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Educational Leadership in the UAE: A Comparative Analysis of Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Models

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Abstract

This study examines three prominent leadership theories (transformational, transactional, and authentic theories) to understand how they are applied in the UAE education sector (private and public sectors) and align with national culture, educational policies, and educational/institutional practices. The UAE requires visionary educational leaders who integrate ethical standards with cultural sensitivity to advance national development agendas such as *We the UAE 2031* across public and private schooling, as well as higher education. Using a qualitative theoretical approach and comparative document analysis, the study describes transformational leadership as visionary and motivational, transactional leadership as incentive-based and compliance-oriented, and authentic leadership as integrity-driven and self-aware. It evaluates the alignment of these leadership models with Emirati cultural values, educational policies, and institutional practices, drawing on academic literature, government reports, and peer-reviewed research. The conclusions suggest that transformational and authentic leadership approaches most effectively support the UAE's educational goals for innovation, inclusion, and sustainable improvement, whereas transactional leadership is better suited to ensuring accountability and operational stability than to driving long-term change. The study proposes that educational leaders in the UAE should adopt blended, transformative and authentic leadership practices grounded in ethical clarity, transparency, and cultural understanding to guide school and university development and shape future-ready learning environments.

Keywords: leadership theories, education, culture, values

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1. Introduction

Leadership has emerged as a fundamental subject of study in academic and professional environments because of the fast-paced changes happening in nations and organizations. Leadership stands as a vital force for national development in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) because of strategic visions like We the UAE 2031, which aim to establish the country as a global leader in innovation and governance and economic diversification (UAE Government, 2023). The UAE social structure which combines traditional Islamic and tribal customs with international workers' demands leadership approaches that merge cultural heritage with progressive thinking (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010).

This analysis examines the application of Transformational Leadership and Transactional Leadership and Authentic Leadership theories in the United Arab Emirates education context. The three leadership theories offer different perspectives as Transformational Leadership focuses on vision and inspiration and change (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and Transactional Leadership grounds itself in structure and rewards and clear expectations (Northouse, 2021) and Authentic Leadership is based on self-awareness and ethics and transparent relationships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Research on these models primarily occurs in Western settings yet their implementation within UAE socio-cultural and organizational structures continues to develop as an area of academic investigation.

This paper aims to critically analyze the three approaches to leadership (transformational, transactional, and authentic theories) within the UAE education sector to understand how they apply in the UAE education sector (private and public sectors) and align with the national cultural, educational policies and institutional practices. To contextualize this aim, it is important to recognize that the UAE education system comprises a federal government school sector, overseen

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by the Emirates School Establishment, alongside a diverse private school sector regulated by authorities such as ADEK for the emirate of Abu Dhabi and KHDA for Dubai. School principals, middle leaders, and higher education administrators are expected to meet demanding inspection standards, drive curriculum reform, and lead multicultural staff bodies. These expectations make educational institutions an appropriate and critical arena for examining how global leadership models can be adapted to the UAE's cultural, policy, and accountability frameworks. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the core characteristics of Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership?
2. How do these leadership theories align with the UAE's cultural, social, and institutional landscape?
3. How do leadership theories apply in the UAE education sector?

The rationale for selecting the three leadership theories are that they represent the most widely used frameworks in international educational leadership research and appear frequently in studies conducted in the Gulf and wider Arab contexts. Transformational and transactional leadership form the Full Range Leadership Model that underpins much of the empirical work on school leadership, while authentic leadership resonates strongly with Islamic leadership principles such as *amana* (trustworthiness) and *shura* (consultation). Analysing these models together therefore offers a balanced lens that captures both performance-driven and value-driven aspects of leadership in UAE schools and universities.

This paper is highly relevant to the current circumstances. The UAE is recognized for taking notable steps to promote leadership through the national programs of MBRCLD (2021). Emirati leaders need to demonstrate a strong command of innovation, the ability to lead diverse groups of people, and a commitment to fulfilling a comprehensive purpose. The shifting demographics of the

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Emirati population, with more women and youth entering leadership positions (Goby, Nickerson, & David, 2015), underscore this need. The strategic economic transformation toward a knowledge-based economy has made it essential to examine which leadership approaches best enhance innovation, trust, and employee engagement.

2. Leadership Context in the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) exercises leadership within a distinct social environment that unites traditional cultural elements with contemporary strategic goals. Assessing the applicability of global leadership theories to the UAE's evolving public and private sectors requires a nuanced understanding of the local context. Within this broader national landscape, educational institutions play a central role, as school and university leaders are responsible for translating these societal and strategic expectations into effective learning environments.

