

SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI
FOUNDATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH

Education Reform in the UAE: An Investigation of Teachers' Views of Change and Factors Impeding Reforms in Ras Al Khaimah Schools

Ruba Tabari
Educational Psychologist

Working Paper 07

July 2014

Abstract

A number of educational reforms were initiated in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2006. Abu Dhabi spearheaded these reforms by setting up the Public Private Partnership (PPP) School Improvement Project in 2006. In cooperation with the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), the Ministry of Education (MOE) engaged private education providers to share international best practices and improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools across the emirate of Abu Dhabi (Thorne, 2011).

In 2007, Dubai launched Madaras Al Ghad (Schools of Tomorrow) in collaboration with the MOE, and forty-four schools across the Emirates were targeted for training, professional development, and reform (Farah & Ridge, 2009). The primary goal was a move from rote learning to learner-centered education by employing a new curriculum, assessment framework, and teaching methodology.

Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi assumed executive functions in Ras Al Khaimah in 2003. Part of his vision for developing the emirate was to boost the quality of higher education through cooperation with top American institutions. In collaboration with the MOE, the foundation he established, the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, supported a number of research and capacity development projects that explored the current state of education in Ras Al Khaimah schools. One of the projects involved creating a teachers network whereby teachers were taught how to use an online platform to openly discuss ways to improve teaching in the emirate.

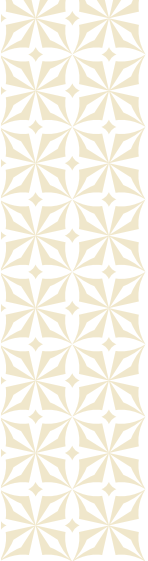
In line with this initiative, international research has shown that teachers' active support is of crucial importance if large-scale education reform is to be implemented effectively (Senge, 1999). For that reason, a detailed investigation of the teachers' perceptions related to education reforms in Ras Al Khaimah is valuable and guides this study. This study was designed to provide insight into teachers' views of the education reforms in schools in the Ras Al Khaimah Education Zone and includes an analysis of what they perceive would make the reforms more effective.

In Phase 1 of the study, 96 teachers from middle and secondary state girls' schools were interviewed and surveyed about their beliefs regarding educational reforms in Ras Al Khaimah. Out of the teachers interviewed, 72 were Emirati and 24 were of non-Emirati Arab nationality. Based on the results from Phase 1, relevant themes were identified for further investigation in Phase 2.

The second phase used structured interviews to explore the views of a smaller sample of 20 teachers in greater depth. The results revealed a general consensus that the reforms were largely positive, but some of the teachers were critical of how they were being implemented. A thematic map outlining the issues raised by the teachers in relation to the reforms was produced, and recommendations were given to the Education Zone based on these findings.

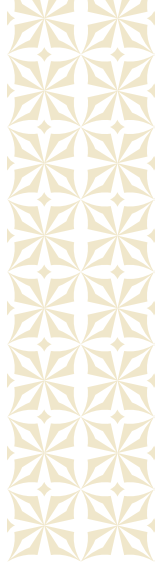
Ruba Tabari is an educational psychologist in the United Arab Emirates. This working paper represents a shortened version of the doctoral paper prepared for University College London in London, England. A full copy can be provided through ruba@ed-psych.com upon request. Additionally, questions, comments, and interest in this paper can be addressed to its author, Ruba Tabari, at the above address.

The Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research Working Paper Series is designed to disseminate ongoing research to individuals and institutions interested in the development of public policy in the Arab world. Findings and conclusions are solely those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research.



Contents

Introduction	7
Literature Review	7
Teachers' Response to Education Reform	7
Reform in the United Arab Emirates	9
Methodology	12
Table 1: Participants by Subject Area and Target Group	13
Table 2: Origin of Participants in the Non-Emirati (Other) Arab Group	14
Results	14
Phase 1	14
Phase 2	18
Discussion	22
Conclusion and Recommendations	25
References	27





Introduction

Over the last ten years, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have focused on improving the standards of education in government schools across the UAE. The government's aim was for schools to graduate pupils who are equally proficient in English and Arabic, knowledgeable, committed to their heritage, and prepared for entry into higher education anywhere in the world. With pressure to modernize and reform education in order to attain higher international recognition, policymakers looked to the West for solutions (Phillips & Ochs, 2003). They "borrowed" practices that were originally developed in and for the West. These were often adopted without considering the cultural context in which they would be applied (Harold, 2005).

There has also been a movement toward shifting the current teaching methodology approach from more teacher-centered to more learner-centered. Despite tremendous financial investments by the government and the recruitment of various consultants, change has been slow (United Nations, 2000). At the 2009 Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) Symposium, a recurring concern among symposium participants was the lack of substantive progress on the education front despite various education initiatives.

This paper explores the issues that have been informally observed and experienced in education in the UAE through a methodical, empirical approach and provides the Ras Al Khaimah Education Zone with an overview of perceptions about the process of change and its meaning for teachers in Ras Al Khaimah. It examines key issues that are pertinent to the teachers and identifies the factors that have impeded positive change. It aims to provide insight into why teachers have resisted reform and to offer recommendations for how the relationship between the Education Zone and Ras Al Khaimah's educators might be strengthened.

Literature Review

Teachers' Response to Education Reform

Education reform is a process. An essential component of this change is teachers, who are also primary stakeholders. Their involvement in and reaction to change can influence the implementation and effectiveness of reform movements. Studies about teachers' reactions to reform have traditionally focused on cognitive processes and behavioral changes; although they have touched upon emotional changes, these findings have been incidental (Hargreaves, 2004). In more recent studies, the focus has moved to teachers' personal beliefs and emotional responses to change (Van Veen & Slegers, 2007).

Hargreaves (2004) compared teachers' emotional reactions to self-initiated change to their reactions to mandated change. He found that 60% of the teachers who were interviewed associated educational change with external, legislated, government-imposed change. Only 2% viewed change positively. Teachers disliked mandates because they thought they were vague and forced upon them without their consent or approval or were implemented poorly, within a short time scale, and often with insufficient resources and support. According to Hargreaves

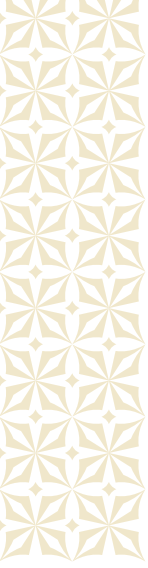
(2004, p. 302), "What seems to matter most for teachers' emotional investment and reward, therefore, is not whether changes are external or internal, but whether they include or exclude their professional purposes and considerations of the realities of their working lives."

