervision of staff, teachers, the discipline of students, parents' demands along with curriculum development. Therefore, principals are suffering from a lack of time, meaning that, a dedicated principal has a limited amount of time to perform all those various responsibilities in a single day (Wise 2015b). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school principals' responsibilities have dramatically risen, and this has led to a reliance on COVID-19 protocols such as social distancing for staff and students that require extra work, intensive cleaning, the shift in education from face-to-face instruction to online instruction (Harris & Jones 2020). The author opted for these definitions because they are clear, precise, and they suit my research topic.

*1.8 Theoretical Framework*

*Kurt Lewin's Change model (1940s).*

Lewin's change theory created a model for change that includes three phases, the first phase is *unfreeze*. The second phase is *change*, and the last one is *refreeze* for a better understanding of the transformation process and bringing about the change needed for success. Lewin believed that change is needed, which allows us to move forward in life. The idea behind the unfreezing stage is to raise awareness of how significant the change is to adapt to the changes that are currently taking place. Based on Lewin's change theory, principal leaders should take the unfreezing step by communicating with teachers and students about the imminent changes in the educational system because of the COVID-19. Hence, the more they are aware of the drastic changes that happened because of the pandemic, the more they feel it is necessary to accept the change. The second step is changing which is the process that must be carefully planned and carried out. During this stage, principal leaders should implement the educational reforms and remind the reasons for the change and how it will be beneficial to them in the future. The final step is refreezing which is necessary to ensure that the change is not lost, therefore, principal leaders are assumed to support teachers and students to solidify the change permanently (Galli 2018).



*Richard Thaler's Nudge theory (2008).*

Nudge's theory proposes that the best way to influence a group or individuals is by using indirect suggestions or encouragement to make better decisions while still allowing them to express their perspectives and make their own decisions without any direct enforcement. This theory advocates the alteration in the education process as a result of the pandemic. Therefore, Principal leaders should be facilitators to the teachers and students as they should be given the freedom to make decisions regarding the change. In sum, reform should not be imposed on teachers and students, rather, it should be implemented with the support of all stakeholders (Ebert & Freibichler 2017).

## **2. Literature review**

It is worth noting that school principal leaders' challenges are not new. Therefore, there is a dense of studies about this subject. Four frequently recognized themes emerge from this

research which will be addressed in this section.

### *2.1 Educational reforms and policies implemented by the UAE during COVID-19.*

Despite global efforts to combat the pandemic, numerous countries around the world were forced to close schools in an attempt to contain the pandemic (Onyema et al. 2020). Consequently, Covid-19 has fundamentally changed the concept of leadership and leaders' practices (Moussa 2021). Fortunately, in the UAE, schools, and universities were familiar with the development of digital learning before the pandemic occurred through the use of effective applications of e-learning (Almarashdi & Jarrah 2021). For instance, Mohd Bin Rashid's program for smart learning used various apps for online learning as well as diverse supporting programs designed to assist students to acquire extra advantages in their studies before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (ibid).

During the pandemic, however, the UAE government implemented several measures to control the pandemic (Moussa 2021). One of the measures taken by MOE was to proceed with remote learning until the end of the school year and to appoint committees who monitored its effectiveness (UAE Ministry of Education 2020 in Almarashdi & Jarrah 2021). Consequently, it is pivotal for educational leaders to follow external authorities when developing new standards and policies that could change the current reform plan (Diamond 2012 in Shilon & Schechter 2019). Furthermore, the education department and knowledge in Abu Dhabi coordinated with schools to provide the necessary tools needed to activate the distance learning system (Sebugwaawo 2020 in Almarashdi & Jarrah 2021). Moreover, the UAE adopted smart learning platforms that were needed for facilitating the teaching and learning process such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Blackboard, in addition to providing professional development training (Almarashdi & Jarrah 2021).

