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**Managing and Guiding School Reform:
A review of strategies adopted by selective international
schools in the UAE towards reform**

إدارة وتوجيه تطوير المدرسة:
مراجعة الاستراتيجيات المعتمدة من قبل مجموعة من المدارس الدولية
الانتقائية في الإمارات نحو الإصلاح

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This study examined five school leaders across the UAE, to have an understanding of the strategies they implemented for school improvement. Schools in UAE are being closely monitored by the local authorities, including the Abu Dhabi Education Council in Abu Dhabi, Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai, and most recently, Sharjah Council in Sharjah. The UAE National Agenda for the year 2021 is striving to achieve first-grade education system across the country. Accordingly all schools are striving to meet the UAE National Agenda targets through school improvement strategies. This research was formalized using a grounded theory methodological approach to learn about the experiences of five school leaders from the different Emirates in UAE, and from this derive a contribution to a theoretical understanding of the most effective practices that school leaders implemented to achieve school improvement. The data analysis adopted the constant comparative method of the grounded theory. Schools in the study used school improvement strategies that leaders in international schools in the UAE implemented in their efforts to meet the National Agenda targets. Results suggest that promoting collaboration between school staff and school leadership, hiring high quality experienced teachers and leaders, and the continuous training and evaluation of the circular process, were considered as successful strategies by these leaders.

ملخص البحث

هذه الدراسة تبحث في خمس قيادات مدرسية في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وذلك بهدف التوصل إلى فهم للمنهجية التي تتبعها لتحقيق التطور في مدارسها. و قد خصصت دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة بعض المؤسسات الحكومية لمتابعة المدارس متابعة دقيقة مثل مجلس أبوظبي للتعليم في إمارة أبوظبي و هيئة المعرفة و التنمية البشرية في دبي و كذلك مجلس الشارقة التعليمي في إمارة الشارقة مؤخراً. ذلك أن الأجندة الوطنية لدولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة للعام 2021 م تسعى لتحقيق نظام تعليمي عالي الجودة في الدولة. و بالتالي فإن سائر المدارس تبذل جهودها لتحقيق الأجندة الوطنية عبر تطبيق خطط تطويرية. استخدمت هذه الدراسة المنهجية النظرية للتعرف على خبرات خمسة من مدراء المدارس في إمارات متعددة في الدولة، و استنباط مفهوم نظري لأفضل ممارسات عملية اتبعت لتحقيق التطور المنشود في المدرسة. لقد تم تحليل النتائج باستخدام طريقة المقارنة بثابت لتحقيق النظرية المنهجية. المدراس التي تمت دراستها هي مدارس اتبعت خطط تطويرية وضعت من قبل مدراءها لغرض الوصول الى تحقيق الأجندة الوطنية. تشير النتائج إلى أن تعزيز التعاون بين كوادر المدرسة و إدارتها بالإضافة إلى توظيف كفاءات ذات خبرة عالية في القطاع التدريسي و الإداري و كذلك العملية الدورية المستمرة في التدريب و التقييم كلها تعتبر منهجيات ناجعة من قبل قيادات المدارس.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The UAE's current vision in education is to be among the leading countries in the field by the year 2021. This vision is based on the development of the areas that have a direct impact on human prosperity, ranging from health to economy, environment, and sustainability as well as safety and, our main concern, education (Agenda, 2018). This program was launched in 2006 in Dubai by His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai and the Prime Minister of the UAE. Consequently, many steps have been taken to elevate education in the UAE to a high quality as per international standards. The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) were two of the main governmental agencies that were formed for the purpose of monitoring high-quality education in schools in those particular emirates. This program was extended later in the year 2017 to Sharjah and the Northern Emirates (MOE, 2018). The program is comprised of visiting each school for a week, after which a report is published describing the strengths and weaknesses of the visited school, and finally giving the school a rating ranging from outstanding to weak, referring to the UAE inspection framework (KHDA, 2018 P.9).

The KHDA framework for the year 2017-2018 explains that emirates in the UAE have worked independently towards school reform, and the need to a unified approach is established recently by combining numerous school inspection policies and procedures from previous experiences. The framework was established to support school reform over all of the UAE as a way to pave the path towards the 2021 vision (KHDA, 2018). Schools have consequently worked to improve their performance. Several schools managed to prove their competency and raise up their inspection results as the reports of KHDA school inspections demonstrate (Report, 2018).

Reform in the UAE, like any other school reform, targets the improvement of education which is measured by students' achievement. Literature review recommend that leadership has a positive

effect on school improvement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The principal's philosophy of education, their vision, and their leadership style have a great impact on school reform (Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016). However, the effect of school leadership does not have a direct impact on students' achievement, as teachers play the role of the middle agent in the process. Hence, the leadership team will have to create a culture in the school and an internal coherence to implement the aimed improvement (Berends et al. 2010). Little research has been conducted to show the strategies and practices that the school leadership deploy to improve the education in their schools (Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016).

This research will critically examine the various strategies that the school principals in the UAE implemented to improve school performance, as well as shed light on what these leaders consider to be 'best practices' that could lead to school improvement. The researcher will also be looking at the role and impact of the stakeholders on this process.

This research is going to be a qualitative research using the grounded theory method. The results of the study will be derived from interviews. The interviewees are five participants who are currently holding a leadership role in international schools in Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi are to be part of this study. The researcher will interview senior leadership personnel in schools in the UAE who were in leadership positions in international private schools. These schools enjoy a great deal of autonomy and can form their decisions independently. Whereas schools in the public sector are managed directly by the ministry of education, and their leaders do not have the power to take decisions to make any major reform (Al-Taneiji & McLeod 2008). That is why the research concentrated on international schools from the private sector.

Working as an educator for 20 years in the UAE the researcher has witnessed great reform taking place in the educational system in Dubai during the past decade. And now, as a member of the senior leadership team in an international school in Sharjah, the researcher is witnessing a new era

of school reform taking place in this part of the country. The Ministry Of Education and the local authority in Sharjah are working hand in hand to create an inspection framework and system with the intention to improve school practices in Sharjah and the Northern Emirates. The ruler of Sharjah, His Highness Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qasimi has established the Sharjah educational Council in August 2018 to overlook academic school practices in the emirate. Sufficient research is lacking in the area of school reform in the UAE (Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016).

1.1 Purpose and Statement of the Problem

The researcher is of educational experience and takes role in the active movement of reform in the educational field that is currently taking place strongly in the UAE. This has triggered the researcher's interest for this study. Having worked in UAE for 20 years in the field of education, the researcher has practiced teaching as well as team leading. She witnessed the launching of the educational reform in the UAE that started early with the new millennium. She was engaged in the process of accreditation and later inspection, and sensed the stress of guiding a school towards local recognition. She also experienced the need for guidance that school leaders were seeking desperately as she noticed that they were left with minimum support.

As the Ministry Of Education started to take over the improvement in education by imposing a system of inspection that publicly rates schools, schools' administrators' major concern was to get a higher rate every year. When talking with the administrators of various international schools from different parts in the UAE, the researcher found that their major concern was trying to learn the best practice to improve their school rating. Inspection has announced a framework that they would use as a rubric to evaluate schools accordingly. Administrators were trying to lead their schools towards the framework, and the researcher believes that this process requires changing some mind sets of various stakeholders.

The complexity of school leadership role that the researcher currently holds was a great motive for her to take this study. As an integral member of the school leadership team, part of her role effects school improvement and student achievement, hence her interest in this quest. The skills of school leaders to manage a reform inside the school while maintaining the trust and satisfaction of stakeholders that are outside the school, such as parents, owners, local authority ... etc. represents a continuous stress and requires high management skills (Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016). School leaders need to promote collaboration among staff and teachers, create a lively environment of learning in the school, embrace school goals and drive students' improvement in achievement. At the same time they need to go on repetitive discussions with stakeholders outside the school in order to bringing them in the loop to support school reform. All that need to be done while managing every day routine (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter 2018).

This study will look at the strategies that the current school leaders use to have an impact on the school reform vision in the UAE. It will be based on direct interviews where the researchers will explore the school leaders' opinion as to what the best practice was.

1.2 Research Questions

The approach of this study is to examine practices of school leadership in international schools in the UAE at different levels of school aspects. The study relied on interviews conducted with school leaders who agreed to participate in this research. The study's foundation is the participants' experience in implementing reform to the schools they lead. The following questions will be directing this study:-

1. What are the structures, policies, and practices that school leaders need to put to foster the goals of the reform?
2. What are the most influential factors in guiding the reform?