Similar findings were reported by Dinham and Scott (2004), who reported on the International Teacher 2000 Project. The project explored international patterns of teacher satisfaction and motivation using data derived from common instruments administered to teachers and school executives in Australia, England, New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada, Cyprus, and Malta. They found that in all seven countries, the most rewarding aspects of teaching were intrinsic and related to pupil achievement and engagement. Teachers were most dissatisfied with outside pressures stemming from governments, society, and employers. Their dissatisfaction was exacerbated by the pace of educational change, increased pressures and responsibilities, and the low level of support provided to facilitate change.

Furthermore, policy measures and education reform can leave teachers in a position in which their professional identity and moral integrity are questioned. When these reforms are mandated or incongruent with a teacher's beliefs, they contribute to feelings of vulnerability and emotional disturbance (Kelchtermans, 2005). A characteristic of vulnerability is feeling that one's professional identity and moral integrity are in question and that positive workplace conditions may be threatened by circumstances beyond the control of the vulnerable party. If reform is accompanied by openness and trust, it can foster healthy and trusting relationships. On the other hand, reform can be a threatening experience that leaves an individual feeling powerless and betrayed, and this can produce anxiety and fear (Lasky, 2005).

More recently, Lee and Yin (2011) studied the impact of reforms on the professional identity of teachers in secondary schools in China through a three-year qualitative study conducted in the provincial city of Guangdong. By the end of the study, teachers were classified into three categories. The first group was the "losing-heart accommodators," who were passionate about the introduction of the reforms but lost enthusiasm after the reforms' implementation. The second group was the "drifting followers," who felt little excitement about the reforms and felt that they had no significant role in them. They did not, however, resist the reforms because they saw them as national policies that needed to be followed. The last group was the "cynical performers," who resisted the reforms internally but maintained an exterior appearance of cooperation.

The studies above were carried out in the West and in the far East. Work carried out closer to the region by Grossman, Onkol, and Sands (2007) assessed the nature, extent, and effectiveness of the reform that was initiated in the 1990s in Turkey to upgrade the Turkish educational system in preparation for its European Union membership. They found that teachers generally expressed positive views about the outcomes of the reforms, but they conveyed dissatisfaction with the process and the endeavor itself. They concluded that the most important factor in determining attitudes towards the reform was the involvement of teacher educators in the process; although this did not alleviate teachers' reaction to the reforms' mandated nature, it did allow for a more positive view of the reform.



Another variable to consider when looking at reform is the national culture and whether response to reform differs when collectivist cultures, as opposed to individualistic cultures, are involved. Hofstede (1983) compared work-related values among fifty countries, revealing four different characteristics: individualism versus collectivism, large versus small power distance, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity. Large power distance refers to great acceptance of power differentials in society. Strong uncertainty avoidance is characterized by high risk-aversion, low flexibility, and lower tolerance for change.

The Arab world was marked by large power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance, a masculine orientation, and a low level of individualism. In these societies, people tend to be more anxious and emotional, and so society may build a sense of security through one of three means: law, religion, or technology.

Reform in the United Arab Emirates

The government of the UAE upholds the value of education and believes that education is the main tool for human development. It has adopted the “World Declaration of Education for All” and has been steadily working towards achieving its ambitious goal of education for all (United Nations, 2000). In a high-technology, rapidly globalizing context, the authorities in the UAE are convinced of the need to reach sustainable human development to keep pace with the changing world. Consequently, they have launched an ambitious program to improve the quality of education across the UAE, a plan for continuous improvement and development based on a series of strategic goals.

Challenges Facing the Education System in the United Arab Emirates

The challenges facing the UAE schooling system, including schools in Ras Al Khaimah, were identified by the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research as:

- “Unclear or conflicting missions and goals, closely related to problems and discrepancies in study programs and curricula.
- Inappropriate methods of teaching and learning.
- Inflexible curricula and programs which lead to high dropout rates and long duration of study.” (Clarke, 2006, p. 226)

Proposed changes to address these challenges have appeared rapidly. Some have been implemented while others never progressed beyond the proposal stage. Senge (1999) claimed that most initiatives involving large-scale organizational change fail, a claim he made following two large studies he completed in the USA in the 1990s. Although much of what he said referred to the corporate world, it may well apply to change in education. Senge (1999) indicated that challenges that impede change must be understood and strategies for dealing with them must be developed. Rather than just increasing training for staff or using top-down commands, Senge (1999) suggested that people involved in the changes must be given the opportunities to review the ways they think and interact. This was in line with Hargreaves’s (2004) findings in which teachers’ acceptance of reforms was affected by their beliefs and professional identity.

Preserving Culture and Traditions

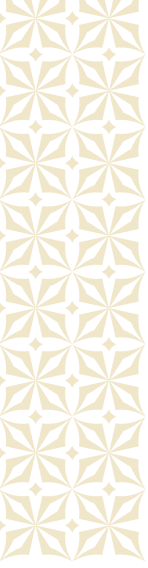
A main consideration for this region in any reform movement has been the preservation of culture and traditions. The global spread of English has raised cultural and political concerns. In the UAE, English is viewed as essential for keeping up with global developments. It is the language of business in many countries, and, in the UAE, it is also the language of instruction in tertiary education and is consequently an important subject in school (Ahmed, 2010). This has posed a challenge for curriculum developers and educators because Arabic is the official language of the government schools and the language of Islam. Islam in the UAE is a way of life for those who follow it and an integral part of the local culture and identity. The growing predominance of English in the education system has left many feeling that the Arab-Islamic identity of the country may be at risk (Ahmed, 2010).

The threat to Arab-Islamic identity was explored by Khelifa (2010), who looked at cultural changes in Emirati Muslim female university students as a result of their exposure to Western education and culture as they pursued undergraduate studies at a Western-modeled university in the UAE. In general, the students reported that the curriculum did not affirm their Arab and Islamic identity but rather that it grounded them firmly in Western culture and thought. They described themselves as modern in comparison to their mothers' generation. They also indicated that their family life had become more modern, too. The results, however, indicated that the students had retained a strong sense of identity despite their Western education and what, on the surface, is a more Western appearance.

Whiteoak, Crawford, and Mapstone (2006) examined the work values of 241 nationals from the UAE and concluded that while the Arab world is generally viewed as a collectivist society, the situation has been changing following exposure to more Western values and the globalization of markets. In the Arab world, they found a great deal of pressure to conform to "societal norms" and that Islamic ideals were strongly held among the adult population of the UAE. Furthermore the study found that younger UAE nationals showed relatively high levels of individualism.

