Volume 19 Issue 62
Originally issued as G11



Global Journal of human-social science: G
Linguistics & Education
Volume 19 Issue 11 Version 1.0 Year 2019
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460x & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Obstacles to School Reform: Understanding School Improvement in a UAE International School

By Dr. Jake Madden

Abstract- This research paper reports on data from an International School in Abu Dhabi that has been engaged in the initial stages of school improvement. Using a constructivist grounded theory design, qualitative and quantitative data were employed to investigate the school's climate and its capacity for change. Applying Schiemann's 'People Equity' framework (2009), data were collected about the level of staff's Alignment, Capability and Engagement (ACE). The Principal was interviewed about his understandings and expectations for school reform and teacher development, and site-based data about staff and student outcomes was drawn from the school.

Keywords: *school improvement; school climate, leadership.*

GJHSS-G Classification: *FOR Code: 139999*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



© 2019. Dr. Jake Madden. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Obstacles to School Reform: Understanding School Improvement in a UAE International School

Dr. Jake Madden

Abstract - This research paper reports on data from an International School in Abu Dhabi that has been engaged in the initial stages of school improvement. Using a constructivist grounded theory design, qualitative and quantitative data were employed to investigate the school's climate and its capacity for change. Applying Schiemann's 'People Equity' framework (2009), data were collected about the level of staff's Alignment, Capability and Engagement (ACE). The Principal was interviewed about his understandings and expectations for school reform and teacher development, and site-based data about staff and student outcomes was drawn from the school. Initial findings show the distinctive dynamics experienced by this school in its journey to improve the quality of teaching and learning. These include: the ways in which the Principal has needed to address the school's specific contexts ahead of school reform; the cultural, linguistic and pedagogic diversity of the staff; the need for greater professionalism; and the idiosyncratic nature of the national regulatory requirements. In the current educational climate of an imperative for improved teaching and learning, the research highlights this school's distinct differences based on cultural and systemic variations as well as its similarities with other schools seeking such improvements. With limited data available on Middle Eastern International Schools engaging in change journeys, this paper provides a valuable perspective on the challenges and opportunities for school reform in these contexts.

Keywords: school improvement; school climate, leadership.

I. Introduction

This paper provides insights into one International School in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, and what data from that school indicates are some key elements for preparing staff for school improvement. Using constructivist grounded theory to frame the analysis of an interview with the school's Principal, this paper notes his understandings of the contexts that underpin the school's climate. The school's specific dynamics further complicate the already challenging processes of school reform. The paper presents a review of the literature, providing a case for the current imperatives for school improvement and the known barriers to that process. It also outlines the challenges that research has shown are faced by principals of International Schools, and some of the inherent problems for schools in the Middle East.

II. The Research

This research paper is based on two sets of data drawn from the International School: qualitative survey data and demographic information, and a quantitative interview with the Principal. The first set of data was a survey from both the Principal and the school's staff. Based on the work by Schiemann (2009) on 'People Equity' and "optimising talent" (pp 208-209), the survey was designed to assess the staff's level of Alignment, Capability, and Engagement (ACE; more on this shortly). Additional contextual information was garnered from the school, which noted its similarities and differences with other Middle Eastern and International Schools. The second set of data was a semi-structured audio-recorded and transcribed qualitative interview with the school Principal about his understandings and expectations about school improvement, his intentions for developing the teachers in the school and the barriers and challenges he was facing in these processes.

The survey data, based on ACE factors (Schiemann, 2009), was gathered and statistically analysed as part of a broader research project with multiple schools across three countries (n=7). It was designed to provide relevant information for school principals for decision-making processes about school readiness for improvement, and provided each school with a report summarising that information. From the survey data, and employing a 'traffic light' system, the report indicated how the individual schools rated, along with comparative data from 'similar' schools and 'all participating schools' in the project. It noted for the principals the areas in which their school ranking was more than one standard deviation above or below that of all the schools participating in the project. The report noted areas of success and areas for potential improvement across the survey questions and, because the principal had also completed the survey, it noted the variances between how the aggregate of the staff responded as opposed to how the principal responded on each of the three areas of Alignment, Capability and Engagement. It also provided demographic information

Author: Al Yasat Private School Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.
e-mail: 1jakemadden@gmail.com

© 2019 Global Journals

about the staff (e.g. gender, teaching experience, age, role/s within the school, qualifications, and areas of prior professional development).

The principal of this Abu Dhabi International School was interviewed to determine his broader understandings about the school climate, the level of preparedness of his staff for school improvement phases, what he expected to achieve through that transformation, and the challenges he was able to anticipate might occur. The transcript of the interview was analysed using a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmez, 2002; Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Mills *et al.*, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; 1999). The interview data in the form of transcription was member checked (Creswell, 2004) with the participant for clarification and further commentary. The analysis revealed more detailed understandings about the context of the school and the issues faced in preparing the staff for school improvement. It noted the school-specific dynamics that presented additional challenges for the Principal.