3. What is the role of the stakeholders in the school reform process?
4. What are the challenges that leaders face through the reform process?

1.3 Rationale of the Problem

Improving education has become the whole world's concern. The UNSECO announced that Education is "Imperative" for all, emphasizing that the quality of education has to be high for everybody (Matsuura 2004).

There is a growing movement in the UAE towards educational reform. The inspection that KHDA, ADEC and MOE is performing is echoing tremendously in the community of educators in every school and educational organization. This is particularly due to the grading results that the inspection announces publicly and the impact it generates on the local community. Mohamad Alkutich (2015) tackled this issue in his dissertation presented to the British University In Dubai. He said that decision makers in Dubai, consider the results of KHDA when forming their policies and regulations. And that the fee structure is reviewed for private schools according to the results of the inspection (AlKutich 2015). The inspection results of KHDA and ADEC forces an "Outcome-driven agenda" Dr.Racquel S. Warner and Dr.Guy Jonathan S. Burton reported in the UAE Public Policies Forum (UAE Public Policy Forum 2017). Such an effective impact on financial and political decisions resulted in a national interest among the local community in general and the educators in particular. Especially that those governmental agencies are looked at as the sole assurance of a quality education in the country. School leaders found themselves with no choice but to prove their competency.

Research in the field of school reform is -though from various places in the world - very diversified. Many research look into reform applied in schools of a certain characteristic such as high Schools (Ganon & Scheschltler 2018), charter schools (Berends et al 2010) and so on. Or it

examines particular stake holders' role in school reform such as teachers' perspective, parent's impact or principal's leadership style. Very few studies tackled the strategies school leadership take to implement a reform (Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhäntö 2016). With the inspection over their heads, educators lack the knowledge base that they consult to guide their practice.

Based on the previously discussed points, it can be concluded that there is a need for data that can help establish the practices that are most effective for the nationwide school reform. There is great value to be found in the experiences that was formed over several years of inspection cycles. The school leaders in the UAE can then make use of the research results discussed herein in order to form and enhance their leadership method and style. Furthermore, it is important to examine how school leaders have managed to advance despite the lack of an articulated pathway and a unified set of standard competencies. This qualitative research is hoping to unfold and demonstrate effective practices for school reform.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The researcher's intension is to contribute to the development of a theory of leadership that includes the necessary plans, structure and practices to develop programs that could guide school leaders in the reform process. It uses the grounded theory methodology to ensure that the theoretical interpretation that will surface will be both established in the practitioners' perspectives as well as the unique sociocultural structure of the UAE. This study particularly addresses practitioners who understand the significance of the educational reform and support that the conditions for children and the workforce that contribute to their education and wellbeing should be improved. It is also for the policymakers who are able to influence the quality of educational evaluation programs by forming an eloquent rout to professional school leadership. A culturally grounded understanding of educational leadership practices that can assist policymakers in schools and educational institutions to possibly become the foundation for initiating leadership training programs, as well

as the basis for establishing a systemic formative and summative evaluation process for school leaders.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A variety of resources were collected including reports from inspection in the UAE and other countries, reports from governmental agencies, articles and books in various formats to formalize a conceptual picture of school reform in the UAE.

Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2006) believe that students performance depends to a large extent on school's leadership success. Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö (2016) take this discussion further by stressing that the school leadership should consider education as an investment in community growth and development, hence they should work on balancing education with the local market need. The importance of education is hence, under spot light now in many countries and in developing countries as well (Liethwood & Day 2007). This is happening as schools are being under the pressure of publicly accountability (Liethwod & Day 2007).

2.1 The complexity of school leadership

Researchers claim that the role of the leader in a school is the major factor behind the success or failure of its reform (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006). The literature review reveals that the school leadership team led by the school's principal have the greatest responsibility of guiding the school through the journey of improvement. The principal in particular will have to be of a high level of management and negotiation skills to bridge and balance as he/she is leading the school towards development, while at the same time promoting the theories of change to the local community (Cravens, Goldring,& Penaloza 2012; Leithwood & Duke 1999; Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016). However, the principal along with the school leadership team are mediating agents in the reform of education as they are not in direct contact with the students on daily basis. The teachers are the intermediate agent that leadership has to deal with in order to achieve its end goals (Cravens, Goldring,& Penaloza 2012; Shaked & Schechter 2016; Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016).

Hogan, Clement and Albright (2013) summarize that in three capabilities that leaders in schools share; interpersonal skills, skills to improve learning outcome and skills to handle issues of a unique nature. Furthermore, school leaders, particularly in private sector, have to find a way to manage finance and school resources and everyday routine as they are working on improving school performance to enhance students' achievement and at same time convince all stakeholders that this is the best for their interest. This leaves the school leadership team and the principal in the lead with a dual responsibility of management and educational facilitator (Lewis & Murphy 2008; Holmes, Clement & Albright 2013).

The complexity of school leadership also has another dimension considering the fact that cause and effect relationship is often lost because of the quantity of details existing in the school management process. In addition to that, the continuing change in factors involved within the process of change or occurring during it also diminishes the relation between cause and effect (Fullan 1998). The change may come from the Ministry Of Education in the form of new policies or rules to be effective in a very short notice or in the change of leadership team, in addition to other possibilities that depend on the local circumstances. And hence, Fullan (1998) concludes that the link between

2.2 Impact of leadership styles on school reform

Leadership in any organization has been perceived as the main factor of effective performance, and education is no exception. In particular, it has been proven that school leadership has a substantial effect on students' achievement and education being the main source of guidance (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2007). School reform puts pressure on districts and schools to create instructional change that affects student achievement. School leaders on the other hand, care for teachers' well-being while maintaining leadership direction as they interact with the national reform (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter 2018).

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) mentions that their research revealed that there are similarities in the characteristics of a successful leader in a school. Further research affirmed that these characteristics can be categorized to be (1) sharing the vision in the school and building policies and practices over it (Fullan 2008), (2) strengthening the reliability of staff members on each other, (3) varying sources of information to resolve complex issues, (4) driving school attention's focus on improving learning outcome, (5) promptly attentive to local community demands (Holmes, Clement and Albright 2013; Ganon, Shilon & Schechter 2018; Leithwood & Day 2007; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008).

Instructional leadership involves setting up goals, implementing curriculum, and maintaining an inviting learning environment (Lunenberg, 2013). With the growing level of teaching standards and the growing demand for accountable assessment, teachers are increasingly relying on instructional leaders. Teachers need principals who delegate responsibilities, allow collaboration to overcome obstacles, and create innovative initiatives for improvement. Transformative and transactional leadership work hand in hand to give principals the capacity to grant teachers opportunity to lead, while preserving structures and policies that hold up student safety and academic achievement.

Literature reveals that the school climate, being the environment of work, has an effect on the staff who work there. In addition to its effect on the academic achievement of the students as well. A community of professional collaborative teachers providing mutual support and aiming at common goals that they have developed upon a common vision supports a healthy learning environment (Kilinc & Aydin, 2013).

Furthermore, there is the style of a transformative leadership. The concept of this leadership style is to motivate staff to work as a whole towards common objectives (Burns, 1978).

Transformative leadership style demonstrates behaviors that include include: A) Empowering Others B) Collective Work, C) Trust, and D) Care (Capshew 2015).

Transformative leadership is the most suitable leadership style in schools' reorganization because it considers both, the innovation of structures and supports teachers' at the same time (Sagnak 2010). Transformative leaders empower their school as a collective unit (Balyer 2012). Transformational leadership spreads two main traits, autonomy and trust, and those two factors increase teacher job satisfaction (Bass, 1999). Autonomy has a powerful effect on teacher commitment (Singh & Billingsley, 1998). Trust has been considered to be of influence in schools that perform under transformative leaders. This is because reciprocal trust allows conversations regarding practice to occur which can improve practices in classrooms. Supportive leadership spread a feeling of trust among staff, which therefore leads to school effectiveness (Anderson, 2008). Trust is not only an outcome of transformative leadership, but is the basis for its influence on implementation and affective commitment (Goodwin, Whittington, Murray, & Nichols, 2011).

Supportive leadership and reciprocal respect, accompanied with robust professional knowledge, readiness for risk taking, and innovation, are indications of a healthy school environment (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Transformational systems allow the empowerment of capacity and the attainment of instructional objectives (Bass, 1997). Empowerment comes from teachers feeling confident in taking part in decision-making, and from feeling supported by school administration (Ndoye & Parker, 2010). Leadership that exhibits these characteristics enjoys a low rate of turnover of teachers and hence keep its workforce performing towards goals of the reform.