2.1. Cultural and Social Values

Leadership perception and practice in Emirati society stem from Islamic traditions, tribal heritage, and collectivist values. The values of authority, respect, community loyalty, and moral integrity (amana) form the foundation of both personal and professional relationships, according to Sidani & Thornberry (2010). The Islamic principle of shura promotes participatory leadership through consultative decision-making while preserving hierarchical structures. These cultural values establish dual expectations for leaders to demonstrate both decisiveness and ethical conduct.

The UAE maintains a multicultural society, with expatriates comprising approximately 89 percent of the total population (World Bank, 2023). Leadership in this context becomes more complex, as leaders must navigate diverse communication styles, work standards, and cultural expectations across groups. Goby, Nickerson, and David (2015) explain that leadership success in the UAE depends on developing intercultural competencies and creating inclusive environments that

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unite individuals from different cultural backgrounds. For educational leaders, these cultural expectations shape how they foster inclusion, build trust with multicultural staff, and support students from diverse backgrounds.

2.2 Organizational Structures and Workforce Trends

The UAE organizational leadership combines elements of traditional hierarchical systems with contemporary corporate management approaches. Government entities in the UAE employ a top-down leadership style that prioritizes control, performance, and clear authority structures, closely reflecting Transactional Leadership principles (Al Ketbi & Mahmoud, 2020). At the same time, the adoption of Transformational Leadership approaches—emphasizing vision, collaboration, and empowerment—is expanding in innovation-driven sectors such as education, technology, and entrepreneurship (Al-Shamsi & Al-Harthi, 2021).

The UAE government also supports Emiratization through national policies designed to increase the participation of Emirati nationals in the workforce. The Mohammed bin Rashid Centre for Leadership Development (MBRCLD) (2021) plays a leading role in preparing the next generation of Emirati leaders through a range of initiatives. These programs aim to cultivate leaders capable of integrating international leadership competencies with UAE national values and cultural heritage**.** In the education sector, these workforce trends require school and university leaders to prepare learners for future labor market needs while supporting teachers in delivering innovative, skills-focused instructional practices.

2.3. Strategic Development Goals

The UAE's strategic development goals are articulated in national visions, including UAE Vision 2021, UAE Centennial 2071, and *We the UAE 2031*. The frameworks established by the UAE Government (2023) emphasize digital transformation, innovation, sustainability, and human

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capital development. Achieving these goals requires leaders who demonstrate adaptability, forward-thinking capabilities, and strong ethical principles.

The *UAE 2031* initiative seeks to establish the UAE as the world's leading dynamic economy while preserving both national identity and social cohesion. Leaders aiming to achieve these ambitions must be capable of driving change, managing diverse teams, and embodying authentic and ethical leadership principles (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The government's commitment to gender inclusion and youth leadership development further underscores the need for leadership models that promote equity, transparency, and trust-based relationships. The growing presence of women in senior positions across both the public and private sectors has contributed to the wider adoption of leadership approaches that empower individuals and promote ethical governance (Goby et al., 2015). These national strategies directly shape expectations for educational leaders, who must implement reforms, adopt innovative teaching models, and ensure that schools and universities contribute to the UAE's vision for knowledge-based development.

Taken together, these national strategies highlight the critical importance of adapting global leadership theories to the UAE's socio-cultural context to ensure sustainable progress and inclusive development.

2.4. Summary

Leadership in the UAE has evolved as a framework shaped by tensions between cultural tradition, organizational modernity, and national aspiration. Leaders are expected to be cross-culturally sensitive, strategically minded, and ethically responsible. This complexity makes the UAE a compelling context in which to examine the applicability of global leadership theories and to identify what proves effective in practice. As discussed in this paper, a nuanced appreciation of this

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context is essential for aligning leadership models with the UAE's futurist aspirations while remaining grounded in its cultural heritage.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach. The analysis draws on three main groups of documents: (a) international and regional academic literature on transformational, transactional, and authentic leadership; (b) UAE policy and strategic documents, including national vision statements and leadership development initiatives; and (c) empirical studies that investigate leadership practices in UAE schools, universities, and related educational organizations.

These documents were examined to identify how each leadership theory is defined, the values and behaviors it promotes, and the ways it has been applied or discussed in the UAE and wider Arab region. The analysis focused on four criteria: (1) alignment with Emirati cultural and religious values, (2) relevance to UAE educational policies, practices and reform agendas (3) implications for staff motivation, trust, and innovation in educational settings, and (4) potential limitations or tensions in practice.