III. Education in the Middle East

The growth of school education in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region began with the discovery of oil in the 1950s. During this time, the rapid economic and social development across the region necessitated the employment of large numbers of expatriate workers. Many of these workers brought their families and children with them. Reflecting the educational needs of these expatriate families, there was a demand for private schools to offer a variety of international curricula—including curricula from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), India, and other places in addition to the Arabic-medium curriculum taught in public schools.

However, the rapid increase in schooling options had seen an increase in school diversity and presented some challenges for governments and education agencies. Kamel (2014) notes the three key challenges facing the Middle East:

1. An increase in education inconsistency within the countries of the Middle East;
2. A marked decrease in the quality of student learning despite an increase in *per capita* education expenditure; and
3. A mismatch and growing divide between market needs in terms of capacity in skills and what the education system has to offer in terms of output (Kamel, 2014, p. 100).

Kamel's findings are drawn from various educational agencies' statistical data that the school systems in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA). These indicate that the schools are generally of low quality, and key international student test measures (i.e. PISA, TIMMS) highlight that basic skills are not being learnt by students in the MENA region (Gatti *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, UAE students scored below average in PISA testing in 2012 and the UAE was ranked 48th in mathematics, 44th in reading and 46th in science out of 65 participating Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. In the last round of TIMMS, the UAE ranked below the average.

Alayan, Rhode and Dhouib (2012) note that in the Middle East, traditional education models can no longer stay abreast with fast modernization resulting from successive technological advances, and there is an impact of the information revolution and social media on character formation. Such analysis has seen the development of an ambitious UAE 2021 Education Vision[1] for the country to activate education in helping to establish a knowledge-based society.

Over the past three decades the expatriate population explosion and the need for schooling has seen a growing number of investors into the school market in the UAE. In 2015 the International Schools Consultancy (ISC)[2] listed the UAE has having 507 International Schools. The dominance of the private education market and the presence of its for-profit providers raises questions about educational access and equity, particularly for middle and low-income expatriate families who do not have access to public schooling.

With the substantial growth in building of new schools in the UAE, ISC Research[3] predicts that, by 2020, there will be a need for 503,000 full time teachers. If International School standards are to continue, this will require the employment of teachers who have the skills and experience to teach the globally recognized curricula such as the National Curriculum of England, the International Baccalaureate and an American curriculum.

Given the research indicates that staff turnover in International Schools is between 20-25% the recruitment of quality staff is a major challenge (Preetika and Priti, 2013). Attracting and then retaining quality staff in itself is a problematic issue for all schools. While many factors contribute to teacher turnover, the disparity in teacher remuneration and the government control on private school fees are key contributors to teacher turnover, as highlighted in a 2015 report by Ardent Advisory and Accounting[4]. Furthermore, Kamel (2014) claims that, as the UAE government revise existing regulations and educational requirements for schools and teachers, education providers are finding it harder

[1] http://www.vision2021.ae/en/national-priority-areas/first-rate-education-system
[2] (http://www.iscresearch.com/information/isc-news.aspx)
[3] http://www.iscresearch.com
[4] http://ardentadvisory.com/images/GCC%20Education%20Sector%20Report.pdf

© 2019 Global Journals

to attract quality teachers due to complicated regulations, licensing and educational requirements set by government entities.

IV. UAE School Context

With almost 90% of schools belonging to the private sector, Dubai established the *Knowledge and Human Development Authority* (KHDA) in 2007 to oversee growth, quality and direction of private education in Dubai (Thacker and Cuadra, 2014) while Abu Dhabi instituted the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK)[5].

Currently, only 20% of the schools are "national" schools that operate using the national UAE curriculum, although all schools are mandated to teach the Arabic and Islamic curriculum as the minimal foundation. Within the UAE there are currently 15 different international curricula[6], including Indian, English National, French, German, Canadian, American, Australian, and International Baccalaureate.

The school at the centre of this study is one of the new private schools to be established by the private sector. Situated in a growing area of Al Shamkha, Abu Dhabi, the K-12 school was re-established in 2014, and opened with an initial enrolment of 277 K-6 students. Since then it has steadily grown into a fully-fledged K-11 school with more than 1175 enrolled students. Currently Emirati students account for 90% of the student population with the remaining 10% and being expatriate, although of predominately Arab descent.

Since its inception, the school has grown its leadership team and there have been leadership changes since opening. The teaching staff is currently a mixture of predominately Arabic only speaking staff (20%), English only speaking staff (30%) and bilingual speaking staff (50%). As reported by Madden (2014) the focus on building teacher capacity centers on addressing the challenges of staff diversity.

Notwithstanding these dynamics, the ability to engage parents as partners in learning does involve cultural challenges. It is considered that "Many schools fail to engage Emirati parents appropriately and use communication channels that do not take cultural considerations into account, such as when a phone call is more appropriate than written communication" (Al Sumaiti, 2012, p. p.1).

Thus, the specific contexts and dynamics evident in this International School compound the challenges faced by the school's Principal in his efforts to prepare for and facilitate school improvement.