### *2.2 Challenges of school principal leaders in pre and during the pandemic*

Before the pandemic, one of the most difficult duties for school principals was to keep up with many tasks such as school building maintenance, implementing policies, budget management, and other school administration matters (Tintore´ et al. 2020). Moreover, in the pre-pandemic era, school principal leaders were mostly concerned with ensuring that teaching and learning activities run smoothly (Matthews et al. 2018 in Rehm et al. 2021). Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed the nature work of a school principals to the online environment, but they were still expected to be great leaders at a time when the change was accelerating by leaps and bounds (Pollock 2020a). School principals had to organise everything virtually and get accurate information on how best to handle rapidly changing situations (Pollock 2020b). Therefore, they were expected to incorporate advanced technology into their school in keeping with the surrounding changes (Ferrandino 2001).

### *2.3 Challenges of distance education*

Schools are a critical place to foster and develop students' social skills. Humans are principally a social species where it is their instinct to interact with others (Filho et al. 2021). Yet, due to the pandemic, teachers and students became isolated, which impacted negatively on students' learning process (Filho et al. 2021). Learning and teaching practices changed drastically and now relied mainly on technology, online activities, and distance learning as the entire education system changed and principals' leadership was tested to the maximum (Moussa 2021). Remote learning could be a major challenge to many learners, educators, and parents especially those in developing countries as they suffer from many factors such as poor power supply, inaccessibility, distractions, technical issues, poor digital skills, and many more that can hinder education (Onyema et al. 2020). Thus, school leaders and teachers were required to revamp their schools as technology-enabled educational facilities to adapt to the new conditions (Harris 2020 in Rehm [et al.](#) 2021). Lunch breaks, student-teacher gatherings, and in-person meetings were

halted (Moussa 2021); furthermore, principals, leaders, and management had to support the students under these difficult circumstances as the students encountered isolation while staying at home (Moussa 2021). This is significant because public health research indicates that face-to-face social interaction is essential for mental well-being (Filho et al. 2021).

#### *2.4 Principal leaders' implementation in overcoming the challenges during COVID-19*

The pandemic undoubtedly presented a plethora of challenges for the education industry. However, proficient principal leaders turned these crises into an opportunity. One of the most crucial steps that principals took was addressing school closures by following health and safety protocols successfully and preventing the postponement of education by continuing distance learning (Chaudari et al. 2020 in Resmi & Hasanah 2020; Moussa 2021). When the situation of distance education occurred, principals sought to ensure that all means of communication were provided to teachers, students, and stakeholders (Metcalf & Perez 2020). Additionally, principals developed plans for distributing the devices to the school community (ibid). Some principals also attempted to close the internet connectivity gap by giving access to the internet for teachers and pupils (Metcalf & Perez 2020). Moreover, some principals conducted weekly training sessions with teachers using various platforms to ensure progress because some teachers were apprehensive about conducting lessons online (ibid). Consequently, the camaraderie among the staff increased, as the teachers assisted each other to develop their teaching skills online (ibid). In terms of consistency, teachers were asked to stick to a schedule of reaching out to the students' families with the assurance that everything would go well and continue to meet their learning needs (ibid). Evidently, effective leaders are needed to meet the school's objectives and find the utmost way to avoid such threats (Sham 2012 in Resmi & Hasanah 2020).

To sum up, this literature review has explored three major issues with the principals'

leadership challenges during COVID-19, these are (A) Educational reforms and policies implemented by the UAE during COVID-19 (B) Challenges of school principal leaders in pre and during the pandemic (C) Challenges of distance education (D) Principal leaders' implementation in overcoming the challenges during COVID-19. It can be noticed that the literature on challenges of school principals increased in recent years which makes it crucial to expand this domain in the UAE (Dubai) context. Hence, the author aimed to contribute to incorporating information about the issues encountered by school principals into the existing body of literature. The synthesised information could aid in a more effective solution to the issue.

### **3. Methodology**

The main research questions for this study are:

- “What challenges did school principals face in the period before and during COVID-19?”,
- “How did the principal leaders overcome the challenges they faced during COVID-19?”.