By synthesizing insights across these sources, the study develops a comparative evaluation of transformational, transactional, and authentic leadership models in the UAE education sector. This methodological approach is appropriate for conceptual and context-focused research that seeks to integrate theory, policy, and practice without collecting new primary empirical data.

To this end, the paper first reviews the three leadership theories and their key concepts and applications. It then examines the leadership context in the UAE, with a particular focus on education, cultural values, and national aspirations. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the alignment between each theory and the UAE educational context, illustrated through examples from schools, universities, and national leadership programs. The paper concludes with a discussion

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of implications and recommendations for developing culturally responsive educational leadership in the UAE.

4. Review of Relevant Literature

This section evaluates three prominent leadership theories, including Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership, through their definitions, principles, and global significance. Organizational research has extensively examined leadership as a topic, while scholars continue to investigate how different leadership approaches affect motivation, innovation, and ethical governance. Multiple theories exist to explain how leaders effectively inspire, guide, support, and transform both individuals and organizations. The three leadership models—Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership—have received special attention because they are applicable across different sectors and cultures. The review examines the theoretical foundations and essential research outcomes of these models while emphasizing their suitability for the socio-cultural and institutional framework of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

4.1 Summary of Existing Knowledge

Organizational studies scholars have extensively examined leadership because it remains one of the most widely researched fields, particularly in contexts where national priorities include change, innovation, and human capital development. Leadership functions as a vital factor in advancing UAE Vision 2031, as the UAE Government (2023) emphasizes innovation and inclusion alongside excellence in governance. Within this wider body of work, a growing strand of research focuses specifically on educational leadership in UAE schools and universities, examining how leadership styles shape teaching quality, innovation, inspection outcomes, and staff wellbeing. A recent review by Rai and Beresford-Dey (2023) provides an updated synthesis of research on school leadership in the UAE, highlighting persistent challenges related to capacity building, multicultural staff management, and the tensions between global leadership expectations and local cultural norms.

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Their review reinforces the importance of culturally responsive leadership models and demonstrates that UAE school leaders increasingly require competencies associated with transformational and authentic leadership to meet national reform agendas and inspection standards.

The three leadership theories—Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership—appear frequently in both international and regional academic literature. Transformational Leadership emphasizes vision creation and motivating followers to achieve beyond expected outcomes, first introduced by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass and Riggio (2006). Moreover, transactional Leadership focuses on performance management, task-based rewards, and clear accountability for results (Bass, 1985). Authentic Leadership highlights ethical conduct, self-awareness, and open communication, making it suitable for contexts that require cultural harmony and the development of trust (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Research by Al-Shamsi and Al-Harthi (2021) and Al Ketbi and Mahmoud (2020) demonstrates that both transformational and transactional leadership approaches are present in the UAE, with transformational leadership strongly associated with innovation and public sector outcomes. Additional studies conducted in the UAE indicate that Authentic Leadership is gaining increasing attention because it aligns with Islamic principles such as *amana* (trustworthiness) and *shura* (consultation) (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010).

Recent international research further reinforces the relevance of transformational leadership in educational settings. Meidelina et al. (2023), in a systematic review of global studies, found that transformational leadership consistently enhances teacher well-being by promoting professional motivation, psychological safety, and supportive school climates. These findings highlight the broader benefits of transformational practices for staff morale and organizational culture,

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strengthening the argument for its applicability within the UAE education sector, where teacher retention, innovation, and well-being remain national priorities.

Together, these findings highlight the importance of examining how global leadership theories can be contextualized within the UAE's socio-cultural framework to ensure both relevance and effectiveness. More recent empirical studies on UAE educational institutions further reinforce this conclusion by showing that leadership approaches combining clear vision, ethical practice, and cultural responsiveness are associated with stronger organizational commitment and improved educational outcomes. Educational settings, therefore, provide a particularly suitable context in which to evaluate the practical implications of these three leadership models.

5. Core Characteristics and Comparison of the Leadership Theories (Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic)

While the three leadership theories are applied in specific situations, their effectiveness differs across the UAE context. Some researchers suggest that the UAE requires transformational leadership for strategic development, especially in innovation-led sectors, according to Al-Shamsi & Al-Harthi (2021). However, the emphasis of this leadership style on personal empowerment faces challenges because the UAE remains predominantly patriarchal and collectivist (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010). Bureaucratic organizations continue to rely on transactional leadership, despite its inflexibility, because obedience, order, and performance criteria remain vital (Al Ketbi & Mahmoud, 2020). However, this approach fails to generate strong emotional commitment, which would motivate employees to exceed their assigned duties.