[5] https://www.adek.gov.ae/

[6] KHDA, 2015, Inspection of Private Schools 2013-2014 Key Findings retrievedfromhttps://www.khda.gov.ae/CMS/WebParts/TextEditor/Documents/DSIB%20Key%20Findings%20Report_English%20Final.pdf

V. Literature Review

This review of the academic literature focuses on three of the broader elements of school reform that relate to this paper:

- The role of the principal in school improvement, with a particular focus on 'readiness' and capacity for change;
- The role of the principal in school improvement;
- And the role of the school climate in school improvement.

While there is an obvious interconnection between these three elements, the literature about how that relationship happens, and how it is then related to school improvement, will be noted.

Reform of national education systems has been at the forefront of discussions for governments and education departments in countries around the world. This global educational reform movement (Sahlberg, 2011) has been gathering momentum since the early 1980s and has focussed attention on many aspects of educational practice. These foci include, but are not limited to: school leadership; principal characteristics; elements of quality teaching; professional learning for teachers; personalisation and differentiation of teaching; embedding ICT into teacher practice; "21st century teaching"; raising educational standards; and many more (Cheng, 2009; Dondero, 1997; Fullan, 2014; Hargreaves and Evans, 1997; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Masters, 2014). Claiming a direct correlation between high levels of educational achievement and national economic success, governments, and subsequently education systems, are continuing to cast their attention to what is happening in schools across the world (Masters, 2014; McMahon, 2011). Middle Eastern nations are not exempt from this focus as they too are seeking national financial and economic excellence as well as educational success for their students (Purinton and El Sawy, 2012).

The educational literature attests to the imperatives of school improvement and increasing student achievement. The professional journals abound with research about how schools, teachers, education systems can achieve improvements in student learning. Hattie's (2009) work has affirmed the numerous factors that influence whether and to what degree a school–its staff, parent community, students and the principal–can achieve 'improvement'. Acknowledging that references to 'school improvement' frequently implies that the learning outcome of students will be increased, expanded, augmented, or in some way be better than it was previously, any kind of school improvement is both nebulous in what it looks like, and difficult to achieve (Alayan *et al.*, 2012). When the measure of 'improvement' is student learning outcomes, then there is the range of student tests that can be used to

© 2019 Global Journals

determine that measurement (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). When 'improvement' refers to the nature of the school 'climate', then there are likewise surveys, tools and instruments that can 'measure' and evaluate a school's climate (Al Makadma and Ramisetty-Mikler, 2015; Alborno and Gaad, 2014; Liu *et al.*, 2014; Thapa *et al.*, 2013). Likewise if the leadership of the principal is the mechanism through which these achievements can be realised, then there is ample research literature around principal behaviour, characteristics and leadership, and their co-relationship (Du Four and Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2014; Hallinger, 2014; Hitt and Tucker, 2015; Leith wood *et al.*, 2004; Litz, 2014; Preetika and Priti, 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, if the focus for the improvement is on what teachers do – their pedagogy and practices – then there are a myriad of research studies that have, and are, investigating changes in what teachers do to bring about learning improvements (McLeod and Reynolds, 2007; Murray, 2012; Niemi *et al.*, 2012).

What is pertinent to this paper is that school principals are increasingly implicated in the imperative for school reform. This expectation, though, is further complicated and compounded by the specific dynamics of International Schools such as the one in the UAE, which is the focus of this study.

The following three sections focus more closely on the literature about the role of Principals and school readiness and capability for change, the role of the school principal in school improvement, and school climate and its relationship with school improvement.

VI. School Improvement: Readiness and Capacity

Since 2009 when Hattie (2009) released his synthesis of meta-analyses of 'what works' in education, noting for readers the 'achievement effects' of a range of factors that play a major role in contributing to student learning, there has been increased attention on what happens in schools. Hattie noted six key contributors to student learning achievement: home, student, school, teacher, teaching and curricula (Hattie, 2009, p. 19). Of these six, his meta-analyses of research showed that the teacher and the teaching play pivotal roles in student learning outcomes. Coming at a time when educational reform was already in full swing and the quality of teaching and learning activities was under the spotlight, Hattie's findings (2009) added weight to the imperative for teachers to focus on pedagogy and practice (Dinham, Feb 28th 2013). This pressure then transfers to the stakeholders: not only teachers, but also principals, education systems, support mechanism, professional literature and research alike (Du Four and Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2014), and has been disparately applied and enacted across the world (Sahlberg, 2011). As an inherent part of the global educational reform movement, quality of pedagogy and practice, in tandem with professional learning and the professionalisation of teachers and teaching has received much attention (Johnston, 2015). Principals are currently expected to focus on developing their staff in whatever ways are necessary to achieve school improvement (Darling-Hammond and Lieberman, 2012).