This section of the essay will describe the research design, sample, and data collection method adopted to investigate these questions.

#### *3.1 Qualitative Design*

To answer the research questions, a qualitative design was conducted to provide rich descriptions of phenomena as it assists to develop more meaningful explanations of research questions (Sofaer 1999). Hence, textual data was collected to perceive principal leaders' views, and experiences to gain a clear insight into the challenges faced by principals in Dubai. The qualitative design was suitable for my research questions as it identifies the gap in the existing body of literature and elucidates the overall understanding

of the topic (Pathak, Jena, & Klara 2013). Bengtsson (2016) asserts that qualitative research design contributes to comprehending the human condition in various contexts.

### *3.2 Research Paradigm*

Qualitative design is underpinned by the social constructivist reality which claims that there is nothing called one reality, but rather, there are multiple realities meaning multiple interpretations because individuals view the world through different lenses (Pham 2018). From a social constructivist perspective, I tend to dig deeper into understanding the phenomenon and its complexity in its context rather than attempting to generalise to the whole population (Creswell 2007 in Pham 2018). Similarly, Hammersley (2013 in Pham 2018) asserted that because multiple explanations of the relationship of human beings have been developed, constructivist social researchers must recognize the different ways of experiencing and seeing the world through different contexts.

### *3.3 Sample Size*

Since it is a qualitative design, it is difficult to represent the entire population therefore, the sample was drawn from principals who work in schools or educational institutions in the UAE, specifically Dubai. The sample was gender-inclusive. Originally planned to interview 10 principals, but due to the full timetables for the researcher and principals, it was extremely problematic to arrange suitable times and places for the interview. Hence, 5 principals were interviewed from different schools and educational institutes considering their age, level of education, job position.

### *3.4 Sampling Technique*

The non-probability sampling was implemented. Therefore, the targeted population members will not have an equal chance of being selected. A convenience sampling was

used where the researcher chose the sample based solely on the convenience (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2017). I chose this technique because the time was limited, and I need to collect data in a fast manner to get the results quickly. In this sampling technique, the researcher sought to select the principal leaders based on the experiences they have faced during the pandemic.

### *3.5 Data collection*

Semi-structured interviews were employed to answer my research questions. This includes principal leaders of educational institutes. Open-ended questions were used in semi-structured interviews that can be seen in Appendix. This allowed the principals to further illuminate the challenges, experiences, and key discussion points (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2017). As a researcher, I stressed that the questions were easy to understand, non-threatening, non-leading, and unbiased. Rowley (2012) Emphasizes that open questions provide adequate space for interviewees so that the participants can speak freely about the topic. The interview guide was prepared beforehand in order to ease the process of data collection. I conducted 5 semi-structured interviews according to the appropriate time and place, taking into account the precautionary measures.

### *3.6 Data Analysis*

Semi-structured interviews were used to acquire qualitative data and thematically analyzed in order to identify the common response patterns. Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing data commonly used in academia to identify, organize, and provide insights into meaningful patterns (themes) that comprehensively address research questions (Braun & Clarke 2012). Consequently, the thematic analysis revealed the challenges that school principal leaders encountered due to the shift to distance education mode. At first, the results were documented, after that, it was transcribed, and then reviewed to ensure accuracy (member-check) of the trustworthiness of the data. The most significant

information connected to my research questions were analyzed. Then, the collected responses were combined to form categories. These categories were scrutinized to determine the patterns of responses and ultimately these patterns (themes) were integrated to form significant themes using NVivo.

### *3.7 Ethical considerations*

As a researcher, I must focus on some ethical principles throughout the research process. I sent a consent form to the respective educational institutions along with potential participants to sign with a brief description of my study to ensure that they are willing to participate in the research study. Once agreed, the participants had the right to cancel their participation at any time if they felt threatened and uncomfortable. I ensured that the participants' information was kept private, and the names of the participants were anonymous during my research study. Belmont (1979 in Wester 2011) emphasizes that it is necessary to protect the rights of research participants. As per safety protocols, I also ensured that the environment is positive, safe, and non-threatening.