The literature shows that Authentic Leadership, grounded in ethical principles and innate integrity, has become more prominent. The UAE, along with other culturally conservative and religiously influenced societies, values authenticity as a fundamental leadership quality (Avolio &

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Gardner, 2005). The development of genuine leadership faces two main challenges: it remains subjective and difficult to quantify, especially when multinational organizations include diverse cultural interpretations of authentic leadership (Northouse, 2021).

Overall, the three leadership styles demonstrate a clear pattern: Transactional Leadership provides short-term control, Transformational Leadership drives long-term innovation, and Authentic Leadership fosters trust and cultural legitimacy. The leadership paradigm that suits the UAE context must therefore demonstrate global effectiveness while simultaneously preserving its cultural roots. This comparative understanding provides a foundation for analyzing the practical implications of leadership theories within the UAE's policy, educational, and organizational environments.

The subsequent sections of this paper build on this literature by applying a comparative lens to these three leadership theories. Using the four analytical criteria outlined in the methodology section: cultural alignment, policy relevance, motivational impact, and practical limitations, the discussion evaluates how each model supports or constrains leadership practice in UAE educational institutions. This structured comparison clarifies where the theories overlap, where they diverge, and how a blended approach might be developed for the UAE context.

5.1. Key Theories and Concepts

- Transformational Leadership: Emphasizes vision, motivation, and personal development (Bass & Riggio, 2006).
- Transactional Leadership: Emphasizes structured processes, rewards, and task fulfillment (Bass, 1985).
- Authentic Leadership: Centers on self-awareness, ethics, and consistency between words and actions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

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These models have unique but overlapping characteristics.

5. 2. Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership emerged from the work of Burns (1978) and Bass and Riggio (2006), who defined leaders as those who motivate their followers to achieve beyond expectations through inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and personalized support. The theory consists of four essential components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Research demonstrates that transformational leadership generates higher levels of employee satisfaction as well as enhanced organizational innovation and performance outcomes worldwide (Northouse, 2021).

The UAE national development plans—UAE Vision 2031 and Centennial 2071—align closely with the principles of transformational leadership because they emphasize innovation, human capital development, and future readiness (UAE Government, 2023). Research by Al-Shamsi and Al-Harthi (2021) demonstrated that transformational leadership practices foster greater employee engagement within UAE government organizations during periods of organizational change and digital transformation. Sidani and Thornberry (2010) explain that implementing transformational leadership in Arab societies requires cultural awareness of individual empowerment, given that these societies continue to maintain collectivist traditions.

5.3. Transactional Leadership

Transactional Leadership, according to Bass (1985), is characterized by contingent rewards and management-by-exception (either actively monitoring performance or intervening when expectations are not met). This approach is especially prominent in educational settings, where transparency, discipline, and standardization are of paramount importance.

Transactional leadership is widely practiced in organizational and governmental institutions in the UAE, particularly in bureaucratic contexts that necessitate strict compliance with procedures.

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For instance, Al Ketbi and Mahmoud's (2020) research demonstrated that transactional practices were prevalent within ministries when prioritizing task performance and the exercise of formal authority. Although effective in achieving immediate objectives, transactional leadership can be perceived as limiting and unsuitable for visionary or innovation-driven growth strategies in the long term (Northouse, 2021). This limitation is especially relevant in the UAE's emerging industries, where leaders must adopt more agile and future-oriented approaches.

5.4. Authentic Leadership

The modern leadership model of Authentic Leadership focuses on ethical conduct, self-knowledge, and consistency between values and actions. According to Avolio and Gardner (2005), Authentic Leadership consists of four elements: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective. The theory is grounded in positive organizational behavior, aiming to establish trust, credibility, and psychological safety within teams.

The UAE population recognizes that Authentic Leadership principles align closely with their cultural and religious values. The leadership traditions of Islam and Emirati society emphasize integrity (*amana*) and mutual consultation (*shura*) as fundamental principles (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010). Studies in the UAE indicate that Authentic Leadership traits enhance trust and credibility among culturally diverse staff groups, reinforcing its relevance for educational and governmental institutions.

The inclusive nature of Authentic Leadership makes it highly suitable for the UAE's gender empowerment initiatives and multicultural workforce. Furthermore, the study by Goby, Nickerson, and David (2015) illustrates that Authentic Leadership strengthens team communication and promotes ethical decision-making, which is particularly vital in the UAE's multicultural organizational environment.