In tandem with this imperative for principals to ensure their teachers are developing and improving student learning outcomes is the notion of "people equity" (Schiemann, 2009) that has been adapted and, in this instance, applied to educational contexts. Taken from the field of human resources and considering people as both a valuable resource and a talent, Schiemann (2009) developed the construct of "people equity" as a framework to maximise and mange staff talent through enabling the performance and the growth of employees. In summary, the framework focuses on three elements of staff capabilities. These include staff's:

1. Alignment to the organisation's focus, which "implies that from top to bottom everything is connected in the most effective and efficient way possible so that there is maximal output using the least amount of input" (p.105);
2. Capabilities, being "the skills, technology and processes needed to deliver successful products and services to customers" (p.129); and
3. Engagement being a combination of worker satisfaction (organisational, job, fair treatment and low stress) commitment (to the company's mission, proud to be a member, and able to identify with the organisation's values and beliefs) and advocacy (willingness to put in extra effort, to recommend friends to join, and customers to use) (Schiemann, 2009, p. p.155).

It was Schiemann's (2009) framework for "people equity" that led to the development of a survey instrument to assess teachers' capacity and readiness for change. The survey was designed to give principals an indication of how their staff, individually and collectively, perceived the school environment. From the receipt of the information drawn from the survey results, principals were more informed about their staff's understandings, readiness and capacity to for change. In light of the imperative for school improvement, it is claimed that this kind of information is foundational for forward movement in the school improvement agenda (Fullan, 2014).

VII. The School Principal and School Improvement

The second area of literature that is overviewed here is that of the role of the school principal in facilitation of school improvement. As already noted, much of the responsibility for ensuring that schools are being seen to reform, and improve their students'

© 2019 Global Journals

learning outcomes, falls to the principal. There is no shortage of research literature about many areas of principal ship, including:

- The nature of school leadership (Fullan, 2014; Urick and Bowers, 2014);
- Principal and leadership characteristics that are aligned with student achievement (Hallinger, 2014; Hitt and Tucker, 2015);
- The imperative for ensuring teachers are professionally developed (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006; Van Driel and Berry, 2012);
- The need to develop professional learning communities (DuFour and Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2014);
- And the need for teachers to be more 'professional' (Johnston, 2015; Wallace, 2009).

All of these components that can contribute to school improvement have become the responsibility of the school principal. With or without system levels of support (funding, time allocation, resources) principals are tasked with ensuring that, through focus on these kind of elements of school life, improvements will happen (Hitt and Tucker, 2015).

While the academic literature on whether or not, or to what degree, the school Principal impacts on the educational outcomes for students is divided (Mulford *et al.*, 2004), there is evidence to suggest that any impact occurs through indirect mechanisms (Barker, 2007; Mulford *et al.*, 2004). For example, Hallinger and Heck (1998) noted that the effect of the principal on student learning is small and usually statistically hard to detect. Barker notes that: "The great majority of schools seem to be performing at levels that could be predicted from knowledge of their [student] intake" (Barker, 2007, p. p.25). This paper though focuses on how this Principal was faced with specific school dynamics, which, in the context of an International School in Dubai, further complicate the processes of school reform.

VIII. School Climate and School Improvement

The third area to be outlined is that of school climate. This paper uses the definition of school climate asserted by the *National School Climate Council* (USA) where school climate is defined as: "the quality and character of school life. School climate is a multidimensional concept that reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, safety, and organizational structures of a school community" (National School Climate Council, 2007, p. 2). Two seminal reviews of school climate research (Anderson, 1982; Freiberg, 1999) provided the basis of much research, especially when Frieberg (1999) asserted the need for more, useable, well-defined and research-based school climate models to facilitate further development in this area. While there is much literature on this complex area, three key links between school climate and school leadership are noted briefly here.

1. Thapa et al. (2013), in their review of school climate have highlighted many of the evidenced outcomes associated with positive school climate (Thapa *et al.*, 2013). While these are too expansive to mention here, suffice to say that school climate matters because it has the potential to affect numerous aspects of school life – for staff, students, parents and leaders. It is also asserted that the tone and nature of a school's climate becomes the responsibility of the school principal. Developing a positive and collaborative school climate within the complexities of an International School setting becomes even more challenging for principals in these circumstances.
2. While principals have the power, authority, and position to not only impact the school climate and the professional capacity of their teachers, the literature indicates that many school leaders are not in tune with their staff (Ainscow *et al.*, 2013; Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014). In the complex and dynamic environment of schools, all principals need to understand effective leadership behaviours and teachers' perceptions of their behaviours (Hill, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2015).
3. Zepeda, Jimenez and Lanoue (2015) assert that principals must know and understand how to provide the foundation for creating an atmosphere conducive to change. Leaders must be able to correctly envision the needs of their teachers, empower them to share the vision, enable them to create an effective school climate and thus create the conditions for school improvement (Fullan, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2015).

Effective school leaders engage in three key behaviours when shaping the climate of the school. Initially they detect the school culture and learn about its history leading to the current context (Hill, 2014). Before trying to reshape or improve the climate of the school the principal must know the deeper meanings embedded in it (Urick and Bowers, 2014). Secondly, principals need to uncover and articulate core values. It is important to identify which aspects of the climate are damaging and which are constructive (John and Taylor, 1999). Finally, principals work to build capacity within their staff to foster mindfulness and create the working conditions for improvement strategies to thrive (Masters, 2012).

