How Private International School Leaders Meet The National Education Transformation Agenda In Dubai

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HOW PRIVATE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS MEET THE NATIONAL EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION AGENDA IN DUBAI

By

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BA (University of Ottawa) 1984
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A DISSERTATION

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HOW PRIVATE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS MEET THE NATIONAL EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION AGENDA IN DUBAI

Abstract

In 2014, Dubai Government adopted the United Arab Emirates (UAE) National Agenda, a strategic plan for Vision 2021, whereas leaders are associated with improving the quality and accessibility to education, which represents a major priority in sustaining economic prosperity and achieving social development goals (Government of the UAE, 2016). Managing this seven-year transformation plan in the educational context has been reported in part by Litz and Scott (2016), in which their study revealed that Emirati school leaders needed to change their leadership practice in order to align with the National Agenda expectations. This study explores critical challenges and opportunities for K-12 private education in modern Dubai. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a selected sample of international school leaders in Dubai managed to bring their school rating beyond the acceptable threshold of the UAE National Agenda in 2017, after three years of low performance. More specifically, this study addressed two research questions: What leadership strategies used by these school leaders were identified as effective to change and improve school performance over a three-year period? In addition, considering Dubai’s highly diverse population with over two hundred nationalities (Government of the UAE, 2018), what, if any, Modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approaches, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016) were evident
in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools? Results from two sources, published school report analyses and transcripts of recorded one-on-one interviews with school principals, revealed this modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approach, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016), was evident in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools. Further research is needed to follow the progress initiated by the UAE National Agenda, to explore the growth after Vision 2021 and determine whether Dubai has indeed reached its goal to be ranked among the safest, smartest, most innovative, and happiest nations (Government of the UAE, 2016).

*Keywords*: Dubai, Transformational leadership, education, globalization, growth, culture
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University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 1
  Statement of the Problem ................................................................................. 6
  Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................... 11
  Research Questions ......................................................................................... 12
  Conceptual Framework ................................................................................... 13
  Assumptions, limitations, scope ..................................................................... 15
  Significance ..................................................................................................... 17
  Definition of Terms ......................................................................................... 19
  Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 22

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ............................................................ 24
  Overview on Education in Dubai and the UAE ............................................. 28
  Cross-Cultural Approach to Educational Leadership in the Context of the UAE ................................................................. 35
  Changes in Schooling Require Changes in Leadership ................................ 42
  The Impact of “Emiratization” and Modernization on Educational
    Leadership ........................................................................................................... 43
  Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 48

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ................................................................................. 50
  Setting ........................................................................................................... 55
  Participants .................................................................................................... 57
  Data ............................................................................................................... 58
  Analysis ......................................................................................................... 60
  Participant Rights .......................................................................................... 61
RQ 2: The Impact of Cultural Perception in Dubai School Leadership ..........98
How the UAE National Priority Leads the Way to Transformation.............. 99
Transformational Leadership Model Through Innovation .........................101
Limitations of the Data and Discrepancies in Findings ..........................102
Implications ..................................................................................104
Recommendations for action .............................................................104
Recommendations for further study ....................................................105
Conclusion ....................................................................................107
REFERENCES .................................................................................109

APPENDIXES

A. Interview Cover Letter .................................................................128
B. Demographic Background ...........................................................130
C. Consent Form .............................................................................132
D. Interview Protocol .......................................................................133
E. Letter of Approval from Internal Review Board ...............................138
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 ........................................................................................................... 4
Figure 2 ........................................................................................................... 5
Figure 3 .......................................................................................................... 25
Figure 4 .......................................................................................................... 33
Figure 5 .......................................................................................................... 38
Figure 6 .......................................................................................................... 47
Figure 7 .......................................................................................................... 55
Figure 8 .......................................................................................................... 67
Figure 9 .......................................................................................................... 74
Figure 10 ........................................................................................................ 75
Figure 11 ........................................................................................................ 76
Figure 12 ........................................................................................................ 76
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Through globalization and digital transformation, the 21st century is reshaping organizations and the education sector (MIT Technology Review, 2017). Consistent with this global trend to enact change, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has embarked on a seven-year transformation through the UAE National Agenda, led by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE, and Ruler of Dubai (Government of the UAE, 2015). While the UAE is one of the most prosperous countries in the Arab world (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015), its goal is to be among the best countries in the world by 2021, in terms of Education, Health Care, Economy, Infrastructure, Safety, and Judiciary (Government of the UAE, 2016). To reach this goal, the country introduced in 2014 the National Agenda Parameter which aims at elevating the UAE as a world leader in education (Government of the UAE, 2016). More specifically, Dubai Government adopted a strategic plan for Vision 2021, in which improving the quality and accessibility to education represents a major priority in sustaining economic prosperity and achieving social development goals (Government of the UAE, 2016).