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5.5. Theoretical and Methodological Approaches in Similar Studies

The UAE, along with the broader Arab region, implements multiple research methods that deliver crucial insights into leadership practices and cultural perceptions of leadership within unique socio-cultural settings. Quantitative surveys serve as the most prevalent research instrument for studying leadership styles, particularly in examining their impact on performance outcomes, innovation, and employee engagement. Al-Shamsi and Al-Harthi (2021) utilized surveys to investigate the effects of Transformational Leadership on innovation within government institutions. Research teams also employ qualitative approaches, including interviews and case studies, to analyze the deeper cultural and ethical dimensions of leadership. The research of Sidani and Thornberry (2010) incorporated interviews to examine leadership values among Arabs, while others investigated Emirati perspectives on Authentic Leadership.

Research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods allows scholars to explore intricate themes such as communication and trust within multicultural teams, as demonstrated by Goby, Nickerson, and David (2015). This body of work employs several key theoretical frameworks. The Bass Full Range Leadership Model has been particularly influential, enabling the evaluation of Transformational and Transactional behaviors in the UAE, where leadership styles frequently exhibit both visionary and directive characteristics. Authentic Leadership research relies on psychological instruments to measure self-awareness, transparency, and ethical orientation, among other traits. Cultural analysis tools, including Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the GLOBE study's Arabic leadership cluster (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002), provide researchers with frameworks to explain differences in leadership expectations across societies and to adapt universal theories for local application.

Research on leadership consistently demonstrates that cultural and contextual understanding remains essential. This paper advances this perspective by employing a theoretical and comparative

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method, combining established frameworks with localized findings to evaluate the applicability of Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership models in the UAE context. While research on individual leadership theories exists, few studies have analyzed their interaction and overlap in practice, particularly within the Emirati context. This study addresses this gap by developing an integrated understanding of culturally responsive leadership in the UAE.

Recent research continues to show how transformational leadership shapes the development of educational institutions in the UAE. Fenech, Abdulla, and Zairi (2024) highlight that higher education plays a central role in preparing future specialists and that strong leadership is essential for achieving this mission. Their study, which examined the views of academic leaders across several tertiary institutions, found that leadership development tends to come first during the early phases of an organization's life cycle. As institutions mature, leadership development begins to mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and a culture of excellence. In long-established institutions, the three elements appear to reinforce one another continuously and interdependently. These findings suggest that transformational leadership in higher education is not a fixed trait but part of an evolving developmental process that grows alongside the institution itself.

A related pattern can be seen in school settings. Abuhassira, Razak, and Hoque (2024) explored how department heads influence classroom interaction through transformational leadership practices. Drawing on responses from 374 teachers working in private secondary schools, their study showed that effective transformational leadership contributes positively to the quality of classroom interactions, particularly in how teachers and students engage with each other and with learning content. They also found that teachers' experience plays a moderating role, shaping how strongly leadership practices translate into improved interaction. This suggests that leadership effectiveness is strengthened when it is supported by practical teaching expertise. The authors argue

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that school leaders and policymakers should recognise the value of teachers' pedagogical experience and use it to enhance student participation and engagement.

5.6. Summary of Key Literature Themes/Characteristics

Evidence from the literature supports the relevance of all three leadership theories—Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership—across sectors and leadership domains in the UAE. Innovation, strategic change, and national space development are strongly associated with Transformational Leadership. Transactional Leadership contributes to operational efficiency and accountability, although it may constrain creativity. Authentic Leadership aligns closely with Emirati cultural values and promotes inclusive, ethical governance within communities and institutions.

Overall, global leadership theories must be contextually adapted to ensure their appropriateness and effectiveness within the UAE setting across all studies.

6. Comparative Analysis of Leadership Theories in the UAE

In this section, a comparison is made between Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership theories and their applicability to the unique cultural, organizational, and strategic leadership context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The analysis evaluates the strengths and limitations of each theory to determine which leadership approach—or combination of approaches—is most appropriate for advancing nation-building, fostering innovation, and promoting ethical governance in the UAE.

6.1. Transformational Leadership and UAE Alignment

The UAE requires Transformational Leadership as one of the most critical approaches for achieving its future-oriented vision. This leadership model aligns with UAE Vision 2031 and Centennial 2071 national strategies because it emphasizes inspiring followers, creating shared

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visions, and fostering innovation (UAE Government, 2023). Research evidence demonstrates that Transformational Leadership has significant impacts on employee motivation, change management, and innovation performance across UAE public and private organizations (Al-Shamsi & Al-Harthi, 2021). It is particularly effective in uniting diverse teams, setting ambitious objectives, and cultivating an environment that supports continuous development.