Thus, this paper has noted the research that was conducted as the basis for the paper. It has outlined the specific context of the International School

© 2019 Global Journals

in Dubai, and has reviewed key literature and research about school improvement, school principals and school climate and their co-relationship to school improvement, with specific focus on the Middle Eastern educational contexts.

IX. Discussion and Implications

This section discusses the themes identified from the constructivist grounded theory analysis of data. The themes derived from the data described the dynamics that the Principal encountered at the UAE International School. These themes are noted here, and then briefly discussed. The key findings and implications arising from this study and relevant to this paper include:

1. *Intensified Teacher Diversity:* The cultural diversity of the school's staff bring added complexities to the task of school reform because of the disparate range of cultural expectations and paradigms. Substantial staff coherence and professional consistency are essential for staff to have a shared vision and mission for change (Fullan, 2014). Understanding the inherent constraints and benefits of this teacher diversity and managing its limitations create an additional level of complexity for the Principal in the school's moves towards improvement (DuFour and Marzano, 2011).
2. *High Teacher Turnover:* The high levels of staff turnover in International Schools is recognized (Benson, 2011) and in this school the Principal has noted impacts of the teacher turnover on the cohesion of staff, the school's organizational structure, and the (loss of) knowledge of the instructional learning programs and routines of every-day school life.
3. *Staff Communication and Languages:* With the cultural diversity comes linguistic diversity that further compounds communication within the school. In this school there are three groups of language speakers, which further complicates not only communication but also professional relationships amongst and between staff members.
4. *Pedagogical Difference:* the diversity of cultural backgrounds of the staff also results in a wide variety of pedagogical differences. While difference can be beneficial, ensuring that there is consistency and a shared pedagogic vision becomes more challenging when the variety of pedagogies are greater and more disparate than in other, state-based educational systems in Western countries.
5. *Teacher Professionalism:* Notions of what it means to be a professional educator also vary greatly with this diverse cohort of teachers. Again, this adds another level of complexity as the Principal seeks to develop consistency and professionalism in the staff.
6. *Performance Management Regulations:* The Principal's need for clarity and understanding of the regional school accountability regulations was more intense in this Middle Eastern context. Additionally, he noted the need to work with the system of school ratings that holds schools accountable for improving student achievement and overall levels of school performance. Developing staff understanding of the performance standards rubrics is a foundational step that was challenging in these contexts.

a) *Intensified Teacher Diversity*

This International School experiences high levels of teachers' cultural diversity as teachers from around the world bring with them a range of "Western" and Middle Eastern educational and cultural knowledge and understandings. The impact of this teacher diversity is significant for International Schools as it invariably affects the school, its students and the teachers themselves. While teachers' cultural diversity brings benefits, it also presents challenges. This school's Principal was aware of the need to align school improvement strategies to the tasks of recruiting, selecting, developing, and retaining effective teachers to maximize the success of such strategies. In doing so, the Principal could ensure that the school had the necessary teaching talent for the implementation of the school's instructional vision.

b) *High Teacher Turnover.*

While high turnover of principals and staff in International Schools is a recognised phenomenon (Benson, 2011; Hawley, 1995; Odland and Ruzicka, 2009), this school realised an average 20% change in staff each year. The overall effect of this level of teacher turnover depended on the effectiveness of individual teachers and their distribution across the school (Mancuso *et al.*, 2010). If leaving teachers were equally as effective as those who replace them, then there should be a smaller net effect on student achievement due to the turnover. While there was no evidence to determine whether or to what degree this staff turnover may contribute to lower student achievement, or whether low achievement may also cause teachers to leave, the school's capacity to recruit quality staff added to the complexity of the situation. The Principal noted the negative impact of staff turnover on staff cohesion, the disruptive nature of staffing changes on the school's organisational routines, and loss of knowledge about the instructional learning programs.

c) *Staff Communication and Languages*

With the noted cultural diversity evident in this International School's staff also came a linguistic diversity. The school's staff fell into three distinct linguistic groups: those who speak only English; those who speak only Arabic; and those who speak one of

© 2019 Global Journals

those languages, with a little of the other language and are thus, bilingual. The linguistic diversity in this International School served to further divide and at times isolate the staff. In many other International Schools English is the 'lingua franca' that all staff are expected to speak and understand. However, this is a bilingual school, with teaching programs in both Arabic and English. When around a third of the staff speak only one of the nominated languages, this acts to further divide and isolate, rather than unite the staff, towards a common, shared vision. Thus, the Principal was charged with not only building school culture, implementing school improvement strategies, providing professional development and monitoring the day-to-day operations of the school, but also with doing so in the context where not all staff speak the same language.