Table 1. Research design

Research Questions: -	Approach:	Instrument:	Participants:	Data analysis:
What challenges did school principals face in the period before and during COVID-19?	Qualitative	Semi-structured interview	5 principals	Thematic analysis
How did the principal leaders overcome the challenges they faced during COVID-19?	Qualitative	Semi-structured interview	5 principals	Thematic analysis

#### **4. Findings**

The findings of this study are represented in this section. This section is crucial as it represents the data that was investigated and answers the research questions. As noted earlier, the primary research questions for this study are: “What challenges did school principals face in the period before and during COVID-19?”, “How did the principal leaders overcome the challenges they faced during COVID-19?”. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for this qualitative design. Hence, the thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview responses and extract common themes. It can be concluded that the 5 principals’ responses regarding the challenges and how they overcame these challenges were comparable. Therefore, the following are some of the predominant themes and key conclusions drawn from all five conducted interviews:

##### *4.1 Implementing distance education*

Keeping up with a range of activities such as school building maintenance, policy implementation, curriculum development, ensuring that teaching and learning ran smoothly, budget management, and other school administration problems was one of the most difficult challenges according to all of the school principals. When transferring from face-to-face to online, the principals consistently reported unpleasant experiences due to the three main reasons which were consistently mentioned. The lack of interpersonal interactions between teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders was one of the most serious issues that principals encountered during the pandemic. For example, one of the principals said “*Suddenly, I started to function via emails. I had to read every single email carefully since they contained directions for school administration because it was no longer possible to communicate in person. Therefore, I must exercise extreme caution while writing emails to avoid misinterpretations*”. The second point was the shift in the roles of

the principals. One of the principals stated *“as a result of the pandemic, I've taken on the role of a robot, carrying out the ministry of education orders. Due to the continuous changing of these orders, I literally wasted too much time and became engrossed in orders without completing any significant task”*. The third point mentioned by all principals was the technical issues and the lack of teacher training on online platforms *“due to the unusual circumstances, it was impossible to train teachers on how to use online platforms properly due to the shortage of time.”*

#### *4.2 Parents' concerns*

The second major issue concerns the difficulties faced by school principals in dealing with parents during the pandemic. A consistent complaint from principals was about the workload involved with following up with the parents and caregivers. For example, Principal #2 stated, *“ I had to keep the parents up to date on the precautionary measures and reassure them that this abrupt situation would be temporary”*. As the COVID-19 guidelines changed day by day, it was becoming increasingly difficult for school leaders to keep up with the changes. On one hand, they wished to focus on digital education in order to help teachers when using online platforms; yet it was difficult to deal with parents' and teachers' concerns, particularly while running the school from home. Moreover, it was somewhat stressful to reassure not only parents, but also other stakeholders that returning to school was safe under the conditions of maintaining school distance and adhering to precautionary measures when the Ministry of Education issued that returning to school was permitted. As one of the principals said, *“It was difficult as a principal to reassure all stakeholders that it was safe to return to school while other businesses were still closed”*.

#### *4.3 Financial issues*

Another issue raised by school principals was the consistent complaint from the parents to reduce the tuition fees since there were no activities, excursions, or seminars for the students. In addition to many students who dropped out of school due to the high fees

which led to financial problems for many schools. As principal #1 said, “*I had no incentive to persuade the parents to retain their children in school while everything was suspended, so the parents favored schools with low tuition fees*”. As a result, school principals were forced to lower tuition fees and instructor wages, which caused some concern among teachers.