The Impact of Education Reforms in Ras Al Khaimah

Ras Al Khaimah has a number of government and private schools. The government schools largely deliver the curriculum in Arabic, although they do offer English as second language for all students beginning in grade one. In line with the MOE's efforts to improve education, schools in Ras Al Khaimah have endeavored to promote critical thinking in classrooms over the traditional rote learning method. The 10x10 program, launched in 2010, sought to orient education towards a career-centered goal and address the needs of pupils entering the labor market (Oxford Business Group, 2012). Ras Al Khaimah has also specifically identified two main priorities for the education sector for the next seven years: to raise the standard of teachers and to improve the quality of research in higher education.



Currently, the MOE employs academic advisors to promote change in schools. These advisors visit teachers and observe lessons to assess the quality of teaching based on a 100 point system. Although this could potentially be a useful tool for rating and inducing change in teaching and learning methodology, the role of the advisors has been marginalized by principals who have chosen to use their own assessment strategies (Ridge & Farah, 2009). The advisors' role was further compromised by their lack of preparation for their role (Gaad, Arif, & Scott, 2006).

Despite repeated recognition in the literature of the importance of including and consulting all stakeholders in any reform process, teachers in the UAE have not been formally involved in or consulted about their views with regards to the proposed changes. Neither have they been surveyed about their perceptions about whether change is needed at all or what form it should take. Teachers were not asked questions like:

- Did they feel that reform was essential?
- What did they think were the factors that impeded reform?
- Why were the numerous initiatives ineffective in bringing about long-term reform?
- How did that translate in terms of their response to the reforms?
- How did that impact their acceptance of it?
- Were the newly qualified teachers able to integrate their new knowledge into the current school culture?

These questions, along with a deeper understanding of both the UAE culture and the government school culture, guide the structure and methodology of this research study.

Given that teacher perceptions and classroom environments differ between rural and urban schools (Reuter, 1992) a separate investigation of both settings seemed important.

The study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. Current views on the quality of education in Ras Al Khaimah:
 - What are the teachers' views about the quality of education in Ras Al Khaimah?
 - Is there a perceived need for change?
 - Are there differences among non-Emirati Arab teachers, newly qualified Emirati teachers, and more-experienced Emirati teachers concerning the views they express on these issues?
 - Are there differences between teachers who work in urban and rural school localities concerning the views they express on these issues?
2. Attitudes towards the current education reforms in the UAE:
 - What are the teachers' attitudes towards the education reforms?

- What factors underpin these attitudes?
- In what way may these attitudes hinder change?
- Are there differences among non-Emirati Arab teachers, newly qualified Emirati teachers, and more-experienced Emirati teachers concerning the views they express on these issues?
- Are there differences between teachers who work in urban and rural school localities concerning the views they express on these issues?

Methodology

The study was carried out in two phases. For Phase 1, a structured interview protocol and vignettes were used. Ninety-six teachers for the study were recruited from four urban schools within the city and four rural schools with distances ranging from 10 to 20 kilometers away from the center of the town. The study was completed in collaboration with the Al Qasimi Foundation, who, with assistance from the Ras Al Khaimah Education Zone, nominated schools for the study based on their locations.

All participants were female teachers from preparatory and secondary girls' schools in Ras Al Khaimah. Only female teachers were included in the sample for a number of practical reasons. First, this facilitated ease of access into schools, as education in the UAE is segregated (therefore, being a female researcher meant that the author had the easiest access to female schools). Also, male teachers tend to teach boys from grades six to 12, so teachers of grades one through five were primarily included in the sample. Secondly, because a female researcher interviewing males might lead to their apprehension or discomfort, such interviews might yield skewed results. Finally, one of the aims of the study was to compare the views and attitudes of Emirati teachers to those of non-Emirati Arab teachers (i.e., teachers living in the UAE who have moved as immigrant teachers from other Arab states), but in the boys' schools, the number of male Emirati teachers was too small to make any statistically viable comparisons.

Teachers in participating schools were invited to take part in the study. Three groups of teachers were targeted: teachers who were Arab but of non-Emirati origin (Non-Emirati Arab); teachers of Emirati origin with less than seven years of experience in teaching (less-experienced Emirati), and Emirati teachers with more than seven years of experience in teaching (more-experienced Emirati). A cut off point of seven years was chosen in order to allow for balance among the groups because initial investigations revealed that there were fewer newly qualified teachers on staff. An attempt to focus exclusively on core subject teachers (science, math, Arabic, and English) failed because the majority of the non-Emirati Arab teachers taught music, art, or physical education (P.E.). To obtain the sample size required for each group, the study was opened up to all subject teachers within the schools. Teachers were nominated by the heads of schools but were given the choice of opting out. Those who agreed to participate signed a consent form prior to the interview. All participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

Table 1: Participants by Subject Area and Target Group

Subject/group	Less-experienced Emirati	More-experienced Emirati	Non-Emirati Arab	Total
Science	6	5	0	11
Islamic	2	7	0	9
English	11	0	5	16
Arabic	6	8	0	14
Computer	1	1	0	2
Math	5	6	0	11
History/social studies/humanities	1	5	0	6
Art	0	2	2	4
Information Technology	1	0	0	1
Geography	0	5	0	5
Physical education	0	0	11	11
Music	0	0	6	6
Total teachers	33	39	24	96

Participants in the non-Emirati Arab group originated from different countries from within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with the majority being of Egyptian origin (see Table 2 below). Ten out of the 24 teachers had lived in the UAE for 11-20 years. Six had been in the UAE five years or fewer. Four teachers had lived in the UAE for six to 10 years and four for 21-30 years.

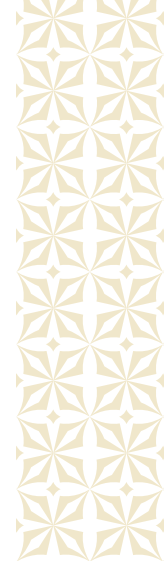


Table 2: Origin of Participants in the Non-Emirati (Other) Arab Group

Country	Number of participants
Egypt	16
Jordan	2
Iraq	1
Tunisia	4
Syria	1

The interview questions from Phase 1 revealed two statistical differences between teachers working in urban and rural schools and only a few among less-experienced Emirati, more-experienced Emirati, and non-Emirati Arab teachers. More importantly, the questions helped elicit key issues, such as the criteria they would use to rate successful schools, that were pertinent to teachers in the current climate and identified those that warranted further in-depth investigation.

In Phase 2, more detailed and in depth interviews with twenty teachers shortlisted from Phase 1 were carried out. The group interviewed consisted of 11 teachers who were in favor of the changes and nine teachers who were opposed to them.