d) Pedagogical Difference

Not only does the school's teachers have a wide variety of cultural perspectives but each of these teachers came with an inherent teaching pedagogy and teaching roles. Their established educational expectations were drawn from a vast assortment of teacher training programs across a range of nations. The teaching approaches that teachers have developed around pedagogical concepts such as: lifelong learning, behavior management, critical thinking, experiential and discovery learning, are often at odds with the teacher-centered, rote learning style that dominates Islamic and Middle Eastern education. Therefore, the Principal's role was to manage the staff professional development, and sometimes re-training, in order to align the staff's pedagogies and enable the implementation of the school's instructional vision. This was another level of complexity faced by the Principal in this International School. Given the cultural diversity from the countries of origin of the school's staff and the diversity of teacher training programs and their respective paradigms, this International School experienced a much wider range of diversity than many other schools.

e) Teacher Professionalism

One of the concepts under the umbrella of enhancing teachers' performance and the effectiveness in advancing student achievement has been teacher professionalism. The relationship between the culture of the school and the level of teacher professionalism has been noted in the literature (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011; National School Climate Council, 2007). Literature on teacher professionalism offers some essential characteristics about what is expected (Duhn, 2011; Hilferty, 2008; Servage, 2009). Chiefly, professionally focused teachers deliver high quality learning experiences, are looked upon as role models, espouse professional values such as effectiveness, efficiency and punctuality, and have an organisational pride and discipline in what they do. The role of the principal is implicated in developing professionalism in teaching staff (Thoonen *et al.*, 2011). For this International School, the Principal was keen to advance notions of what it means to be a professional teacher through engaging teachers in a conversation about the implications for them, their students, and the educational community. Without this focused attention on core standards and expectations, the opportunities for cooperative and consistent staff behaviours was limited. Thus, this facilitation of a shared understanding of what it is to be a professional educator was an additional component of this Principal's role in this International School.

f) Performance Management Regulations

The Emirate of Dubai's requirements for performance management and the attending regulations in the form of an annual external inspection process was devised to observe and rate a school's overall levels of student learning and progress over time. Although a wide range of data is collected, a key process for judging school performance is the use of standardized test results (eg TIMSS, PISA, ISA). Using the UAE School Inspection Framework[7], this Principal indicated he intended to coordinate collaboration of teachers around curriculum and standards, focus on instructional strategies and goals, and influence student learning through tightening assessment practices. This has implications for leaders to not focus too strongly on implementing practices associated with accountability and quality assurance as this increases pressure on teachers, thus reducing their readiness for change (Lee and Dimmock, 1999).

X. Conclusion

This study uses the self-stated understandings of teachers and an International School principal who are teaching in a majority Emirati International School in Abu Dhabi. The paper focuses on the need for school leaders to have a strong contextual understanding before leaping into school improvement initiatives. The literature has shown the importance of implementing a sustainable school improvement plan and accounting for the specific nature of the school climate. The study has shown ways in which this Principal addressed: the school's specific dynamics ahead of school reform; the cultural, linguistic and pedagogic diversity of the staff and how it complicated the application and preparation for change; and the Principal's focus on greater professionalism for his staff. These specific challenges were noted within the idiosyncratic nature of the national regulatory requirements for this International School.

[7] https://www.moe.gov.ae/Ar/ImportantLinks/Inspection/PublishingImages/frameworkbooken.pdf

© 2019 Global Journals

This study highlights that having a depth of knowledge of the cultural, linguistic and pedagogical diversity of the staff, and then addressing the challenges, can support the school leader and the staff in readiness for significant educational change. In this study, the information provided to the Principal from participation in a 'school readiness' survey empowered him for informed decision-making. Thus, navigating the complexities of school climate and the specific dynamics evident in the school became inherent to the plan for change. The study notes that successful school improvement can occur when the readiness of staff for change is high and the principal has an informed understanding of the challenges of the school's climate. This was evident for this Abu Dhabi International School and the journey of change continues for the staff and principal.