However, the approach encounters challenges when applied in bureaucratic systems characterized by formal decision-making structures, which are typical of Emirati government institutions (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010). Transformational Leadership, therefore, requires cultural adaptation to operate effectively within the UAE's collectivist and authority-oriented society.

6.2. Transactional Leadership and UAE Alignment

The United Arab Emirates maintains the relevance of Transactional Leadership in its regulatory institutions, ministries, and formalized sectors, as these areas require strict performance standards, procedural compliance, and efficiency. The structured nature of many UAE government and semi-government organizations (Al Ketbi & Mahmoud, 2020) aligns with Transactional Leadership's emphasis on goal-setting, rewards, and corrective actions. This approach is effective for maintaining operational control and stability but demonstrates limited value in dynamic or innovation-driven contexts.

Transactional Leadership can generate short-term motivation; however, it fails to foster emotional engagement and long-term strategic vision, both of which are essential for developing younger Emirati leaders and supporting cross-cultural collaboration (Northouse, 2021). Accordingly, Transactional Leadership is best understood as a supplementary approach within the UAE's governance framework, complementing the nation's progression toward more agile and human-centric leadership models.

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6.3. Authentic Leadership and UAE Alignment

The UAE has shown rising interest in Authentic Leadership because it emphasizes ethical conduct, value-based leadership, and integrity. Emirati society, rooted in Islamic principles such as *amana* (trustworthiness) and *shura* (consultation), regards Authentic Leadership as highly relevant for meeting local expectations of moral leadership (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010). According to Avolio and Gardner (2005), Authentic Leaders demonstrate self-awareness and transparency while adhering to an internal moral compass, which enables them to build trust and secure long-term commitment.

Authentic Leadership contributes to achieving national goals by promoting good governance, social cohesion, and inclusion. The UAE's leadership development programs now emphasize training that integrates values-based principles with ethical decision-making and community service (MBRCLD, 2021). Authentic Leadership also supports both gender equity and youth empowerment, which are fundamental components of national strategies aimed at cultivating diverse leadership across sectors (Goby, Nickerson, & David, 2015).

The main drawback of Authentic Leadership lies in its subjective nature, as cultural contexts shape differing definitions of authenticity, and workplace assessment remains particularly challenging in multicultural environments. Nevertheless, its ethical foundation and cultural congruence make Authentic Leadership a highly suitable model for guiding leadership practice in the UAE.

6.4. Comparative Summary

The evaluation demonstrates how different leadership theories correspond to specific elements of the UAE leadership environment. The UAE's collectivist and authority-respecting culture makes Transformational Leadership a strong cultural fit when properly adapted. This approach supports UAE Vision 2031 by advancing innovation, long-term strategic thinking, and

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youth empowerment. Its capacity to unite individuals under shared visions makes it especially effective in multicultural teams and Emiratization initiatives.

Traditional rule-based organizations, such as ministries and regulatory bodies, benefit from Transactional Leadership, although its scope remains limited. The approach aligns with aspects of the national vision through performance management and operational efficiency, yet it lacks the emotional depth and strategic foresight required for innovation and inclusive governance. Moreover, Transactional Leadership demonstrates limited effectiveness in diverse teams and provides minimal support for youth and gender inclusion, as it reinforces traditional hierarchical structures.

The UAE's cultural and religious values align closely with Authentic Leadership, which emphasizes ethics, trust, and transparency. This approach yields particularly strong results in multicultural settings, where it fosters trust and psychological safety. Its values-based orientation makes it highly suitable for empowering Emirati youth and female leaders. The comparative findings are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Leadership Theories in the UAE Context

Leadership Theory	Advantages	Limitations	Applicability in the UAE
Transformational Leadership	- Inspires vision and long-term innovation - Enhances motivation and engagement -	- Less effective in rigid bureaucratic systems - Requires adaptation in	- Aligns with UAE Vision 2031 & Centennial 2071 - Effective in education, technology, and

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	Supports reform and system-wide change	collectivist, authority-oriented cultures	entrepreneurship sectors - Fosters youth empowerment and multicultural team collaboration
Transactional Leadership	- Ensures accountability and operational stability - Provides structure and clear expectations - Effective for short-term performance goals	- Stifles creativity and risk-taking - Limited capacity for innovation - Weak in promoting inclusion or trust	- Prevalent in ministries and regulatory bodies - Effective in large public schools under ADEK/KHDA inspection - Works as a **supporting system** for operational efficiency
Authentic Leadership	- Builds trust, integrity, and transparency - Encourages inclusion and cultural sensitivity - Strengthens ethical	- Subjective definitions of authenticity - Difficult to assess in multicultural settings - Less institutionalized in policy frameworks	- Aligns with Islamic values (*amana*, *shura*) - Suitable for multicultural schools and universities - Supports gender equity, youth empowerment, and wellbeing initiatives