The interview protocol was developed in English, translated into Arabic, and then translated back into English independently based on Brislin’s Translation Model (cited in Jones, Lee, Phillips, Zhang, & Jaceido, 2001). The individual interviews were conducted in Arabic, and responses were recorded and later transcribed in English. When participants refused to be recorded, the researcher made a complete written record of their responses. Interviews were held in different locations in participants’ own schools depending on the availability of space but always took place within a private setting. The purpose of the study was outlined for each participant, and she was given the opportunity to ask questions before proceeding. Confidentiality was guaranteed. During the interview, probing questions were used to check for clarity and accuracy.

Results

Phase 1

In this Phase, two comparisons were made: one between the rural and urban schools and the other among factors related to teachers’ years of experience and national origin. As the data analysis required a comparison of categories, a Chi Square test was conducted using an online statistical tool (“Chi-Square,” 2008). That means that the data has been counted and divided into categories. Based on the test’s results, only the following two urban/rural comparisons were found to be statistically significant:

- Teachers in the more-experienced Emirati group teaching in rural schools were more likely to opt for government education for their children, whereas teachers working in urban schools were more likely to opt for private education for their children.
- Teachers from the more-experienced Emirati group working in urban schools were more likely to be against education reforms than those working in rural schools.

There were no other statistically significant differences on any substantive items between the two groups of teachers, urban versus rural. Consequently, this distinction was disregarded in the remainder of analyses reported here. However, other differences related to teachers' years of experience and origin were found and are discussed in the sections below.

Career Information

In comparing the less-experienced Emirati group, more-experienced Emirati group, and non-Emirati Arabs, the study found that the groups gave different responses about why they entered the teaching profession and how they prepared for their careers. There was a significant difference $\chi^2(2, N=96) = 0.01$ sig, $p=8.83$ in the way that the teachers prepared for teaching with 66% of teachers from the less-experienced Emirati group and 66% of teachers from the non-Emirati Arabs obtaining a university degree in education or having a related education diploma in contrast to only 36% of teachers from the more-experienced Emirati group. There was no significant difference among the three groups in relation to the professional support that teachers received upon entry into the profession.

The majority of the teachers agreed that their work had changed over time. Eighty-six out of the 90 (95.5%) of those who reported changes stated that these were related to teaching methodology, the curriculum, and increased pressure in their work. Sixty out of the 90 (66.6%) reported that the change was positive. There was, however, no statistically significant difference among the three groups in their responses to these questions.

A Kruskal Wallis test, a non-parametric test used to compare three or more samples to test a null hypothesis, was used. In this study, it revealed no significant difference in contact time across the groups. However, further information reported by the participants indicated that most teachers would be expected to participate in school-level and Emirate-level competitions such as literacy competitions or robot-making competitions, which took up much of their non-contact time.

Early Experience and Personal Beliefs

All teachers were encouraged to speak about their early school experiences. Around 67% of teachers across the three groups rated their early school experience as having been positive. There were no statistically significant differences among the three groups.

The accounts of early experience were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A number of themes of general significance emerged across the groups. Themes pertaining to teachers' personal characteristics were excluded. The themes selected as relevant are outlined below with brief illustrative extracts from the interview transcripts.

Theme 1: Teacher/Student Interaction

Fifty percent of teachers' comments indicated that their experiences as students were largely positive, in the context of interactions with their teachers. They often emphasized the impact that individual teachers had had on their perception of particular subjects.

"One teacher inspired me, praised me, cared for me. I liked her teaching style: helpful, patient, honest, and creative. Use her as a model."

"My math teacher made me like the subject. [My] Islamic teacher influenced my personality."

But some recalled their negative experiences with teachers, emphasizing their "harsh" and "strict" style, remembering how they "beat students" and contrasting the atmosphere of fear back then with the "looser boundaries between teachers and students now."

Theme 2: Pedagogy

Teachers were inconsistent in their views about modern methods of teaching the curriculum with some favoring the simpler, traditional approach that they associated with their own childhood.

"There were fewer resources—it was less distracting than now—but now it is better in that students have an idea about what they are learning."

"I liked the teachers who explained simply—not like now—the data show and OHP distracts pupils."

Others favored the more applied approach of the present day, disparaging "teaching dependent on rote learning (when) studies were more difficult" and preferring the support now provided through practical activities and the utilization of resources to support learning.

"I wished school were like now—teachers check that kids understand and use resources."

Theme 3: Attitudes toward Learning

Teachers emphasized the change in attitudes towards education from their childhood to today. They commented on the relationship between teachers and students:

"Before, there were better days as students cared more—[they were] more serious about their studies."

Others voiced concern about the change in attitude towards teachers:

"Before it was different—there was more respect for the teachers—students listened and were quiet in class."

Participants were also asked to describe what they thought an "ideal school" would look like. An analysis using the Kruskal Wallis test found no statistically significant difference among the three groups. Features suggested included high-quality curriculum, availability of resources, strong leadership, and a healthy environment.



Vignettes

The vignettes were used to explore the participants' understanding of child-centered education, views about their work, the curriculum, and whether they felt appreciated in their work. Teachers indicated their agreement or disagreement with the views of an imaginary character, Moza, who was generally skeptical of or worried by the reforms. When a respondent expressed agreement with Moza, it suggested that she herself was skeptical of or worried by the reforms.

Learner-centered Education

When asked about their attitudes on the move towards more learner-centered learning in the UAE, most teachers were happy with the change, but some of the participants (21%) suggested that they were reluctant to take on recommendations that they felt prevented them from completing the curriculum. Although these participants acknowledged the high level of interest generated in learner-centered education, they questioned whether students learned as much through this method of teaching as before with more teacher-centered styles.

“Curriculum and resources are better now, but the girls need to learn new skills, need more time.”

“Now, there are a lot of projects and activities. Where is the curriculum and studying? The school bag is full of projects and files.”

Professional Expectations

Seventy-seven out of 96 (80.2%) teachers agreed with Moza that the new way of teaching was time-consuming and that it took time from their families and social obligations.

Sixty out of the 96 teachers (62.5%) disagreed or were undecided about whether they agreed with Moza's belief that training is of little value.

In addition, teachers expect to be more valued than they feel. Fifty-six out of 96 teachers (58.3%) agreed with Moza, indicating that they did not feel sufficiently appreciated for their efforts at school.

Curriculum changes

Sixty-five out of 96 teachers (67.7%) disagreed with Moza or were undecided. Sixty-nine out of 96 (71.9%) felt that the girls they taught were ready for the changes in curriculum, and 51 out of 96 teachers (53.1%) indicated that they felt that the content of the new curriculum was appropriate.