References Références Referencias

1. Ainscow, M., Beresford, J., Harris, A., Hopkins, D., Southworth, G. and West, M. (2013), *Creating the conditions for school improvement: A handbook of staff development activities*, (2nd ed.). Routledge, Oxon UK.
2. Al Makadma, A. S. and Ramisetty-Mikler, S. (2015), "Student, school, parent connectedness, and school risk behaviors of adolescents in Saudi Arabia", *International Journal of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine,* Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 128-135.
3. Al Sumaiti, R. (2012), "Parental involvement in the education of their children in Dubai (Policy Brief 30: Dubai School of Government)", available at http://www.khda.gov.ae/CMS/WebParts/TextEditor/Documents/Parental_Involvement_in_the_Education.pdf (accessed March 17 2016).
4. Alayan, S., Rhode, A. and Dhouib, S. (Eds.). (2012). *The politics of education reform in the Middle East*. New York, NY: Berghahn
5. Alborno, N. E. and Gaad, E. (2014), "'Index for Inclusion': A framework for school review in the United Arab Emirates", *British Journal of Special Education,* Vol. 41 No. 3, pp. 231-248.
6. Anderson, C. S. (1982), "The search for school climate: A review of the research", *Review of Educational Research,* Vol. 52 No. 3, pp. 368-420.
7. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL]. (2011), *National Professional Standards for Teachers*. online at http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/,Education Services Australia.
8. Barker, B. (2007), "The leadership paradox: Can school leaders transform student outcomes?", *School Effectiveness and School Improvement,* Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 21-43.
9. Benson, J. (2011), "An investigation of chief administrator turnover in International Schools", *Journal of Research in International Education,* Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 87-103.
10. Charmez, K. (2002). "Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods", in N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 509-535.
11. Cheng, Y. C. (2009), "Teacher management and educational reforms: Paradigm shifts", *Prospects,* Vol. 39 No., pp. 69-89.
12. Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (1990), "Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons and evaluative criteria", *Qualitative Sociology,* Vol. 13 No.1, pp.3-21.
13. Creswell, J. W. (2004), *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
14. Darling-Hammond, L. and Lieberman, A. (2012), *Teacher education around the world: Changing policies and practices* Routledge Taylor and Francis London UK.
15. Dinham, S. (Feb 28th 2013). The Annual Phillip Hughes Oration *The quality teaching movement in Australia: Losing our confidence, losing our way and getting back on track*, ACT Branch of ACE, Canberra. Available at http://austcolled.com.au/article/2013-annual-phillip-hughes-oration
16. Dondero, G. M. (1997), "Organizational climate and teacher autonomy: Implications for educational reform", *The International Journal of Educational Management,* Vol. 11 No. 5, pp. 218-224.
17. Du Four, R. and Marzano, R. (2011), *Leaders of learning: How district, school, and classroom leaders improve student achievement*. Solution Tree Press, Blooming ting IN.
18. Duhn, I. (2011). "Towards professionalism/s", in L. Miller & C. Cable (Eds.), *Professionalization, leadership and management in the early years*. Sage, London, UK, pp. 133-146.
19. Freiberg, H. J. (1999), *School climate: Measuring improving and sustainin healthy learning environments*. Falmer Press, Philadelphia PA.
20. Fullan, M. (2014), *the principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*. John Wiley Jossey-Bass, San Francisco CA.
21. Gatti, R., Morgandi, M., Grun, R., Brodmann, S., Angel-Urdinola, D. and Moreno, J. M. (2013), "Jobs for shared prosperity: Time for action in the Middle East and North Africa", available at http://hdl.handle.net/10986/13284(accessedFebruary 15 2016).
22. Hallinger, P. (2014), "Reviewing reviews of research in educational leadership an empirical assessment", *Educational Administration Quarterly,* Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 539-576.
23. Hallinger, P. and Heck, R. H. (1998), "Exploring the principal's contribution to school effectiveness:

© 2019 Global Journals

1980-1995", *School effectiveness and school improvement,* Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 157-191.
24. Hargreaves, A. and Evans, R. (Eds.). (1997). *Beyond educational reform: Bringing teachers back in*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
25. Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012), *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school* Teachers College Press, New York, NY.
26. Hattie, J. (2009), *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge, London, UK.
27. Hawley, D. B. (1995), "How long do International School heads survive? Part II", *The International Schools Journal,* Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 23-37.
28. Hilferty, F. (2008), "Teacher professionalism and cultural diversity: Skills, knowledge and values for a changing Australia", *The Australian Educational Researcher,* Vol. 35 No. 3, pp. 53-70.
29. Hill, I. (2014), "Internationally minded schools as cultural artefacts: Implications for school leadership", *Journal of Research in International Education,* Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 175-189.
30. Hitt, D. H. and Tucker, P. D. (2015), "Systematic review of key leadership practices found to influence student achievement: A unified framework", *Review of Educational Research* Vol. 0034654315614911, first published on November 12, 2015 No. http://rer.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/11/12/0034654315614911.full, pp.
31. John, M. C. and Taylor, J. W. (1999), "Leadership style, school climate, and the institutional commitment of teachers", *International Forum* Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 25-57.
32. Johnston, J. (2015), "Issues of professionalism and teachers: critical observations from research and the literature", *Australian Educational Researcher,* Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 299-314.
33. Kamel, S. (2014). "Education in the Middle East: Challenges and opportunities", in N. Azoury (Ed.), *Business and education in the Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, London UK, pp. 99-130.
34. Lee, J. C.-K. and Dimmock, C. (1999), "Curriculum leadership and management in secondary schools: A Hong Kong case study", *School Leadership and Management,* Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 455-481.
35. Leith wood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S. and Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Review of research: How leadership influences student learning*. New York, NY www.wallacefoundation.org The Wallace Foundation
36. Litz, D. (2014). *Perceptions of School Leadership in the United Arab Emirates* (PhD thesis). University of Calgary, http://theses.ucalgary.ca/handle/11023/1394
37. Liu, Y., Ding, C., Berkowitz, M. W. and Bier, M. C. (2014), "A psychometric evaluation of a revised school climate teacher survey", *Canadian Journal of School Psychology,* Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 54-67.
38. Madden, J. (2014), "Raising student achievement: The work of the internationally minded teacher", *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change,* Vol. 1 No. 4, pp. 41-51.
39. Mancuso, S. V., Roberts, L. and White, G. P. (2010), "Teacher retention in International Schools: The key role of school leadership", *Journal of Research in International Education,* Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 306-323.
40. Masters, G. N. (2012). *National school improvement tool*. Melbourne, Vic: http://research.acer.edu.au/tll_misc/18/ Australian Council for Educational Research
41. Masters, G. N. (2014), "Is school reform working?", *Policy Insights,* Vol. 1 No. ACER, pp. 1-75 http://research.acer.edu.au/policyinsights/71/.
42. McLeod, J. H. and Reynolds, R. (2007), *Quality teaching for quality learning*. Thomson Social Science Press, South Melbourne, Vic.
43. McMahon, A. (2011). Education reform: A wicked problem. Retrieved from http://annpmcmahon.com/2011/03/16/education-reform-a-wicked-problem/
44. Mills, J., Bonner, A. and Francis, K. (2006), "The development of constructivist grounded theory", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 25-35.
45. Mulford, W., Silins, H. and Leith wood, K. A. (2004), *Educational leadership for organisational learning and improved student outcomes*, (Vol. 3). Kluwer Academic Publishers, New York, NY.
46. Murray, J. (2012). Supporting effective teacher learning in American schools. *Teachers College Record* (ID number 16751). Retrieved from http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=16751
47. National School Climate Council. (2007), "The school climate improvement process: Essential elements National School Climate Centre Brief Number 4", available at http://www.schoolcilmate.org (accessed April 1 2016).
48. New South Wales Department of Education and Training. (2006), "Professional Learning and leadership development", available at https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/proflearn/index.htm(accessed March 24th 2009.
49. Niemi, H., Toom, A. and Kallioniemi, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Miracle of education: The principles and practices of teaching and learning in Finnish schools*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Pulishers
50. Odland, G. and Ruzicka, M. (2009), "An investigation into teacher turnover in International Schools", *Journal of Research in International Education,* Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 5-29.
51. Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., Walker, L. S. and Woehr, D. J. (2014), "Gender and perceptions of leadership