While Dubai has changed dramatically in the last fifty years (Brook, 2013), Fullan (2002) argues that “school improvement depends on principals who can foster the conditions necessary for sustained education reform in a complex, rapidly changing society” (p. 20). Although school inspections reported that a majority of Dubai schools had been successful in implementing the UAE government strategic plan, one-third of Dubai schools were still not performing to set standards (DSIB, 2017). Managing this seven-year transformation plan in the educational context was reported in part by Litz and Scott (2016), in a study that revealed that Emirati school leaders
needed to change their leadership practice in order to be aligned with the National Agenda expectations. Their findings explained “the UAE rigid school leadership model negatively impacted school cultures and school change initiatives” (p. 19). Litz and Scott (2016) predicted that a transformational leadership model would be positively associated with school leaders’ effectiveness in implementing school improvement in the UAE. A look at Bass’s (1990) definition of transformational leadership described this model.

Transformational leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. (p. 21)

Further review of the literature exploring the effectiveness of transformational leadership in an international context demonstrated that applying the Western model of transformational leadership may vary depending on individual cultural values (Spreitzer, Perttula, & Xin, 2005). Critics of the reform agenda claimed that education based on a Western modern model undermined local, culturally and historically rich Arab-Muslim forms of education (Warner & Burton, 2017). Key to Litz and Scott’s (2016) work, and integral to this research proposal, is their conclusion, that a purely Western-style leadership approach—through the traditional transformational model—did not necessarily fit the current context of K-12 Emirati schools. Their study (2016) suggested that, although school leaders intended “to make transformational leadership more dominant” (p. 17) by fostering shared vision, collaboration, and innovation, the top-down, hierarchical context, “readily accepted in this cultural setting” (p. 17) where “controlled freedom and authoritative leadership [are] the norm” (p. 12) may explain the drawback in aligning with the National Agenda school improvement plan.
This research further elaborated on Litz and Scott’s (2016) findings, by examining how the National Agenda Parameter and Vision 2021 have initiated the needed transformation and innovation school leaders in Dubai continue to face in coming years, whilst highlighting the challenges that emerge from the emirate’s highly diverse population and cultural differences (Singh, 2017). Unlike Litz and Scott’s (2016) Emirati public school context, however, this study revealed how private international schools, based on a sample of four schools, specifically in Dubai, improved their performance in 2017—since the introduction of the National Agenda in 2014—according to the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA, 2017).

The KHDA ensures the growth and direction of private education in Dubai and, through the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB), is responsible for monitoring and maintaining high quality education in Dubai’s private schools (KHDA, 2016). The UAE School Inspection Framework “is designed to provide a shared set of quality standards and quality assurance … to meet the National Agenda targets and to provide a world-class education” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 3). To establish this performance improvement plan, one of the goals outlined in the UAE National Agenda Parameter is to ensure that 100% of schools have highly effective school leadership by 2021 (Government of the UAE, 2015). To understand the impact of reform agenda, Warner and Burton (2017) claimed that “the educational expansion of recent decades has been associated with a Western-oriented modernization, which inherently challenges local … forms of knowledge” (p. 10).

For this study, the selected schools shared a similar journey as they were ranked “Acceptable”—meeting the minimum level of quality required in the UAE—since the beginning of school inspections in 2009. In 2017, their rank was raised to “Good”—thus meeting the expectation set for all of UAE schools by 2021—according to the 2016-2017 School Inspection
Report (Government of Dubai KHDA, 2017). Figure 1 indicates inspectors’ evaluation on how well the school performs overall by considering all of the individual quality descriptions and using the closest match to the following statements.

Figure 1. How well does the school perform overall (KHDA, 2013, p. 59)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Across all quality indicators, most judgments are acceptable. It is expected that the acceptable or better judgments will include:</td>
<td>Across all quality indicators, most judgments are good or better. It is expected that the good or better judgments will include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students’ progress</td>
<td>- Students’ progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teaching for effective learning</td>
<td>- Teaching for effective learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The quality of leadership</td>
<td>- The quality of leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-evaluation and improvement planning</td>
<td>- Self-evaluation and improvement planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How did the leaders of these four improved schools—in this study—manage to meet the requirements set by the UAE National Agenda? Was there a transformational leadership model for the UAE context, as described by Litz and Scott (2016), where school leaders consider “the unique cultural nuances and needs of the organization within the national culture” (p. 19)? This research identified criteria that may help other school leaders apply an understanding of highly effective leadership in a global context and contribute to school improvement. Using the lens of Kotter’s (2012) Theory of Change and Bass’s (1990) Theory of Transformational Leadership, this study was based on a qualitative data collection. The researcher analyzed published reports from KHDA on the selected sample of four schools to draw comparative data, and pinpoint how each school improved. As a first step of analyzing these published school inspection reports, this
study compared three consecutive years of inspections from the four schools involved in this study—from 2015 to 2017—to identify standards used by inspectors to make their judgment, in line with the 2014 National Agenda.

The six levels of evaluation that the KHDA uses were measured by giving a value (5 to 0) in such a way that they are able to represent graphically the changes and improvements of each selected school.