Summary

In summary, the vignettes revealed mixed views towards the changes brought about through the education reform movement. Many of the teachers welcomed the new curriculum and felt that their students welcomed the changes. There was concern, however, that the work

demands associated with the reforms were too high, taking time away from family priorities and other social obligations. The activities and projects that were now more focused on developing skills as opposed to ingraining content were also time-consuming and detracted from the time needed to complete the curricula. Finally, teachers generally appreciated the recommendations brought forth by the selected advisors but did not feel sufficiently appreciated for their efforts at school.

Phase 2

The urban-rural comparisons in Phase 2 were disregarded as analyses of data from Phase 1 confirmed a lack of difference in response between teachers from urban schools and teachers from rural schools.

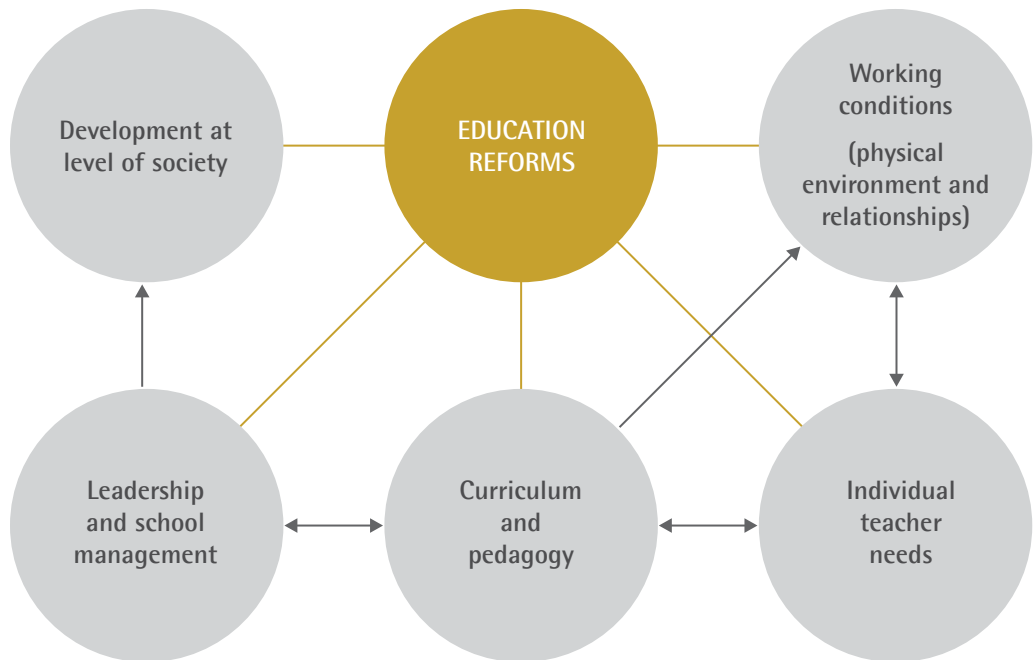
The responses from the interviews with teachers were collated and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A number of codes emerged from the teachers' responses to the interview protocol, which depict the views of both groups of teachers, those who were in favor of the reform and those who were against it. The interview extracts that are included are samples of those from each group and have been selected to illustrate the codes and to highlight differences of emphasis between the two groups. In describing the data, "many (meaning nine or more)" was descriptively used to denote a frequently represented view. "Others (meaning five or less)" was used to represent a small number of teachers.

The two groups of teachers had similar answers to many of these questions but differed in the emphasis they gave to:

- The position of education in Ras Al Khaimah globally. The teachers felt that schools rated highly within the UAE but that globally, they were likely to be in need of improvements.
- Their views on the importance of given factors in the reform process. Many of the teachers regarded school administration and leadership as key in the process of reform. This was then followed by curriculum and professional development.
- Their attitudes towards other aspects of reform. Although expressed differently, teachers indicated similar views in that they were generally dissatisfied with their working conditions, the pace of introduction of the reforms, the availability of resources, and the role of advisor in the facilitation of the reforms.

The codes were further collated to create an overall thematic plan. As the differences among the teachers' views about reform were minor, they are represented below in one thematic plan. The themes are summarized below and followed by a brief account of interview extracts illustrating each theme in turn:

Thematic map



In the figure above, the green lines reflect the components of the final thematic map which was developed from the codes. The black lines represent how the elements interact with each other.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

In terms of general comparisons, teachers who were in favor of reforms tended to acknowledge that the standard and quality of education needed improvement. Many of them highlighted the traditional curriculum as a major contributor to the difficulties they were experiencing both in terms of quality and the primary method of instruction (through rote learning). They felt that the system does not support students because it overemphasizes quantity rather than quality and memorization rather than the practical application of knowledge.

Nevertheless, they felt that a new curriculum was not the key to improving education:

“The curriculum [is] not important because a competent teacher can manipulate any curriculum. It is the method of delivering information to students that lets them love the subject and motivates them.”

Other teachers felt that the new curriculum was a burden to pupils, specifically in relation to exams, project preparation, and homework. Some of these teachers who were opposed to the reforms felt that the new curriculum was too simple and that it resulted in students who graduated without sufficient knowledge and skill sets.

Both sets of teachers, those who were supportive and unsupportive of the new curriculum, were frustrated by the lack of consultation with regards to the change and felt the reforms should be evaluated for a longer period of time before their implementation.

“Change comes without real study. They should [consult] the opinions of people in education in the field to see if new changes will work.”

“Decisions applied to teaching are quick and not fully considered, and not enough attention is paid to details. If studied and thought through more, [the new curriculum] would be better.”

“Change should be done in phases—every year add a phase—but now it is too quick.”

Teachers also felt pressured into integrating more technology and resources into their lessons and sometimes doubted the value this added. Thirty-eight percent of them believed in the new pedagogy but felt that they did not have sufficient autonomy to apply it as they saw fit. They were concerned that the lack of autonomy was caused in part by lack of experience of some teachers with the new methodologies on the one hand and restrictions from the MOE, such as the prescriptive curriculum, on the other.

“Give the teacher responsibility for management of the lesson; encourage them. Cancel the written things—[they are] considered an additional burden. Allow them to prepare an idea and implement it, rather than preparing it only for a file. Give the teachers confidence in themselves—allow them some autonomy.”

“There are many pressures from change—we want it but need time to adjust. Change is good.”

Leadership and School Administration

Both teachers who were opposed to and teachers who favored the reforms rated the school leadership as a critical piece in education reform. Teachers felt that, without strong and supportive leadership, it would be difficult for individual teachers to implement the reforms.