© 2019 Global Journals

effectiveness: A meta-analysis of contextual moderators", *Journal of Applied Psychology,* Vol. 99 No. 6, pp. 1129-1145.
52. Preetika, B. and Priti, J. (2013), "A descriptive study on the challenges faced by school principals.", *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* Vol. 2 No. 5, pp. 39-40.
53. Purinton, T. and El Sawy, A. (2012). "School Reform in the Middle East: Educational researchers adapting to the Arab spring", in E. Mendizabal (Ed.), *Communicating Complex Ideas: Translating research into practical social and policy changes*. On Think Tanks, pp. 57-76.
54. Sahlberg, P. (2011), *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press, New York, NY.
55. Schiemann, W. A. (2009), *Reinventing talent management: How to maximise performance in the new marketplace*. Wiley & Sons, Hobokin NJ.
56. Servage, L. (2009), "Who is the "Professional" in a professional learning community? An exploration of teacher professionalism in collaborative professional development settings ", *Canadian Journal of Education* Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 149-171.
57. Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998), *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, (2nd ed.). Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
58. Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1999). "Grounded theory methodology: An overview", in A. Bryman & R. G. Burgess (Eds.), *Qualitative research,* Vol. 3). Sage, London, pp. 72-93.
59. Thacker, S. and Cuadra, E. (2014), "The road traveled: Dubai's journey towards improving private education: A World Bank review", available at http://www.khda.gov.ae/CMS/WebParts/TextEditor/Documents/World%20Bank%20Report-English.pdf (accessed February 20 2016).
60. Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S. and Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013), "A review of school climate research", *Review of Educational Research,* Vol. 83 No. 3, pp. 357-385.
61. Thoonen, E. E., Sleegers, P. J., Oort, F. J., Peetsma, T. T. and Geijsel, F. P. (2011), "How to improve teaching practices: The role of teacher motivation, organizational factors, and leadership practices", *Educational Administration Quarterly,* Vol. 47 No. 3, pp. 496-536.
62. Urick, A. and Bowers, A. J. (2014), "What are the different types of principals across the United States? A latent class analysis of principal perception of leadership", *Educational Administration Quarterly,* Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 96-134.
63. Van Driel, J. H. and Berry, A. (2012), "Teacher professional development focusing on pedagogical content knowledge", *Educational Researcher,* Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 26-28.
64. Wallace, M. R. (2009), "Making sense of the links: Professional development, teacher practices, and student achievement", *Teachers College Record,* Vol. 111 No. 2, pp. 573.
65. Wang, N., Wilhite, S. and Martino, D. (2015), "Understanding the relationship between school leaders' social and emotional competence and their transformational leadership the importance of self–other agreement", *Educational Management Administration and Leadership,* Vol. No. Published online before print January 21, 2015, http://ema.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/01/21/1741143214558568.full.pdf+html, pp.
66. Zepeda, S. J., Jimenez, A. M. and Lanoue, P. D. (2015), "New practices for a new day: Principal professional development to support performance cultures in schools", *LEARNing Landscapes,* Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 303-322.

© 2019 Global Journals