Participative leadership focuses on group leadership and shared decisions and is correlated with organizational effectiveness. The assumptions of participative leadership are that when teachers are engaged with decision making, they are more inclined to follow through with it. In addition, people are less competitive and more collaborative when they are working together to reach a

decision, and when more than one person is making the decision they are generally arriving to a better outcome (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach 1999). Sergiovanni (1984) points that the importance of a participative approach is derived from the fact that it will create a stronger bond amongst staff member and ease the pressure on school principals.

Distributive leadership is another form of participative leadership; however, the emphasis is on professional development through shared ideas and collaborative effort (Nupponen 2005). As described by Harris (2004), “distributed leadership is characterized as a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop skills and expertise through working collaboratively” (p. 3). These principles shift the effort from a single person to a multiple, where the division of labor will be equally distributed among laborers which creates an atmosphere of collaborative teamwork and cooperation on the job (Gronn 2003).

2.3 Education under the National Agenda of the UAE

H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, launched at the closing of a Cabinet meeting in 2010 the UAE Vision 2021. The Vision’s target is to place the UAE as one of the best countries in the world by the Golden Jubilee of the Union (Agenda 2018).

“In order to translate Vision 2021 into reality, Sheikh Mohammed launched a seven-year National Agenda leading to Vision 2021. National Agenda identifies six priorities as the key focus of government strategy in the coming years. The six national priorities are:

- 1. cohesive society and preserved identity*
- 2. safe public and fair judiciary*
- 3. competitive knowledge economy*
- 4. first-rate education system*
- 5. world-class healthcare*

6. sustainable environment and infrastructure”

Education has always been set a premium since the establishment of the UAE in 1971 (AlKutich 2015; AlQassimi 2016). Hence, it coherently is listed among the focus governmental aspects in the UAE National Agenda. And in the UAE Vision of 2021 education is explicitly listed and implicitly embedded as a foundation, which -in other words- means that the country is aiming for better education (KHDA 2015). It is listed in the KHDA framework that *“Education is a particularly important focus of the UAE National Agenda as it includes eight objectives that should lead the UAE to being among the most successful countries in providing world-class education. These objectives target important areas in education related to students, teachers and school leaders”* (2015, P.11).

To reach their goal, the educational officials in AbuDhabi, Dubai and later Sharjah and the northern Emirates formed authorized agencies that were assigned the job of monitoring school improvement to reach high standard levels of quality in performance. And that was the spark that initiated the reform in schools in UAE. The inspection will evaluate schools’ performance to ensure high quality in education and hence, enhanced student outcome. (KHDA 2015)

2.4 Role of Principals in Schools

Historically, the role of the principal was managerial rather than instructional. Before the No Child Left Behind era, the principal was expected to run a well-structured organization where norms and traditions are maintained (Portin, Alegano, Knapp, & Marzolf 2006). Schools were run like systematic institutions that were similar to a “well-oiled machine.”

Today principals are expected to be ‘change agents’ as well as instructional leaders, and this expectation places new demands on them (Hallinger, 1992). Colvin (2007), Hess and Kelly (2007), Leithwood et al. (2004), and Portin (2004) identified seven characteristics of a contemporary principal’s role. First as a human resources manager responsible for recruiting, hiring and firing

personnel as well as coaching, mentoring and providing professional development for the staff. Second, as a cultural leader, he/she manages student behavior through effective discipline procedure and influences the school climate as well as creates the school culture (Colvin, 2007). Third, as a public relations person, the principal influences the perception of the community on the school (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Fourth, as a manager of external development, the principal promotes the image of the school to the public to secure external funds (Portin, 2004). Fifth, as the financial manager, the principal is responsible for balancing the budget, raising funds and cutting costs (Portin, 2004). Sixth, the principal is the strategic planner promoting the school's "vision, mission, and goals" (Portin, 2004, p. 17). Finally, as an instructional leader, the principal oversees academic performance, serves as a role model for teachers, supervises curriculum and provides appropriate resources (Leithwood et al., 2004). Davis et al. (2005) found through research that there are three important aspects of the principal's job: "developing a deep understanding of how to support teachers, managing the curriculum in ways that promote student learning, and developing the ability to transform schools into more effective organizations that foster powerful teaching and learning for all students" (p.6).

The principal plays many roles as reflected in the literature review. For example, according to Acheson, (1985), the principal is responsible for public relations, health and safety, behavior management and curriculum planning. In addition to these roles, the principal is also the financial officer (Alvy & Robbins, 1998; Gorton & Schneider, 1991), a human resource manager, an evaluator of staff and programs and a maintenance supervisor (Garubo & Rothstein, 1998).

There are great differences between the role of principals in Western countries and those in African and Muslim countries. The role of the principals in developing countries focus on routine management, maintenance, and performance appraisals. Leadership functions such as, staff and

curriculum development, parental involvement, vision, and mission have not been observed (Oplatka, 2004).

In Lebanon, principals working in government schools are expected to select textbooks, set schedules, supervise tests and examinations, report to the supervisors, set budgets, provide staffing and oversee maintenance needs. While the private school principal's role includes hiring and evaluating teachers, encouraging parent involvement and setting school policies- especially those related to student behavior management and discipline (Akkary, 2013). Mattar (2012) also concluded that in Lebanon, training and qualifications are not a must to be a principal. It is often assumed that good teachers make good leaders. In another qualitative study by Akkary and Greenfield's (1998) on the role of the principal in a Lebanese secondary school, found that principals view themselves as managers rather than instructional supervisors.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), principals do not have decision making authority in their schools due to the structure of power in the country, which results in lack of innovation and no proactive management (Shaw, Badri, & Hukul, 1995). Instructional leadership is rare in most developing countries as principals perceive themselves more of administrators and managers than instructional leaders. In Kuwait, the principal is not involved in curriculum decisions as they don't see that as part of their job (Al-Jaber 1996).

In Summary, the principal's role in Western countries is more democratic, participative, visionary, goal-oriented, where there is shared power with teachers, delegation of tasks and responsibilities to teachers, staff development, formative evaluation of teachers, and parent involvement. Whereas in non-western countries, such as Africa, Muslim countries, and Mexico, principals are more likely to "employ autocratic, non-participative, summative evaluation." (Oplatka, 2004).

2.5 Significance of School reform

The enhancement of students' documentable achievements has become the utmost objective of education reform agendas in most countries. There is a growing trend to advance the skills that students need to take part effectively in national and global economies (Coburn, Hill & Spillane 2016, Ganon, Shilon & Schechter 2018; Saade 2018; Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016). The literature on robust school reform implies that focusing on teaching and learning strategies and environment and the consistent development of the learning culture are key factors for successful school improvement (Fullan 2014; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter 2018; Shaked & Schechter 2016; Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016). Yet there is a unanimous agreement from researchers that any reform taking place in a school has to be holistic in order to avoid a drawback or a fall in one aspect or the other (Holmes 2013).

Schools are considered to be the institutions of renewal, considering the capacity of being naturally responsive (Fullan 1998). Nabih Maron et al (Ideation Center Insight 2014) considered another perspective of school reform. They considered including finance, resources and infrastructure in the reform to obtain sustainability. They argued the importance of socioeconomic base for driving education, so that initiatives in school development emerge in correlation to the development of the local community (Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016, and P.452-453).

Governments relay on school inspection to follow up educational reform. Whereas, school inspection focuses on school practices in caring for students' wellbeing and education (Hutchinson 2009, PP.5-9, KHDA 2015, National Agenda 2007). Inspection is perceived as quality assurance of education (ElSaadi 2017). School inspection has a significant impact on the development of teaching and learning. Research discovered that the system of school inspection in Dubai is highly qualified and encourages collaboration rather than competition between schools. At the same time

it was found that inspection in UAE promotes subjects in education that support national identity (ElSaadi 2017) which matches the goals of the National Agenda in the UAE.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century the modern world have experienced attempts to restructuring public schools (Laguardia 2002). In the United States for example, all states have adopted standards in education that show mastery of skills that students should demonstrate. And states are setting standardized exams to make sure students re performing by the standards (Fullan 1998). Whereas in Finland the governmental role is to develop the curriculum, and implementing it is the responsibility of teachers and schools, so that monitoring pedagogical practices in school is rather strange (Soini, Piatiarian & P 2016). These efforts around the world have been driven to an extent by alarms about the capability of public schools to provide students in industrialized countries with necessary skills to compete in the international economy (Laguardia 2002).