“Most important is leadership, as it is crucial to any successful school. Successful leadership leads to a successful school.”

“Without leadership there is no system; the atmosphere is random. With leadership there is organization, work completion, challenge, excellence, [and] competition between teachers.”

Working Conditions

The teachers reported a number of concerns regarding their working conditions. Some of these were related to the physical environment. Teachers felt that the buildings needed better maintenance. The temperatures in the summer were very high and uncomfortable, and many complained about poor air conditioning. Teachers also spoke about the facilities and felt frustrated about not being able to teach as well as they could due to poor provisions. For instance, some physical education teachers mentioned that there were no indoor sports halls for P.E., which made it difficult for them and their students to make the most out of the classes. Speaking about the introduction of a three-term system, one teacher suggested:

“[They should make] changes to the building itself. For example, we do not have a proper sports hall for the girls, so when they play in the sun, it is tiring.”



In addition, teachers were dissatisfied with their working hours and periods. During the year when the interviews were conducted, the government had introduced a three-term year as opposed to the previous two-term years. The three-term year meant teachers had to work longer into the summer when conditions were difficult because of high temperatures. Two of them commented that the change would have been more acceptable had the physical environment been more suited to the change and the temperatures.

“At first I liked idea of three terms, but now, towards the end of term, I find it exhausting. This new system in the Ministry is unlikely to change, though they do try to accommodate some subjects. They also unified holidays now to help with family ties. Three terms were introduced to reduce the load on pupils.”

Individual Teacher Needs

Teachers were unhappy about their career prospects both in terms of promotional opportunities and retirement. The interviews revealed that the structure of school staffing was quite flat, so that teachers remained subject teachers no matter how many years’ experience they had. The only promotional routes open to them were attainable if they chose to transfer into school administrative work, deputy headships and headships, or Ministry work, such as advising.

“Once a teacher always a teacher, same salary; it may increase by 200 AED per year: depressing.”

“I have been teaching for 15 years; what promotions did I get?”

The teachers’ sense of professional identity and motivation were important to them because that was how they received acknowledgement from authorities. Without promotional prospects or increases in pay, the only way of assessing their performance was through their personnel files (depicting their activities and participation in school life and competitions).

Others felt that their jobs required giving selflessly and did not depend on promotional opportunities.

“What do you mean by career path? My ambitions? A teacher has the opportunity to improve and develop herself. The job does not change. . . . in a work situation, I would give my all with or without promotion—I have to be true to myself.”

When it came to retirement benefits, interviews indicated that the retirement age had been moved up to 50 years of age as of 2012, and teachers reported they would forfeit their retirement benefits if they left the profession early. A number of teachers felt that their personal needs, family commitments, and health had not been considered fully when drafting this new policy.

“Now we need to sort out the retirement process, which was started three years ago. A woman is not like the man at work. They say they have reduced it for the women—what did they reduce? Mashallah, we get home [and] carry on working. I like to look after my home. From here, I go to my children and homework.”

Others, however, denounced some teachers for waiting to retire once they were no longer interested in their work.

Teachers had mixed views about their professional development. Some described Ras Al Khaimah as generous in offering professional training to teachers. Others felt that the training over the years had become repetitive and that they were not learning anything new. Teachers were also mixed in their views about the applicability of the training with some feeling that it was up to the individual teacher to adapt knowledge gained on courses to their particular situations.

Development at the Level of Society

Teachers were generally in support of development and their country's vision for education. Resistance had stemmed from the pace and scale of change. Eight of the teachers felt that new policies were implemented far too quickly and that teachers were not given time to adapt to them or to test their effectiveness. According to them, teachers were not given the resources or the time needed to familiarize themselves with the changes, further challenging the implementation of these reforms.

In terms of impact on different aspects of society, teachers in favor of change felt that the education reforms had been positive for the UAE as a whole. They felt that they had improved students' chances of getting into university. They did not report any negative impact of any significance. Teachers opposed to the reforms were less definitive in their views, as many chose "neutral" as a response. Overall, however, all teachers (100%) felt the reforms were positive for the economy, for the UAE's global position, and for students' future prosperity.

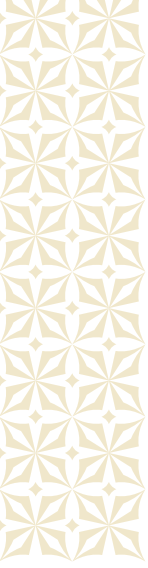
Discussion

In responding to the research question posed at the beginning of this study, no distinction will be made between urban and rural schools, teachers' country of origin, or years of teaching experience except where the difference is relevant.

Education Quality and Reform in Ras Al Khaimah

The teachers generally had a high regard for the quality of education in Ras Al Khaimah. They identified with the national policy towards achieving global standards in education and believed that Ras Al Khaimah schools needed further improvement in curriculum and pedagogy before they could be compared with those in the developed world.

The teachers who were in favor of the reforms expressed enthusiasm regarding the changes and were keen on the professional development and self-growth opportunities that were provided by reform efforts. At a cognitive level, they believed that the changes worked in favor of their students and their country as a whole, and they, therefore, supported them behaviorally and emotionally (Piderit, 2000). They had a strong sense of wanting to improve themselves and a need to move forward. They demonstrated initiative and emphasized the need for teachers to accept the changes and adapt to them in a way that best worked for each of them as individual teachers. They did not express the vulnerability that has been identified in reactions to similar reforms elsewhere (Kelchtermans, 2005). Teachers who were opposed to the reforms reacted in



a more predictable manner. They felt threatened by the mandated reforms leaving them with feelings of helplessness and anxiety (Kelchtermans, 2005). Some of their reasons for opposing the reforms may have seemed justified to them, and this may have strengthened their emotional reactions (Piderit, 2000). The teachers felt unsupported by the system that provided insufficient resources, offered outdated facilities, and devised timetables that did not allow them to teach at the pace expected of them. They were further frustrated by the inconsistent advice (through the advisors) they were given from the Education Zone.

The teachers opposed to the reforms also felt that the new curriculum was a burden to those who had to study for exams, prepare for lessons, and complete projects. They felt that the curriculum was too dense and hindered teachers from doing their jobs effectively. They acknowledged that the curriculum was still largely taught by rote methods and that this needed to change. They were, however, frustrated because the grading and exam system did not fit with the newly introduced, more interactive methodology, placing many students at risk of failure.