#### *4.4 Virtual Platforms*

*The school principals had a lot to learn because it was such a new challenge, and they were trying to figure out how to effectively engage and educate the students digitally. This resulted in an additional load on principals (and indeed teachers), whilst they attempted to figure out the most efficient methods for online teaching delivery. Interestingly, all the principals stated that they have taken responsibility for ensuring the safety of the students and teachers by creating a virtual platform that adapts to the current situation. For example, principal #5 stated “my primary goal was not to suspend learning, instead, I had to create an environment in which learning could take place”. Furthermore, the online didactic materials were not up to the same level of quality as on-campus materials because teachers were forced to simplify the content for the benefit of students. Unfortunately, there was a lack of engagement, interactivity, and meaningful feedback with these materials.*

#### *4.5 Continuous technological training*

As the covid-19 pandemic progressed, many governments implemented policies to limit the number of individuals who congregated in public places. Because such measures have lasted so long, most leaders have been working on ways to make schools suitable for working in a safe environment where students and teachers can continue with their lessons even if attending school was not possible. All of the principals stated that they were attempting to use resources that would aid in the management of teaching and learning, such as lessons, videos, interactive learning modules, and other curriculum tools that help students acquire knowledge and skills along with the accessibility of educational content

by teachers, students, and parents. The majority of principals have recognized that teachers must be trained since they have not gotten adequate training when dealing with the technological demands of distant learning as principal #3 emphasised “*providing adequate professional development training for teachers about online and blended learning is crucial to help students maintain their learning.*”

#### *4.6 Communities of Practice*

The final theme that came out of the data was the notion of ‘communities of practice’, which are similar to special interest groups. Essentially, principals would ask teachers who had expertise in educational technology to volunteer their time by sharing their knowledge about online and blended learning. It appears that in many schools, most teachers are not tech-savvy; however, there are a handful of younger teachers (such as millennials) who are in fact very competent with EdTech tools. Therefore, principals would encourage them to form an unofficial committee within the school, wherein they find solutions to problems, share ideas, and then deliver in-house professional development training to peers. For example, principal #2 stated “*by building communities of practice related to eLearning within the school, we were able to identify teachers with specialist knowledge, and empower them by giving them opportunities to lead professional development sessions. This was great for sharing knowledge and collegiality*”.

### **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of this study was two-fold; firstly, to explore the challenges that principals encountered in before and during the covid-19 pandemic; secondly, to identify the solutions they made to overcome these challenges. A purely qualitative approach was taken for collecting data because I wanted to adopt an exploratory approach towards answering the research questions. Ultimately, the data analysis revealed that overall, Dubai’s education system was profoundly impacted by the pandemic, as were schools globally

(Sintema 2020). More specifically, when school principals reflected upon the challenges they faced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were minor compared to the difficulties faced with online and blending learning during the pandemic. Overall, there were 6 main challenges that school principals faced:

- Implementing distance education - seeing as most schools did not have any policy or mechanism in place to facilitate online learning, this was a major challenge at the start of the pandemic.
- Parents' concerns - principals were bombarded with complaints from parents about the poor quality of teaching and learning remotely.
- Financial issues - in relation to the previous point, parents did not want to pay full tuition fees.
- Virtual Platforms - principals had to invest a significant amount of time, energy, and money into learning about various eLearning environments and virtual platforms.
- Continuous technological training - evidently, teachers were unable to cope with the transition to online teaching and were in desperate need of professional development training.
- *Communities of Practice - there was a clear need for collegiality, comradery, and internal support from peers in many schools,*

These challenges are similar to ones which have been found in previous studies (Ferrandino 2001; Pollock 2020a; Tintore' et al. 2020). In order to overcome these challenges, principals needed to find creative and effective solutions. These included creating communities of practice of teachers who would provide professional development training to their peers. Additionally, some schools lowered their tuition fees in order to accommodate parents' complaints and concerns. Furthermore, school principals invested a significant amount of time, energy, and financial resources in order to provide the best online learning experience possible during these exceptional times.