2.6 School Improvement Process

Scholars defined school improvement as the schools effort to support the teaching and learning process, provide professional development for the staff, and develop a strategic actions that aims at continuous school improvement)Fullan 2001; Heck and Hallinger 2009, in press; Hill and Rowe 1996;Leithwood et al. in press; Mulford and Silins 2009; Stoll and Fink 1996).

Keefe and Howard (1997) developed a school improvement process that is based on the organization's shared values, personal mastery, critical reflection, and collaboration. The leadership team that starts this process are a number of faculty members who guide the whole school through the implementation process.

The plan has three steps, the first one concerns the school's vision and mission statement, the second, is the school goals that address the mission and vision and the third is identifying the

components areas of the school that could help achieve these goals. The component areas include, curriculum, instructional strategies, organizational structure, leadership and budgeting, staff development, communication and resources. For each area a team is formed to address the tasks needed to achieve the goals and objectives of the school. The identified tasks are then funneled back to the leadership team who in turn integrates these tasks into the strategic plan. This process involves a lot of communication and interaction between the leadership team and the component teams to constantly evaluate the process and make the necessary changes.

Conclusion

The literature review for this study shows that the role of the principals in schools and the leadership teams that support them is rather complex, and requires very high standard skills to be able to perform a successful job. It is at the same time essential for any educational reform to take place as it has a tremendous effect on the teaching and learning that takes place in schools. And schools in the UAE are not an exception, particularly that they are undergoing a revolutionary reform process lead by the supreme leadership in the country to provide high quality outcome. Hence, implementing the vision 2021 in the UAE requires school leaders to be agents of change and instructional in style. This is because the role of reform on the macro level in schools eventually results in the improvement of the society.

There is a lavish of research on leadership styles in education but the researcher could not find enough on practices that lead to reform. Especially under the umbrella of the UAE vision of 2021, there is a need for research to be conducted in order to provide leaders of schools with the theoretical basis for a better practice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study explored School leadership in the UAE. It examined the perspective of five international school leaders from three emirates to better understand how these leaders managed reform in their institutions. The hope is to understand the best practices of the school leaders' role in reform and to establish a baseline for school leaders to refer to during future reforms. The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the leadership practices that are deemed well by these leaders, making a first installment of culturally grounded understanding of this leadership role.

3.1 Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following research questions:-

1. What are the structures, policies, and practices that school leaders need to put to foster the goals of the reform?
2. What are the most influential factors in guiding the reform?
3. What is the role of the stakeholders in the school reform process?
4. What are the challenges that leaders face through the reform process?

3.2 Research Design

The research design for this study is basic, interpretive qualitative research. A qualitative research approach is defined as the approach where researchers construct their understanding by interpreting the responses of the participants (Polit & Beck, 2010). Qualitative studies aim to provide a bountiful, contextualized apprehension of approachable experience through the study of particular cases (Polit & Beck, 2010). And a need to develop a theoretical foundation of the way school leaders manage to lead their schools through the journey of reform is persistent.

Merriam (2015) argues that although there is no consistency in researchers' literature about the philosophy of qualitative research, researchers who oversee essential qualitative research would be

primarily interested in “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). In this study, the researcher is interested in how school leaders develop policies and practices to improve the school while preserving its goals and maintaining the support of the local community.

Merriam (2015) believes that qualitative research could provide a better in-depth understanding of leadership practices, processes, and techniques in the education field than the qualitative research can. Furthermore, researchers assert that plentiful amount of the literature on research synthesis methods has been prevailed from education and healthcare have acknowledged the importance of synthesizing qualitative research (Suri 2011, P.1).

Grounded theory was the chosen research method as practices of leadership in the UAE schools has not been researched enough, thus little is understood about it and the purpose is to derive a theoretical understanding from school leaders’ experiences (Alkutich 2015, P.2).

Qualitative research methodology may involve multiple means of data collection to further understand the problem, such as interviews in addition to observations (Polit & Beck, 2010). Further, qualitative research is flexible and adapts to new information based on data collected, provides a holistic perspective on the topic, and allows the researcher to become entrenched in the investigation. The researcher is the research tool, and data are constantly being analyzed to identify commencement of the study. The decision to select a qualitative methodology requires several considerations, a great amount of planning (such as which research design fits the study best, the time necessary to devote to the study, a data collection plan, and resources available to collect the data), and finally, self-reflection on any personal presumptions and biases toward the topic (Merriam 2015, PP. 6-8).

There is a great need to develop a theoretical understanding of the practices that leaders in the UAE schools establish, and build it on the existing success stories, by taking into consideration the sociocultural conditions under which those leaders are operating.

3.3 Data Collection

In this study, the researcher collected data from five school leaders holding a senior leadership role that has the highest level of autonomy in the school and at the same time direct impact on teaching and learning. The consent of participants is provided in the appendix A. Participants were interviewed at their offices in the school for the purpose of this research.

3.4 Participant Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants to understand their experiences and how they interpret those experiences. The method of interviews was chosen because it seeks authentic experiences that would be mostly beneficial for the study. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Later they were written in verbatim transcripts to allow them to be analyzed and coded.

The interview questions are designed to answer the four research questions posed for this study using probing questions during the interview. The interviews varied between open-ended and closed-ended questions depending on the piece of information being sought. During the interviews the researcher maintained unbiased and the questions were focused on the agenda.

3.5 Selection of Participants

The method of selective sampling was adopted as it is practical if conducted within reasonable context (Suri 2011). The criteria for sample selection was to choose a school leader from a senior leadership team of an international school in the UAE. The researcher used location as a variable for sampling in a selective method as described by Suri (2011). Hence, a representative sample that

fulfil the criteria based on location was selected. The researcher collected data from five school leaders from four major cities in UAE: AbuDhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and AlAin. These leaders have held the position of head of school, director, principal, or administrator in an international school setting. The intent is to provide an understanding of the practices followed to lead a reform in the school, and a broader commentary on what it takes to fulfil this mission. The interviews were recorded and written in verbatim transcripts, which were later analyzed and coded.

Participants were leaders in their schools as the interview took place but they have also had the experience of leading other schools as well. Participants came from different backgrounds and experienced different roles in a leadership teams. Table 3.1 demonstrates the participants, the cities they represent and the role they take in the school they were interviewed about.

The following section examines how data was analyzed for this research.

Code	Gender	Curriculum of School	Role	Experience *	City	Country of Origin
L1	Female	American	Assessment Director	2 years	Dubai	Bulgaria
L2	Female	American	Principal	6 months	AlAin	Iraq
L3	Female	American	Principal of Elementary School	5 years	Abu Dhabi	USA
L4	Male	American	Director	2 years	Dubai	USA
L5	Female	American	Principal	3 years	Sharjah	Lebanon

- Years of experience in the school under study

Table 3.1 Participants background information

3.6 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the first step to data analysis is coding. As Gough & Scott (2000, P43) defines it “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and account for each piece of data”. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008, P. 66), coding involves:

Interacting with data (analysis) using techniques such as asking questions about the data, making comparisons between data, and so on, and in doing so, deriving concepts that stand for this data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions.

The data was analyzed and coded using the “constant comparative method” which is considered by Gough & Scott (2000) as the way to develop a theory grounded in data. Tesch (2013, P. 96) explains it as an intellectual tool where:

The method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc. The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns.

Accordingly, the researcher will use the hierarchical coding process: the initial coding, focused coding, and axial or theoretical coding (Gough & Scott 2000).

Initial codes are defined by Gough & Scott (2000, P. 48) as “provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data”. In this stage, the data will be collected, coded and analyzed word for word and line for line to generate concepts without the preconception of the researcher.

The data was analyzed and coded using the “constant comparative method” which is considered by Gough & Scott (2000) as the way to develop a theory grounded in data.

The next stage was focused coding which required the researcher to make decisions about the initial data where the significant and most frequent were categorized completely. The final stage was axial coding where the data was brought back together to form a coherent whole. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008, P. 125), axial coding answers questions such as “when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences”. In answering these questions, the researcher converted text into concepts by linking the categories and understanding the relationship between them.

This next section looks into the criteria adopted to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of the results.

3.7Quality Criteria

The critics of qualitative research are reluctant to accept its trustworthiness though there are rigorous frameworks in place to ensure quality (Shenton, 2004). Guba (1981), a naturalistic researcher has proposed four criteria that qualitative researchers should pursue to have a trustworthy study which include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility is where the researchers need to demonstrate their accuracy in portraying the picture. According to Merriam (1998) credibility is the ability to match findings with reality. To ensure credibility the researcher used several methods such as, familiarizing oneself with the interviewees by meeting with them informally before starting the formal interviews, adopting a well-established research method which is open ended interviews, and the use of the triangulation method where there were multiple sources of data collected. First, the interviewees will be submitting their resumes and background experiences, second the interviews will be audio-taped, and third, the data will be analyzed and given to the members of interest to be checked for accuracy.