Attitudes towards Education Reforms

Teachers were again divided in their views with respect to the reforms themselves. Teachers in favor of the reforms reported that it was important to keep moving forward and to continue developing in order to keep up with the modern world. They were pleased that the UAE always looked for new approaches to implement. They were in agreement with the UAE goals and vision of seeking excellence and aiming to be part of the developed world partially through advancements in education.

Globalization and the importation of knowledge were, however, highlighted in the research as issues causing concern. The results in this study indicated that some teachers identified this as a potential problem whereas others reported feeling comfortable about adapting the curriculum and about replacing irrelevant examples with ones that were more culturally appropriate. Some of the teachers held a more cautious approach and felt that it was not ideal to import knowledge from somewhere else before carefully studying how effective it would be and what impact it might have on schools in the UAE. A number of teachers were against the fast-paced change that was brought about by imported reforms and instead believed reform should be carried out in phases, allowing time to evaluate each phase before introducing new ones.

Given that the UAE is a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1983), it is not surprising that teachers had not been vocal about their opposition to the reforms. Informal comments at the end of interviews suggested that the teachers tended to perform in accordance with the reforms for visitors, but reverted to their preferred teaching methodologies in the privacy of their classrooms. During the interviews, some teachers expressed concern about the quality of the new teaching pedagogy and how it made their lessons very busy but not necessarily more effective. Some reminisced about the “old days” when teaching was simpler and students were more motivated to learn. Those vocal among them were nonetheless happy to have the opportunity to express their views and to be heard. Some were keen to ensure that their message was relayed to the Education Zone.

Although a number of studies had previously highlighted concerns about the reforms as a threat to Islam (Khelifa, 2010), this was not evident in the results of this study. Teachers both for and against the reforms did not perceive their culture or Islamic values as being negatively impacted or under threat by the reforms.

There was, however, a high level of frustration towards changes to the teachers' working environment, and teachers felt unappreciated and dissatisfied. This was a recurring theme in teachers' responses. The teachers felt that their daily needs had not been taken into account as far as timetabling was concerned. They were unhappy that changes were being implemented without having taken the environmental context into account. Particularly, teachers reported concerns about having to work late into the summer term. Some younger teachers felt disheartened as they had underestimated the workload upon entering the profession and, in practice, found the job difficult. For many of them, the issue of retirement was a key factor influencing their attitude towards the reforms. Some expressed apathy toward the education system but accepted that they had to remain there until retirement age in order to secure their pensions.


Teachers generally thought that they had not been sufficiently consulted about the changes though many felt that they could provide workable solutions or suggestions to existing problems. More than half of the twenty teachers interviewed suggested that reforms were mandated by a change in policy and did not take into account the practical realities of their hot, under-equipped classrooms or even the likely reaction of a teaching workforce who would experience no career progression despite great personal preparation, training, and professional investment. Teacher reports indicated that change to the curriculum was not supported by a change in the assessment system.

The results reflected the complexity of the factors involved in the reforms in schools in Ras Al Khaimah. What was unexpected was the minimal role that religious and cultural values played in the teachers' expressed reactions. The results indicated that the teachers' views with regards the reforms were consistent with the literature on the psychology of change.

Thus, in order to fully understand the factors hindering change, it is important to go back to the literature about the psychology of change. Reforms were mandated with little consultation with the teachers, which left educators feeling vulnerable and unengaged (Kelchtermans, 2004). We know from previous studies that teachers are most enthusiastic about change that occurs within their classrooms and that directly benefits their students (Hargreaves, 2004). Teachers in Ras Al Khaimah did not observe this kind of change, however.

Moreover, the teachers had not been consulted about the suitability of the reforms. This left many of those opposed to the changes uncertain about what the changes would involve and how they would benefit students and schools (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000).

The categorization proposed by Lee and Yin (2011) applies to the range of reactions observed in Ras Al Khaimah schools, where some teachers who were keen on the reforms soon became disheartened by the challenge involved in implementing the changes. These educators can be described as those "losing heart." The "drifting followers" implemented the reforms with little excitement because they did not feel that they had a significant role to play in the process or believed that they were only "buying time" until their retirements. Others were cynical in their



views but outwardly cooperative. These constitute the “cynical performers” as described by Lee and Yin (2011). These can all represent typical reactions among those working within a collectivist culture (Hargreaves, 2004).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study raised a number of key issues that serve as a good starting point for discussion between the Education Zone and the teachers. Implementing reforms without consulting teachers and without their participation is unlikely to result in substantive change. Teachers need to own this process of change and feel engaged. It is not the frequency of change that is the major hindering factor but rather what it means to them as teachers and how it challenges or affirms their professional beliefs and identity. A number of recommendations were put forward by the teachers themselves:

1. Carry out an honest review of the working conditions of the teachers in relation to career ladders, incentives, and retirement.
2. Offer teachers workshops and training focusing specifically on what the reforms mean and what they hope to achieve. These need to be supported by workshops addressing the value of professional development and the psychology of change.
3. Restructure and invest in school buildings in a manner that facilitates the implementation of reforms through the provision of indoor sports halls, better air conditioning, and subject-specific resource rooms.
4. Reduce the number of administrative projects required from teachers, thus allowing them more time to focus on teaching.

“Reduce projects for teachers and lessen their loads. Allow the teacher to focus more on teaching.”

5. Provide forums for teachers to share and communicate their views with the Education Zone.

“Seek our views and opinions on change instead of imposing change on us [at] the last minute. Open channels of communication so we [can] change together . . . change is demanding, and [mothers] already have a lot of responsibilities. Create a committee with members from different schools to represent teacher[s]’ views.”

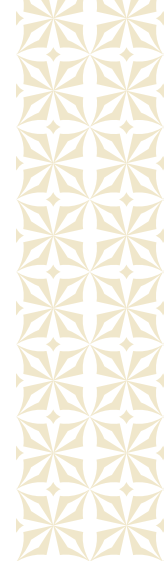
Previous studies have focused on the West-East dimension of the importation of policies and their impact on culture and Islam. This study has demonstrated that these factors have not contributed to teachers’ resistance to change, but, more importantly, it has indicated that what we know about the psychology of change and teachers’ beliefs and identities applies to teachers in Ras Al Khaimah, too. The findings indicated that the reported passive resistance to the reforms may have arisen not so much from cultural concerns that are specific to the region or to Islam but more likely have resulted from practical and professional concerns in general. Similar concerns have been identified among teachers in many other societies who are faced with change of this kind.

While the study's findings cannot be generalized to all teachers in the UAE or even in Ras Al Khaimah, they can provide a tool for improving the relationship between the Education Zone and schools by highlighting the factors that have supported and hindered change.