It should be noted that this study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size is rather small because it was incredibly difficult for the author as a master's level student to get educational leaders to participate. Secondly, all of the interviews were conducted online, and the author could sense that the participants were not able to give their full attention; so, it would have been better if these were face to face interviews. Since this paper had a small sample size, there were only five principals who took part in the interviews. Future research could look at a larger sample size and maybe not only Dubai, but other cities in the UAE as well. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to collect data from other types of participants, including students and parents; as this would have given a more comprehensive and holistic view. Lastly, the author would suggest that future studies take this topic a step further.

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## **Appendix**

Semi-structured and focus group interviews' questions for experienced participants Principals (participants).

Today's date:

Time allotted for the Interview(s):

### **Preamble:**

Dear Sir/Madam,

You have been invited to be part of this interview as part of my research I am working on. I am a master's student at the British University in Dubai, UAE. My research paper is entitled **“Investigation into the effect of COVID-19 on the leadership of principals in Dubai Schools”**. The study is designed to investigate the challenges that principals have encountered in different contexts (pre and during the covid-19 pandemic) and the solutions they made to overcome these challenges. You are being asked to take part in this because you play a crucial role in making this goal a reality.

In this interview, your responses are completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to respond to any of the questions. I estimate that the interview will last about 45 minutes. By consenting to participate in the interview, you affirm that you give me your permission to record the interview and utilise your responses in my research. I assure you that all your responses will be anonymized. Please contact me if you have any queries or concerns. I will provide you with my contact information at the end of the interview.

Do you consent to be part of this interview?

**General questions**

1. Please designate your gender.
2. Please designate your age.
3. Please designate your qualification.
4. Please allocate your designation.

**Questions:-**

1. In general, tell me about your current school.

(prompts: describe your school's vision and mission).

2. What motivates you to be a school leader?

(prompts: What drives you to be a school leader?)

3. What did you learn the most as a principal leader?

(Prompts: as a leader, what lessons did you learn during your journey?)

4. What leadership skills do you usually employ to build your staff?

(Prompts: How do you lead your school?)

5. what procedures do you use as a leader to ensure a successful change?

(Prompts: as a leader, what practices do you employ to guarantee a successful transition?)

6. What do you think as a leader about taking risks at school?

(Prompts: as a leader, what are your thoughts on taking risks in your school?)

7. Describe a time when you started a new strategy at your school. What steps did you take to make this work?

(Prompts: Describe an innovative idea that you have employed in your school. What did you do to make this successful?).

8. What are the secrets to being a successful leader?

(Prompts: What are the keys to successful leadership?)

9. School leadership necessitates conflict resolution and communication. Could you give me some examples of how you dealt with a difficult scenario at school?

(Prompts: Communication and conflict resolution are essential components of school leadership. Can you tell me about a time when you had to deal with a challenging situation at school?)

10. As you know that time management is important, how do you manage your time to make sure that you are a peak performer?

(Prompts: How do you manage your time?)

11. Describe a time when you tried something and failed at. What did you learn from this experience?

(Prompts: describe a time when you tried something new and didn't succeed. what did this experience teach you?)

13. What makes a distance learning program effective?

(Prompts: What factors contribute to the success of a distance learning program?)

14. How did you deal with the educational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic?

(Prompts: What are your strategies for dealing with educational challenges during outbreak of the pandemic?)

15. During the pandemic, how did you ensure that teachers and students have access to the materials they needed?

(Prompts: how did you make sure that teachers and students got the educational resources they need?)

16. What are the major problems that you have experienced as a leader during COVID-19?

(Prompts: What have been the most significant challenges you have faced as a leader during the pandemic?)

17. Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion that I have not asked you about?

18. Do you have any further questions for me?

**Probes:**

1. could you please tell me more about that?

2. Can you provide me with some examples?

3. What makes you feel that way?

4. What do you need to change to make this happen?

5. Can you elaborate on how you worked that out?

6. That's interesting, what makes you say that?

7. During that time, where were you?
8. Where did it happen?
9. How did you feel about that?
10. What made you decide to look for a solution right now?

“Thank you very much for your valuable time”