The second criterion is transferability whose concern is to what extent is one finding transferrable to another setting (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Lichtman, 2006; Merriam, 1998; 2002). To enhance transferability of results the researcher used random sampling of participants from different countries, which offered a variation of results and provided a thick description of the phenomena under investigation to provide a better understanding for readers. The researcher also provided a detailed description of the background and context of the participants which will help situate the results in the larger picture and assist future researchers in determining whether and how they can transfer the results to their settings.

The third criterion is dependability where the researcher needs to employ techniques to show that if the research is to be replicated in the same context, with the same methods the results obtained will be the same (Ashton, 2004). To ensure dependability, the researcher will use the

assistance of a colleague and the advisor to check the coding process as well as describe the process of the study in details to allow others to replicate it.

The fourth criterion is conformability which is concerned with the objectivity of the researcher (Ashton, 2004). Here steps must be taken to ensure that the findings reflect the work and experiences of the informants rather than the preferences of the researcher. The researcher kept checking for understanding during the interviews and randomly selected two of the interviewees to check if the coding reflects their experiences. As the researcher is included as one of the informants her beliefs and assumptions are clearly stated.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings detailed below are based on the information supplied by five school leaders from different cities in UAE, which are: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah and Al Ain.

4.1 Policies and practices to foster the goals of the reform

Research question 1 inquired about the following: What are the policies and practices that school leaders need to put to foster the goals of the reform?

From this question 1 theme emerged: Data Driven Decision Making.

DATA DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

All participants unanimously stated that the first step is collecting data on the various school aspects, analyzing it and using the results to create policies and practices that fosters the goals of school reform. The data should be collected from assessment, curriculum practices, and classroom observations to understand teaching and learning and the school culture.

Assessment Data

The first and foremost data needed is the student assessment data as it is synonymous with improved school performance provided it was utilized effectively. The respondents also agree that there should be various means of student assessments international benchmarking assessments as well as internal assessments, and the data should be analyzed and acted on to achieve improvement in overall school performance.

School inspection in the UAE has imposed standardized tests which, according to the respondents, revealed a discrepancy with the results of the schools' internal assessment. This gap between internal and external assessment results, led the school leaders to create assessment policies based on the schools' adopted standards and benchmarks where the results of these

assessments are compared against standardized test results. Hence, all participants agreed that improving assessment is a major motive for reform.

One participant (L3) expressed how strongly that factor was by saying:

“I will never ever forget the inspector asking about: we had students whose report cards were all straight A's and straight B's and he pulls out our MAPs data and he says how is it possible that you have all these children that have straight A's and they're only reading on the second grade reading level? That changed everything about how we graded students”.

All other aspects of reform that include curriculum, improving teaching and learning and assessments basically revolve around attaining higher results at standardized tests. One of the participants (L3) very strongly clarified that new strategies of assessment were adopted, new reporting system and a new assessment policy was written. And that aimed at improving assessment results. Some participants even mentioned assigning a dedicated person to look after the assessment as part of school reform strategy to improve the assessment. Another participant (L2) conducts a post assessment survey in class and takes students' feedback on how teachers perform during exam which had an impact on her hiring strategy. Participant (L5) stressed strongly on the necessity of collecting assessment data from various means, analyzing the data and using the results to improve instruction. She also said that to achieve that it is important to have an assessment policy and procedure in place to ensure that students are performing within standards and to help the school administration bridge the gap between internal and external assessment.

Curriculum Data

Two of the participants explicitly expressed that the curriculum should be part of the school reform process. Participant L3 practiced a structured improvement in curriculum writing at her school. Whereas participant L1 was satisfied with a review to close the gaps as participant L1 has joined her school alongside a group of leaders that replaced an older leadership team. L5 said:

“reviewing the curriculum in terms of standards, books, unit plans, and the lesson plans to make informed decision on what needs to change and what is working is one aspect of the reform journey”. She believed that collecting evidence and data on current curriculum practices is an important factor in the data collection for school improvement. Though the other participants did not specifically talk about rewriting the curriculum but they believed that curriculum should include skills and knowledge that would add rigor to the school performance.

Classroom Observation Data

A cursory glance at the inspection framework of -for example- KHDA (KHDA 2015) shows that teaching and learning practice in classrooms take a majority of the inspection’s attention. All inspection reports mention the importance of having a student centered classroom which makes collecting data on the teaching and learning environment is important to understand the weaknesses and strengths of the teaching staff. All participants believed that having student centered classrooms is a highly effective in improving students’ attainment and generally in improving education. Participant (L1) even called it “*effective teaching*”, and noted that it should be used to help struggling students towards meeting their learning standards.

Participant (L2)’s vision in teaching and learning states that learning should be connected directly to everyday life practices. She believed that students should be able to apply the knowledge and skills they learn into their daily life practice. Therefore, she worked towards bringing classroom practices to life through engaging students and teachers in activities that relate the lessons to real life practices. She believed in experimenting, reasoning, and raising students’ ownership of their education.

Participants (L3) and (L4) both agreed that the teacher observation and evaluation data should be used to improve teaching and learning practices in classrooms. They also both agreed that schools must provide teachers with a “risk free” environment to them the freedom to be innovative

and creative in their teaching strategies. Participant L5 stated: “classroom observations are powerful tools to inform administrators on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning and on the professional development needs of the staff.” She believed that administrators should be visible in the school and the classrooms most of the day to have a better understanding of the quality of classroom instruction in the school.

School Culture

It was notable that the participants had different visions concerning the culture they should promote in their respective schools. Their visions reflect the style of leaders they represent. Participant (L1) and (L3) believe in structure and organization, hence, they expressed the need to follow up with all policies and procedures to ensure that the school is performing systematically. On the other end of the spectrum we find participant (L4) who promotes a “risk-free” school that allows people to work out of self-motivation, collaborate with love, and feel “*happy*”. Participant (L4) stated that his vision is to have “*the happiest school in UAE*”.

Participant (L2) demonstrates a style that is structured to an extent but closer to the innovative, tolerant perspective that (L4) demonstrates. Participant L5 believed that the school culture should be a positive one where all staff cooperate to offer the best practices for their students.

All participants agreed that their vision of what the school culture should be and what it actually is could only be understood through surveys and interviews with all stakeholders.

In summary, for schools to move forward in their improvement plans, the leadership team should collect the necessary data and use the results to improve the school performance.

4.2 The most influential factors in guiding the school reform

Research question two inquired about the following: What are the most influential factors in guiding the school reform?

Interviews with participants in this aspect revealed five themes that the participating school leaders believe as influential factors that would uniformly influence a reform in school. The themes are 1) building a leadership team 2) a systematic follow up of the implementation of plans 3) training teachers 4) the inspection and 5) hiring qualified staff.

BUILDING A LEADERSHIP TEAM

Every school naturally has a leadership team but schools need an effective team to influence school reform. As mentioned in the literature review, the success of school reform depends on the leadership. All participants mentioned the importance of having a school improvement team that meets regularly to discuss, analyze data and put a plan. The names of these teams differs from one school to another but they all agreed that the team should enjoy a high level of autonomy that allows them to be effective.

Participant (L4) said that his team enjoy a complete level of autonomy and power in their departments to be able to perform as per their vision and they are only requested to report back actions that they have taken. In other words (L4) believed in decentralizing leadership as a factor of influence in school.

Two participants (L2 and L5) however, stated explicitly that forming the right team is essential to the process of school improvement. (L2) explained how they formed the team in their school using the “unfreeze-freeze” phases as explained in the previous section.

Findings revealed that the teams in schools meet to discuss an agenda. In this context (L4) stated that: *“Team meets to make comprehensive needs assessment. That is to say, to determine perspective, strength, capacity and weaknesses and set realistic time frame expectations”*.

Participants also mentioned that the teams meet regularly in order to study new initiatives, create an improvement plan or follow up the implementation of the improvement plan as well as running

daily school administrative routine. Some participants stated explicitly (L1, L3 and L5) and some implicitly (L2 and L4) that decisions in the leadership team are taken based on data analysis coming from academic and non-academic sources in the school. (L5) elaborated that the data comes from student's attainment, surveys and interviews with the school stakeholders, teacher observations' results and analysis, and studying artifacts such as curriculum documentation and admin documentations. She also emphasized the importance of building decisions based on data analysis as a major factor for school improvement.