Future research needs to explore the full age range of students in schools and to look at both boys' and girls' schools. It will need to cover schools beyond Ras Al Khaimah, exploring teachers' views in different regions across the UAE. Additional research could look into the characteristics and personality types of teachers who demonstrate stronger initiative and motivation towards the reforms.

Upcoming research should also explore more societal factors that may contribute to education reform efforts. For instance, this study touched on the concept of a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1983) but failed to address the other dimensions of Hofstede's work. The UAE, among non-Emirati Arab countries, was classified as having large power distance, and this suggests the existence of social inequalities. These inequalities exist within the education system but have never been fully addressed (Ridge & Farah, 2009). While this study touched on the impact of inequalities by comparing Emirati teachers with non-Emirati Arabs, the sample of participants was possibly too small to yield a clear distinction in their views.

Strong uncertainty avoidance is also evident within the UAE through its emphasis on religion and the proliferation of laws that govern moral and social behavior. Does this affect teachers' views? Does their discomfort with change affect their perceptions of the future? The UAE can be classified as having a masculine orientation whereby men take more assertive roles than women do and where "showing off," having visible achievements, and making money prevail. How do these factors influence teachers' definitions of success? Further research exploring this question and the impact of these factors on the thoughts and behaviors of teachers will enhance our understanding of the difficulties they face in accepting or challenging reforms.

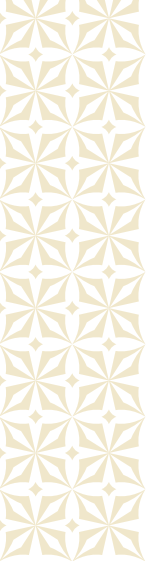


References

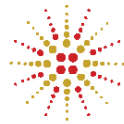
- Ahmed, K. (2010). English in the Arab Gulf. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 6(1), 1-12.
- Barter, C., & Renold, E. (1999). The use of vignettes in qualitative research. *Department of Sociology, University of Surrey*. Retrieved April, 23, 2011 from www.sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Chi-Square Test. (2008). *World Articles in Ear, Nose and Throat*. Retrieved from <http://www.waent.org/Chi-Square-Test.htm>
- Clarke, M. (2006). Beyond antagonism? The discursive construction of “new” teachers in the United Arab Emirates. *Teaching Education*, 17(3), 225-237.
- Dinham, S., & Scott, C. (2004). International patterns of teacher satisfaction and motivation in Australia, England, New Zealand, United States of America, Canada, Cyprus and Malta: The role of context and the “third domain.” Paper presented at the *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Manchester*. Retrieved May, 28, 2011 from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003879.htm>
- Dubai School of Government. (2009). *Challenges to curriculum development in the UAE* (Policy Brief No. 16). Dubai: Ridge, N., & Farah, S.
- Gaad, E., Arif, M., & Scott, F. (2006). Systems analysis of the UAE education system. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(4), 291-303.
- Gardner, W. E. (1995). Developing a quality teaching force for the United Arab Emirates: Mission improbable. *Journal of Education and Teaching*, 21(3), 289-302.
- Grossman, M. G., Onkol, P. E., & Sands, M. (2007). Curriculum reforms in Turkish teacher education: Attitudes of teacher educators towards change in an EU candidate nation. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(1), 138-150.
- Hallinger, P., & Kantamara, P. (2000). Educational change in Thailand: Opening a window onto leadership as a cultural process. *School Leadership and Management*, 20(2), 189-205.
- Hargreaves, A. (2004). Inclusive and exclusive educational change: Emotional responses of teachers and implications for leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 24(3), 287-309.
- Harold, B. (2005). Spreading the word: An analysis of the impact of Australasian educational ideas on a new nation state. Presented at *Australian Association for Research in Education*. Retrieved April, 14, 2011 from <http://www.aare.edu.au/05pap/har05593.pdf>
- Hofstede, G. (1983). The cultural relativity of organisational practices and theories. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 14(2), 75-89.



- Jones, P. S., Lee, J. W., Phillips, L. R., Zhang, X. E., & Jaceldo, K. B. (2001). An adaptation of Brislin's translation model for cross-cultural research. *Nursing Research*, 50, (5), 300-304.
- Kelchtermans, G. (2005). Teachers' emotions in educational reforms: Self understanding, vulnerable commitment and micro political literacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(1), 995-1006.
- Khelifa, M. (2010). Trading cultures: Have Western-educated Emirati females gone Western? *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development*, 1(3), 19-29.
- Lasky S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reforms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(1), 899-916.
- Lee, J. C., & Yin, H. (2011). Teachers' emotions and professional identity in curriculum reforms: A Chinese perspective. *Journal of Educational Change*, 12(1), 25-46.
- Little, J. W. (1996). The emotional contours and careers trajectories of (disappointed) reforms enthusiast. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(3), 345-360.
- Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), Art. 20.
- Phillips, D., & Ochs, K. (2003). Processes of policy borrowing in education: Some explanatory and analytical devices. *Comparative Education*, 39(4), 451-461.
- Piderit, S. K. (2000). Rethinking resistance and recognising ambivalence: A multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organisational change. *The Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 783-794.
- RAK: Prioritising education (2012). *Oxford Business Group*. Retrieved January, 11, 2013 from http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/economic_updates/rak-prioritising-education
- Reuter, S. F. (1992). Characteristics of successful schools: Perception differences between rural and urban elementary school teachers. Retrieved February, 18, 2012 from www.eric.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=ED360115
- Senge, P. (1999). Fifth discipline. Retrieved May, 23, 2011 from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>
- Thorne, C. (2011). The impact of educational reforms on the work of the school principal in the United Arab Emirates. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 39(2), 172-185.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, World Education Forum. (2000). *The Education for All 2000 Assessment: Country Reports*. (United Arab Emirates, Part III: Prospects). Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/countryreports/united_arab_emirates/rapport_3.html



- Van Veen, K., & Slegers, P. (2007). How does it feel? Teachers' emotions in a context of change. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 38(1), 85-111.
- Warnica, E. J. (2009). Educational reforms K-12 in Sultanate of Oman and United Arab Emirates Ministries of Education: What worked, what failed and why? What's next? Retrieved March 12, 2011, from www.ces2010.webs.com/Educational%20Reforms.ppt
- Whiteoak, J. W., Crawford, N. G., & Mapstone, R. H. (2006). Impact of gender and generational differences in work values and attitudes in an Arab culture. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 44(1), 77-91.



SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI
FOUNDATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH

P.O. Box 12050, Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates
Tel: +971 7 233 8060 | Fax: +971 7 233 8070
Email: info@alqasimifoundation.rak.ae | www.alqasimifoundation.com