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	decision-making and cohesion		

Note. This table was developed by the authors and synthesizes information from previously cited sources (e.g., Bass & Riggio, 2006; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Sidani & Thornberry, 2010; Northouse, 2021; Al Ketbi & Mahmoud, 2020; Al-Shamsi & Al-Harthi, 2021).

Overall, the analysis indicates that a blended model of Transformational and Authentic Leadership, adapted to the UAE's cultural and strategic requirements, represents the most effective approach for future leadership development in the country.

The analysis shows that Transformational and Authentic Leadership align most closely with the UAE's strategic objectives and cultural principles among the three approaches. Transformational Leadership drives innovation, national development, and youth empowerment, while Authentic Leadership fosters trust, ethical governance, and inclusive decision-making. The application of Transactional Leadership remains relevant for certain sectors, though it should serve as a supporting mechanism rather than a primary leadership model for future development.

Overall, a hybrid leadership framework that integrates the strengths of all three theories and adapts them to the UAE context offers the most effective pathway for sustaining long-term national progress.

7. Leadership Theories in Practice – The UAE Education Sector

The United Arab Emirates' education sector is undergoing rapid transformation as the nation seeks to establish a competitive knowledge-based economy. This transformation depends on

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effective leadership, which many institutions have adopted through practices informed by Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership theories. These models are evident across educational institutions, including schools, universities, and national leadership development initiatives, all of which aim to enhance educational quality and promote equity.

7.1. Transformational Leadership in Educational Reform

UAE educational institutions are increasingly adopting Transformational Leadership to implement large-scale reforms that support the national strategies of UAE Vision 2031. Leaders who practice this approach work to create a shared vision among staff members while motivating teachers and promoting innovations in teaching and learning. The Emirates School Establishment's curriculum reforms in government schools require principals to act as instructional leaders, enabling teachers to experiment with learner-centered educational methods (Al-Shamsi & Al-Harthi, 2021). At the higher education level, leaders of federal institutions such as the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) and United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) have applied transformational approaches to align academic programs with both labor market demands and future skill requirements. By emphasizing collaboration, continuous professional development, and student innovation, Transformational Leaders in education drive change at both the institutional and system-wide levels (Northouse, 2021; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

7.2. Transactional Leadership in School Management

The UAE education sector continues to prioritize innovation, yet Transactional Leadership remains essential in many educational domains. School principals apply transactional strategies through performance evaluations, target setting, and compliance monitoring to ensure policy implementation, behavior management, and administrative accountability (Al Ketbi & Mahmoud, 2020). These systems are particularly important in large public schools, which require clearly

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defined operational procedures and rigorous academic performance monitoring under the national inspection frameworks of ADEK and KHDA.

The exclusive reliance on transactional methods proves effective for maintaining order and achieving short-term goals; however, it restricts staff creativity and discourages risk-taking. A balanced combination of Transactional Leadership with Transformational elements yields stronger outcomes, as it allows for both teacher autonomy and active student participation (Northouse, 2021).

7.3. Authentic Leadership in Inclusive and Ethical Education

The UAE education sector places increasing importance on Authentic Leadership because it effectively serves multicultural schools and diverse learning communities. Leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior, self-awareness, and transparency build stronger trust relationships with staff, students, and parents (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). In higher education institutions, Authentic Leadership fosters inclusive practices, shared governance, and respectful dialogue, all of which form the foundation of successful academic communities. Research in the Gulf region shows that authentic leadership is particularly valuable in multicultural educational environments, where transparency, ethical conduct, and relational trust are essential for creating inclusive learning cultures (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Sidani & Thornberry, 2010).

This leadership approach supports national initiatives focused on gender inclusion, moral education, and educational equity through programs such as the Moral Education Curriculum and the National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031. The Mohammed bin Rashid Centre for Leadership Development (MBRCLD) and the Higher Colleges of Technology's Professional Development Institutes offer leadership programs that teach future leaders to practice authenticity with integrity and cultural sensitivity (MBRCLD, 2021).