During their meetings, participant (L2) invites teachers to voice their opinions and concerns. This is something participant (L2) believes to be effective. She also said that she invites representatives from supplying agencies to take part in their meetings as she believes that will support her team making decisions about school improvement in the field of technology or other resources. During their meetings (L2)'s team use the same technology that is utilized in classes for the purpose of maintaining consistency throughout the school. This, participant also believes that giving the teachers ownership in the reform process they will be more invested in the implementation process.

Participant (L5) believed that the team should meet on weekly basis to discuss collected data and begin to develop a big picture of the weaknesses and strengths of the school. Once the picture is clear, the team decides on the most pressing issues that need to be addressed and then form the school improvement plan. After the school improvement plan has been formatted, all staff need to be involved and invested in the process of deciding the improvement strategies.

The most influential factor in a school leadership team, participant (L3) sees, is the quality of its members and their experience, and that they monitor implementation of plans by themselves. In her school they had a very highly effective chairman that took part in monitoring teaching and learning by himself.

SYSTEMATIC FOLLOW UP OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANS

Participants agree that placing a plan is just the first step, following up the implementation of the plan is the most essential part for the success of the plan. Follow up, they all agree, should be systematic and should provide feedback to targeted staff member as well as reported and discussed

periodically in leadership team meetings. Participants (L2 and L4) looked at monitoring the implementation process as a necessary step for the school to achieve a norm. Participant (L1) found out that the training they were giving to the teachers was not being applied in classes as the leadership team was expecting to be. Hence, decided to create a system of follow up after every professional development session to ensure that teachers are applying what they have learned.

Similarly every participant created a different system of follow up to ensure quality of plans implementation. Although they all agreed that plan implementation should be consistently and periodically monitored, the five participants had different visions of the strategy this follow up structure should follow. For example participants (L1 and L3) believed in multileveled layers of classroom observation. That it is more effective if teachers get feedback on their teaching from multiple resources. From a different perspective, participants (L3 and L4) considered the monitoring process as a support provided to the staff rather than an evaluation.

TRAINING TEACHERS

The UAE national agenda is to provide first class education by the year 2021. And schools are strongly pressured to improve student attainment in standardized tests. And this cannot be achieved except by improving teaching and learning practices in classrooms. Schools quest is to apply the most effective teaching methods that implement the theories of teaching and learning provided by Piaget and Vygotsky in cognitive development (Orlich, et al. 2013) to support a student-centered learning. Participant (L4) stated that this does not come naturally and needs to be taught. All participants agreed to the necessity of intensive teacher training on 21st century teaching. To support that, teachers were given classroom management strategies, techniques on using assessment for learning, and introducing new technology in order to utilize an up-to-date technology in class as an educational tool, were few of the topics given to the teachers in a form of practical workshops.

All participants expressed that the magnitude of this training was huge. Participant (L2) focused on implementing technology in teaching and participant (L3) focused on the benefit of having highly qualified and experienced middle leadership team members that are capable of providing this training. To determine the topics to create professional development sessions participant (L3) mentioned that targeted walkthroughs were used to determine what training teachers/personnel needed. And participant (L4) stressed that prioritizing is the key to success as he believed in time management to a great extent.

THE INSPECTION

Participant (L3) said “I’ll never ever forget the inspector asking us about ...” to emphasis of how influential the inspection was on directing the improvement of the school. All participants agree that inspection whether it was by ADEC, KHDA or any other authority was a pivotal agent of change. The impact of inspection report on the local community is tremendous which led school leaders to put on more effort into the school improvement process. This was explained in details in chapters 1 and 2 (see 1.1, 2.3 and 2.5 sections in this study).

Participant (L4) stated that the school improvement plan was created with the inspection in mind. And its items were placed according to the inspection report. Although participant (L1) stated that the inspection framework is relatively new yet, they worked in school as per the stated standards. In other words, the inspection report was used to improve the school as participant (L2) stated.

Schools on the other hand, find it an overload that adds up to the -already- stressful mission, especially that the inspectors keep raising their standards every year. Participant (L4) stated that “*.. They keep moving goal poles*”.

HIRING QUALIFIED STAFF

All participants in this study agreed that hiring staff should be based on quality and that if a staff member was found to be of a negative effect he/she should be removed. Participant (L1) expressed that her school was raising up the standards to catch up with the inspection and this creates more and more stress on teachers every year. Hence, by the law of “Natural Selection” the weaker teachers find themselves incapable of coping with the challenge and they resign. Participant (L4) shared the same vision stating that teachers will either reform or get replaced. He mentioned that there was one person that he had no hope of, and he watched him/her improve given adequate time and intensive follow up from his/her line manager.

Participant (L3) believes strongly in the effect of hiring highly qualified teachers/leaders who have had sufficient experience in similar circumstances. She also stated that investing in hiring highly qualifies personnel would save up in the training. To elaborate she explained that if middle

leadership team was qualified enough they can provide training for the teachers at no additional cost.

4.3 Stakeholders' role in the school reform process

Research question 3 inquired about the following: What is the role of the stakeholders in the school reform process?

Stakeholders in this study are mainly the students, teachers, parents and the board of trustees. Each member of the stakeholders has a role to take and fulfill regarding the school improvement which has to be followed up by the leadership team.

Participant (L5) stated that as school improvement is mainly aiming at raising the attainment and achievement result of the students, the most important task required of the students is to be motivated to raise their scores. Student motivation starts with the teachers. Part of it would be preparing interesting and engaging lessons where students are required to do problem solving using higher order thinking skills instead of passively listening to the teachers or engaging in mundane low level activities. Another part would be to address high achievers as well as low achievers. Understanding the students' need to be stimulated according to their level of thinking not too difficult not too easy. Assigning different tasks to different students is one example of keeping them motivated at their own level. Participants (L2 and L3) believed that students will get motivated to perform better in their own way if they were given the chance to express their creativity and enjoy their learning. Participant (L4) believed in the power of reasoning and said that if we can reason with them on what is in it for them they will embrace the school reform and get motivated. He elaborated that students would be looking for improving their end results and this would be the key to reason with them. Participant (L2) implemented surveys in the school. She conducted surveys with students to discover the level of learning they are at and to hear their voice.

Parents however are harder to handle from the point of view of the participants of this study. Participant (L1) was heading towards the school reform aiming at achieving school targets. The school implemented its reform, and parents who did not perceive the reform in a positive way left the school and hence allow for more supportive parents to be part of the reform process. Participant (L5) stated that Parents need to trust the educators and offer the support needed to help their children be motivated. Participants mainly agree that brining parents to being part of the school community supports the school improvement. Participants (L2 and L5) mentioned that schools can involve parents in the school community by inviting them to attend meetings, engage in philanthropy work with the school, engage in extracurricular activities with their children, and help the school raise funds to enrich the library, etc. are all examples of parental engagement that sets a good model to the children.

Participants (L2 and L3) suggested using a group of parents as ambassadors to advocate for the school reform. Participant (L3) found that this is very effective in the local community of the UAE. Parents rely to a large extent on social media and the school can encourage some of the parents to lead the social media communities and promote the reform plans of the school.

As for teachers (L5) stated that teachers need to buy in on the improvement plan and be ready to attend workshops, read books and use technology in the classrooms to move the children into 21st century learning. Teachers are the integral part of the school improvement, if they are not willing to change, their students will keep getting the same results. (L4) suggested methods to encourage teachers by praise and reward to create an environment of love between staff as he believes that people naturally come together. Participant (L3) shared the vision of providing a risk free school with (L4) so that teachers will try the best they can. Participant (L2) and (L4) agreed on the impact of looking for innovation and allowing creative solutions in the school to encourage teachers to have ownership of their initiatives and get involved as a partner in the school reform.

4.4 Challenges

Research question 4 inquired about the following: What are the challenges that leaders face through the reform process?

Participants input was studied and reviewed and four themes emerged and they are: 1) Budget and allocation. 2) Implementing reform. 3) Inspection benchmark is rising, and 4) Teacher turnover. We are going to look at each of those themes in this section.

BUDGET AND ALLOCATION

Participant (L2) stated that a school principal has to have business skills to manage school resources effectively. Participant (L4) shared the same opinion that prioritizing school needs to utilize the budget is one of the challenges as demands are high and resources are limited. Participant (L5) also agreed on the above elaborating that getting the budget for school improvement plans is one of the most challenging tasks in this process. In most schools the budget is always tight. The challenge is to allocate the money for the right resources. When the school doesn't have the budget for improvement, then it is the leadership team's job to decide what to sacrifice and where the money should go.

IMPLEMENTING REFORM

Participant (L5) argued that the implementation process is also a challenge. Most of the time teaching and learning is at the top of the list for improvement. This is an indicator of the lack of highly qualified and experienced teachers and most of the time it is because of the lack of a proper budget for hiring or retaining highly qualified staff. Another road block she mentioned is getting the staff to accept change. Change is difficult on students, staff and parents. It would be wise to implement the reform process in small steps while involving all stakeholders with the implementation process.

Participant (L2) also said that changing the mindset of all stakeholders is the greatest challenge. Whereas participant (L1) finds that the biggest challenge is at the teacher's domain. She finds that the slow adoption of reform plans in classroom practices is a major challenge and her school has planned to overcome this obstacle with a systematic class visits that involves the teachers' trainer him/herself.

Participant (L3) faced the great challenge with parents as she has reported that 70-80% of teachers in her school were highly qualified. Parents were reluctant to change whenever they face a strategy that was "not as they used to do"; however a substantial percentage of parents of students in that school were educated abroad and have experienced high quality education in the west and were advocates of for the school reform.

INSPECTION BENCHMARK IS RISING

One participant (L1) viewed that as a challenge that needs to be addressed. She noticed that the inspection was raising its expectations continuously. This has led to stressed teachers who are unable to perform at their best. It also led to continuous revision and of the school improvement plan to catch up with the inspections' standards.

TEACHER TURNOVER

After having had the training to raise up the performance level, and after all the school effort exerted to convince a teacher to accept the new vision and change his/her mindset the free market effect takes the school back to square one. Participant (L3) spoke with bitterness saying that *"teachers here have gotten where you can see it because it's a buyers' market and teachers have gotten used to being able to pretty much buy anywhere. They want to go."* Explaining that it leaves schools in constant search of new teachers who should be trained all over again.

Participants L1 and L2 both believe that the teacher turn over could also have a positive effect to it as it opens the door to hire more qualified staff.

4.4 Summary

This section included a detailed analysis of the experiences of five school leaders regarding their experience in planning and implementing school reform, and what they believe their roles and responsibilities are, and what are the challenges they faced. Many of the direct quotes from the participants were included to illustrate and describe their insights and views.

The following themes emerged from the data analysis: data driven decisions, implementation and follow up of the school improvement plan, the roles and responsibilities of the leaders along with all school stakeholders and the challenges faced.

As categories emerged from the data, using similar patterns that were collected, themes were derived accordingly. From these classifications, themes were recognized within the data. In sum, most participants described assessment, teaching, student attainment, curriculum standards, and school culture as important aspects of school reform. Also most participants believed that the influential factors of the school improvement plan are collaboration of the staff, the follow up and implementation of the plan, and hiring qualified staff. As for the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders participants agreed parents need to be supportive, students should be motivated to achieve high results in standardized testing, and staff need to embrace the change. Finally the challenges faced in the school reform journey were stated as budget allocation, teachers 'turnover, and changing the current mind set of all stakeholders.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study applied a qualitative research design and methods to collect and analyze data for the purpose of building a profile of school leadership in the UAE during reform and gaining a deeper understanding of how these leaders practiced leadership for the purpose of improvement. The aim was to document how these five school leaders formed an understanding of best practices for school reform and implementation. Grounded theory was used as the methodological approach. Due to the lack of leadership practices theory applied within the context of the UAE, grounded theory allowed the researcher to approach the research so as to generate concepts, rather than validate an existing theory based on the experiences being studied. Sorting and coding of data were employed in the interview protocol in order to address all research questions. This chapter provides a discussion and analysis of the findings of this study. It also offers recommendations for future research.

It was found that the practices school leaders take for reform comprised an overall consistency around the school. The practices encompassed all participants in educational reform, especially including professional community. Special practices were applied to decrease the teachers' overwhelm and to offset the risk of demotivation. Strategies aiming towards problem-solving that cover horizontal consistency were more learning oriented, advocating that principals were trying to create the atmosphere for learning among teachers. However, there were still variations between the practices that the principals preferred, which implies that the task of preserving or improving strategies that are learning-oriented and inclusive are highly challenging. At the same time, the factors under consideration, such as the situation at the ministry of education or inspection office level, also adds to the differences.

Four major themes emerged from the data: data driven decisions, implementation and follow up of the school improvement plan, the roles and responsibilities of the school stakeholders and the challenges faced.

The following section will discuss the findings under these themes.

5.1 Data Driven Decision Making

The definition of data driven decision making according to scholars, is when school leaders would adopt and analyze multiple sources of information and knowledge and use it to develop ongoing change and improved student achievement. Researchers stressed on the importance of using multiple resources of data to be able to make informed decisions (Bernhardt, 2003, 2004; Combs & Edmonson, 2006; Learning Points Associates, 2006; Mandinach & Honey, 2008).

Similar to the findings of this research, Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk (2001) suggest that at the heart of school improvement is the coherence of the instructional program. They believe that school reform starts with a systematic collection of data which should be used to drive the school improvement process. The data should be collected from curricular alignment to standards, effective instructional strategies, and assessment.

Researchers believe that most schools have become interested in data-driven instructional decision making especially in schools in the states (Ackley, 2001, Thorn, 2002). However, schools find it challenging due to the lack of training for the teachers on using the data to improve student performance (Schafer & Lissitz, 1987; Wise, Lukin, & Roos, 1991). Scholars found that it is not common to find teachers who would think critically about the effect of their instructional practices on student performance (Confrey & Makar, 2005; Hammerman & Rubin, 2002; Kearns & Harvey, 2000).

UAE school leaders also have the same challenge according to this study. Most of the participants expressed the need to train teachers on assessing according to standards and using the assessment results to improve instruction.

In terms of teacher performance and classroom observations, studies in western countries show similar finding to this study. Studies show that within the same school there's a variation of student learning due to variation in classroom environment and teacher performance (Education Trust, 1999). This is an indication that improving teacher performance is an important factor in school improvement.

The participants in this research believed that reviewing the curriculum, aligning it with the school's adopted standards, and making sure that the curriculum is within the students reach and capabilities is also important in the school improvement process. The research also indicates that curriculum is part of the data collection for school improvement purposes, as Schildkamp, & Kuiper (2010) stated "When analyzing data to improve the school's curriculum, it is important not only to use assessment data, but also take into account information from sources other than measures of student achievement" (p 482). Baker, Linn, Herman and Koretz (2002 in Chen, Heritage, & Lee, 2005) also indicated that understanding the context of student achievement is as important as understanding their performance levels.

As for culture, the respondents believe that culture is important in school improvement especially having an organized, positive and collegial culture among staff members. According to Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, and Liu (2001), promoting collegiality in the work place and establishing a positive school culture is important for school improvement. The characteristics of a positive school culture are fostering trust and ethical behavior, encouraging learning, communication, and data driven decisions.

Researchers also reported that there is a high correlation between the student learning and the school culture and climate (Hallinger and Heck 1998). Watson (2001) also warned that an inhospitable culture lead to low student achievement.

The findings of this research correlate to a great extent with the findings of other researches in the Western culture. The UAE school leaders find that data driven decisions

5.2 Implementation and follow up of the school improvement plan

Participants named three major factors that have an impact on the implementation of the school improvement plan, which are, staff involvement, staff collaboration and staff qualifications. These three aspects of the improvement process are viewed by the respondents as the driving factors for improving student achievement and test results which in turn lead achieving the school improvement goals.

Research in the field of education state that curriculum, class size, and family are contributing factors to student achievement (Cawelti, 1999); however, the single most influential factor in school improvement is the teacher (Stronge & Tucker, 2000). Darling-Hammond (2000) in their research on successful schools found that teachers of these schools have a solid academic background, are fully certified, and have differentiated teaching skills. Moreover, notable positive correlation was found between educational coursework and teacher performance (Ashton& Crocker 1987). Which means that teacher performance is affected also by the curriculum. (1985) Evertson, Hawley, and Zlotnikdescribed a consistent positive effect of teachers who are fully certified versus those who are uncertified.

5.2 Conclusion

It has been found that collaboration and collegiality sums up the successful practices of reform implementation. According to Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, and Liu (2001), promoting

collegiality in the work place and establishing a positive school culture is important for school improvement. The characteristics of a positive school culture are fostering trust and ethical behavior, encouraging learning, communication, and data driven decisions.