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7.4. Summary

The UAE education sector provides a unique context in which the three leadership models are practiced concurrently. Transformational Leadership offers the vision needed to drive curriculum reform and educational innovation. Transactional Leadership ensures stability and operational performance by upholding national standards. Authentic Leadership emphasizes ethical practices, cultural inclusion, and the cultivation of trust-based relationships. The most effective leaders in the UAE education sector are therefore those who integrate all three models, responding simultaneously to the operational and transformational demands of a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

8.1. Discussion: Personal Reflection and Critical Position

The study of theoretical foundations and practical applications of Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership in UAE education has enabled us to better comprehend the complexities of leadership in diverse, fast-changing environments. The authors argue that effective leadership requires both academic understanding and practitioner knowledge, as no single leadership approach is sufficient on its own. A blended leadership model that combines adaptability, context-awareness, and value-based methods represents the most appropriate approach.

The authors observe that in UAE higher education institutions, Transformational Leadership yields the greatest results when institutions pursue long-term goals, educational transformation, student engagement, and institutional expansion. Leaders who successfully inspire shared goals and empower faculty often foster higher morale, stronger collaboration, and greater student impact, aligning with the findings of Bass and Riggio (2006) and Al-Shamsi and Al-Harthi (2021). Our assessment also recognizes that Transactional Leadership remains relevant despite its limitations. Large institutions with strict administrative systems require transactional practices, such as

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performance tracking and structured accountability, to maintain operational efficiency. However, Transactional Leadership can restrict creativity and autonomy, particularly for innovative teachers who seek to introduce new ideas (Al Ketbi & Mahmoud, 2020).

Authentic Leadership, though the least widely applied, stands as the most crucial model for UAE educational settings in my assessment. Leaders in multicultural academic contexts must demonstrate self-awareness, integrity, and transparency, as these qualities establish the foundations for building inclusive academic cultures. Research by Avolio and Gardner (2005) supports this view, while our professional experience working with both Emirati and expatriate colleagues affirms that trust and ethical conduct form the core of sustained leadership success.

Overall, the UAE educational leadership framework should adopt a hybrid model that integrates the visionary drive of Transformational Leadership, the structural efficiency of Transactional Leadership, and the ethical principles of Authentic Leadership to achieve maximum effectiveness. Leadership development programs within the country should therefore embed all three perspectives through tailored initiatives that uphold national values and advance the UAE's strategic goals.

8.2. Implications

These findings have several practical implications for educational leadership in the UAE. At school level, principals and middle leaders need structured opportunities to develop transformational and authentic leadership capabilities, particularly in relation to building trust, supporting teacher agency, and sustaining innovation beyond compliance with inspection requirements. In higher education, leadership development should focus on creating cultures where ethical dialogue, shared governance, and evidence-informed decision-making are normalized. At the policy level, leadership standards and training frameworks could more explicitly integrate authentic leadership principles—

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such as moral perspective, relational transparency, and cultural humility—alongside expectations for performance and accountability. Together, these shifts would encourage leadership practices that are both contextually grounded and aligned with national educational reform agendas.

8.3. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article contributes to the literature by offering an integrated, context-specific framework for educational leadership in the UAE that combines transformational, transactional, and authentic leadership principles. The research examined how Transformational, Transactional, and Authentic Leadership theories apply to the UAE education system. Practical examples and scholarly literature were used to demonstrate how each leadership theory offers distinct advantages in specific contexts. Transformational leadership is most applicable to educational innovation and reform; Transactional Leadership ensures operational consistency and accountability; and Authentic Leadership provides the ethical framework and relational depth required in multicultural and inclusive educational environments.

The study offers several essential recommendations:

- The UAE should develop leadership programs that integrate vision, ethics, and accountability into training models.
- Leadership development programs should prepare educators to select leadership approaches based on institutional and cultural requirements rather than applying standardized methods.
- Educational institutions serving diverse communities should prioritize Authentic Leadership development, as this approach builds trust and fosters cohesion among students and staff.
- Policymakers and training providers should integrate cultural and religious values, including *amana* (trustworthiness) and *shura* (consultation), to create leadership frameworks that balance local applicability with global best practices.

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This research contributes both theoretical and practical insights into leadership styles within UAE education but also highlights several gaps. Research on the experiences of teachers and students under different leadership models in school contexts remains scarce. While Authentic Leadership aligns closely with Emirati values, it is underrepresented in local policy development, training initiatives, and leadership discourse. The integration of Islamic leadership principles with globally recognized leadership theories presents a promising avenue for development. Future research and leadership initiatives that address these gaps will enable the advancement of more effective educational leadership, responsive to cultural needs and supportive of inclusivity in the UAE.

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