Hiring qualified teachers reduce the cost of training, this is what one school leader participant (L3) argued. It was an interesting argument since training is a common interest by all interviewed leaders because teachers don't have high qualifications and experience. So you jump one level by hiring, whereas she argues that hiring qualified teachers makes more time and money effective as you use their professional development time to talk about new strategies to lead to a high quality education.

5.3 The roles and responsibilities of the school stakeholders

Participants in this study agreed that all stakeholders should be involved in the school reform. Students are the targeted agent at the end of the day. The reform aims at improving their education. School leaders participating in this study asserted that students respond very well to the movement of reform taking place in the school when they understand its positive effect on them. Participants mentioned practices that include direct involvement in driving improved classroom practices as well as open door policy with students. There is a plenty of research on the relationship between school leadership practices and students achievement. It is asserted that the principal's direct involvement in educational practices reform rather than his/her leadership style will get the desired effect on students' achievement (Marzano 2006). This, in addition to having direct interaction with students is also influential to motivate them (Marzano 2006).

The second stakeholder is parents and all schools in this study make sure to involve parents in the "next step" and advocate for the school. This is also what literature review revealed as a measurement of a successful reform practice. Marzano (2006) stressed on the visibility of the school to the parents.

The responsibility of the school principal stretches vertically and horizontally and exclusively reaches the board of trustees of the school. School leaders in this research address the board with a study of the reform and clarify its importance to the benefit of the school in order to gain the boards' interest and hence their support. This goes hand in hand with what Marzano (2006) stated that school principals would shift the responsibility of the school's reform to the board by communicating the importance of it.

All stakeholders share the responsibility of the school reform but the main one is the teacher. School leaders all work to raise up the sense of ownership of their school improvement in the teachers. As Marzano (2006, P.122) stated that educational leaders should work to "develop the ownership rather than the buy-in to their initiatives".

5.4 The challenges faced

Generating a school improvement plan is not sufficient to actually achieve school improvement (El Turk 2017), challenges and obstacles that encounter school improvement can have a hindering effect on it. This study encountered some of the major challenges that face the reform process. These challenges are listed below

1. Budget and allocation
2. Continuously rising inspection expectations
3. The reform process implementation
4. Retaining qualified teaching staff

Allocating the budget is the most challenging part of a principal's duties, since the flow of operations all over the school depends on it. Marzano (2006) explained that the role of a principal entails allocating the budget for educational purposes. Schools in the private sector, which takes this study's focus, are funded within the context of for-profit business. This study found that

principals experience challenges prioritizing the budget aiming to reach the maximum utilization possible. Principals need to raise up their problem solving skills trying to find substitutes to expensive resources.

Another aspect is the school inspection from local authorities. Leaders in schools promote the inspection framework and train staff to perform accordingly, however, this study revealed that the decision makers in the UAE provide the schools with supplemental documentation that demonstrate requiring a higher level of standards in performance. This creates an additional challenge among school teachers that contributes to their burnout. Hence, school leaders must have good interpersonal skills to keep motivating teachers towards self improvement.

Recruiting qualified teachers and the parental stress on school decisions, are two issues that school leaders face in the country. These issues require high level skills of school leadership team members in order to be able to handle them. Proficiency in teacher training and adult learning are important to ensure quality teaching for the students; as well as acquiring good interpersonal and leadership skills required to satisfy the parents without scarifying the quality of the program.

School reform implementation depends a lot on the leadership style and characteristics of the person in lead. This research encountered various types of leaders who implemented reform in their schools in different manners, yet faced similar challenges during the process. Teacher training is one of the most persisting measurements that takes place during reform implementation. However, this study encountered difficulties finding impact of professional development training on classroom practices. This is due to the difficulties that teachers face while applying constructivist strategies aimed at by the reforms under study (Windschitl 2002).

Finding and hiring qualified staff is a challenge that stems from the laws and policies in the UAE. According to the participants in this study, the challenge is to attach the staff to the school

in an environment of an open market. The laws and policies of hiring teachers do not mandate them the commitment to the place of work for an adequate period of time to accomplish academic progress with the students. In Dubai, the percentage of public schools that hire qualified teachers is higher than that of private ones (Saadeh 2018). The results came as no surprise that these principals found themselves in the process of hiring teachers repeatedly during the academic year. It is an overload exerted on the school administrations, which in particular requires coordination skills to manage the smooth shifting of classes from one teacher to another with the minimum effect on the students' progress in learning. It also requires going through the process of induction and training repeatedly throughout the academic year.

Finding and retaining the qualified teacher that can guide students' learning by international standards is also a challenge that encounters the hiring process. The schools under study are International schools performing in a local environment. This requires staff that have bilingual linguistic skills, education qualification and masters in their field of expertise, this amount of requirements adds further complexity to the hiring procedure because it adds complexity to the scares of finding one person holding all these qualities combined. In the UAE and other countries of the world research took place to study retaining teachers (Garcia, Slate & Delgado 2009) and reduce the turnover rate, implicating the significance of this factor to the educational process.

In light of the research findings on these two challenges, it seems imperative that school leaders need training in teacher development. The field should expect those developing and training educators to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to effectively carry out their duties.

Summary

Education is a complex procedure. To achieve a holistic improvement in an educational institute leaders are to make sure they drive it themselves. This study adds to the educational literature asserting that an affective instructional leadership in a school has the capability to achieve a successful reform.

Despite the fact that all stakeholders are involved in this process, this study asserts that teachers play the most influential role as concluded from the qualitative research. Teachers have the direct interaction with the students on a daily basis and hence, should be the centre of attention to school reform. Teachers are at the centre of the educational process and to achieve better education, improving teaching practices is the most influential strategy. Therefore, decision makers in the UAE realize that to improve education they have to develop improved teaching and learning implementation practices in every classroom. For this reason the UAE inaugurated the teacher licensing initiative which aims at mandating having licensed teachers by the end of 2020 (MOE 2018). By shifting focus to improving teaching practices the government in the UAE is eliminating many of the challenges and obstacles that face schools on their way to improving education.

Limitations and recommendations of the study

This study included a limited number of schools that share similar characteristics and for this reason it is impractical to generalize its findings to all schools in the UAE. This study sheds the light on some practices that were found to be effective in the implementation of school reform. On the other hand it is recommended to stretch the research over the public schools to try to reach an understanding of the practices taking place to achieve the national agenda's vision by 2021.

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Appendix A


The British University
in Dubai

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Managing and Guiding School Reform:

Title of Study: A review of strategies adopted by selective international schools in Dubai towards reform

Investigators: Dubai towards reform

Name: Dima AIZUhair **Dept:** EDUCATION **Phone:** 0505778019

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study of school leadership.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to examine aspects of leadership that affect school improvement.
- Ultimately, this research may be *presented as a paper*.

Description of the Study Procedures

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: *[explain procedures and tasks; identify any procedures that are experimental; describe length of time for participation, frequency and duration of procedures; etc.]*

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks. There may be unknown risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- The benefits of participation is that a copy of the report will be sent to the school.

Confidentiality

- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

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- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, [Dima] at [2016101027@student.buid.ac.ae] or by telephone at [0505778019].
- If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can contact the university directly.

Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Subject's Name (print): LORETTA SANDERS

Subject's Signature: L. S.

Date: Sep. 24, 2018

Investigator's Signature: [Signature]

Date: 24/9/2018

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, [Dima] at [2016101027@student.buid.ac.ae] or by telephone at [0505778019].
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Subject's Name (print): Hunaida Saadeh

Subject's Signature: H. Saadeh

Date: 4-7-2018

Investigator's Signature: [Signature]

Date: 4, 7, 2018

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, [Dima] at [2016101027@student.buid.ac.ae] or by telephone at [0505778019].
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Subject's Name (print): SHATWA ALGHIZALI

Subject's Signature:  Date: 16 July 2018

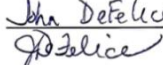
Investigator's Signature:  Date: 16 July 2018

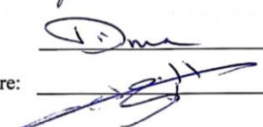
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Consent

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Subject's Name (print): John DeFelice

Subject's Signature:  Date: _____


Investigator's Signature:  Date: 3/9/2018

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, [Dima] at [2016101027@student.buid.ac.ae] or by telephone at [0505778019].
- If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can contact the university directly.

Consent

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Subject's Name (print): EVA PELSEVE

Subject's Signature: 

Date:

Jul 1, 2018

Investigator's Signature: 

Date:

1/7/2018