Figure 2. The Six Inspection Judgments & Value

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judgment</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outstanding</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Weak</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following this comparative analysis, the researcher conducted a narrative inquiry, through in-depth interviews with the selected school principals, to obtain deeper understanding from school leaders’ experiences on their journey to improvement. The focus was on the four school leaders’ authentic stories and the way these individuals gave meaning to their experiences in improving their school’s ranking during the 2017 school inspection. Through these four school leaders’ stories, this research examined Litz and Scott’s Modified Transformational Leadership, also referred to as the Cross-Cultural Transformational Model (Litz & Scott, 2016), as a global model used to promote school improvement. As the KHDA framework presents key components
“that define the essential aspects of a quality education” (MOE, 2015, p. 7), the question for 36% of Dubai’s underperforming schools is how to get to the “Good” rating. Whether a traditional transformational leadership model, Bass’s (1990) or other models, such as Litz and Scott’s (2016), were used in these four improved schools, the results of this study brought insight on sharing best practices that can impact school performance. Furthermore, the narrative inquiry approach, which “involves not only collecting stories but also undertaking analysis” (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007, p. 464), provided in-depth meaning and reflection from school leaders prepared to reveal their expertise and guidance.

**Statement of the Problem**

As Kotter (2012) emphasized the critical importance of organizational vision to lead change, the leaders of the UAE have set forth the National Agenda Parameter and Vision 2021, which focus on governmental priorities, including establishing a first-rate education system through innovation and change to impact school improvement and ensure that all schools are rated “Good” or better by 2021 (Government of UAE, 2016). Although the majority (64%) of K-12 private schools in Dubai had embraced the state’s vision to meet or exceed the quality of performance of the UAE National Agenda expectations, 36% of the schools had not been successful in evidencing the UAE guidelines for innovation and change for improvement (DSIB, 2017). The issues identified by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) that are pertinent to this study were found in the effectiveness of leadership, structured around six performance standards, which directly impacted school performance (Government of the UAE, 2015). KHDA’s (2016) Inspection Framework identified two outcomes – students’ achievement and students’ personal development – that are the key measures of school effectiveness and form the basis for the first two performance standards. The other four standards focused on what
KHDA considered the “most powerful factors determining school effectiveness: the quality of teaching, curriculum, care and leadership” (KHDA, 2016, p. 18). While the primary indicator of school improvement had traditionally been the quality of the instructional staff, there was then a need to examine principals as leaders in a culture of change (Fullan, 2002).

As Dubai has changed dramatically in the last fifty years, becoming a major business center with an extensive foreign trade network (Brook, 2013), “School improvement depends on principals who can foster the conditions necessary for sustained education reform in a complex, rapidly changing society” (Fullan, 2002, p. 20). School improvement literature identified essential elements for instructional leadership, including establishing a shared vision, collaboration, supporting professional development, and monitoring instruction and innovation (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). In addition, Bass’s (1990) model suggested that efficient leaders “may be charismatic to their followers and thus inspire them” (p. 23), whilst “charisma provides vision and sense of mission, instills pride, gains respect and trust” (p. 22).

Similarly, the key elements featured in KHDA’s Inspection Framework on Leadership and Management included a shared vision and direction, professional development, and the capacity to innovate and improve through learning (MOE, 2015). A study conducted by Ibrahim and Al-Taneiji (2013) concluded that schools in the UAE lacked instructional leadership as school principals “are so engrossed in the managerial and administrative tasks of daily school life that they rarely have time to lead others in the areas of teaching and learning” (p. 45). Similar findings from Warner and Burton (2017) indicated that, since the large investment from private sector into education underlines the market driven nature of education in the UAE, school principals’ lack of accountability in the areas of teaching and learning have “plagued many Arab education systems, including the UAE” (p. 25). Warner and Burton (2017) further claimed that
“altruism aside, investors expect a return on their investment and so schools operate using a business model” (p. 21).

Before KHDA’s focus on school leadership, principals were measured based on their administrative skills, without any accountability for the academic effectiveness of the school (Barber, Mourshed, & Whelan, 2007). Since 2012, however, the KHDA’s Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) has focused on implementing guidelines for effective leadership from senior and middle management school team members who must be approved as educators by KHDA (Government of Dubai, 2013). The results from KHDA school inspections have shown a link between leadership, instructional effectiveness and educational effectiveness (KHDA, 2016). The DSIB reported that successful private schools featured leadership accountability, stakeholders’ engagement in improvement plan, and a holistic learning framework. Their performance results were characteristically better than in schools with rigid top-down leadership, where “relationships and communication are restricted and/or unclear, [and where] there is little delegation and most decision making resides with the Principal” (MOE, 2015, p. 85).

Through KHDA’s Dubai School Inspection Bureau, the quality of school leadership and a shared ethos of collective accountability had been key drivers underpinning school improvement since 2012 (KHDA, 2017). Furthermore, the majority of school organizations in Dubai adopted a transformational approach evidenced by equity in learning practices, creating a vision, building human resource partnerships, and providing instructional leadership at different institutional levels (Warner & Burton, 2017). Similarly, Kotter’s (2012) Eight-Stage Process of creating major change included developing a vision and strategy to help with direction, while building the guiding team to work together and lead the change. In the context of the UAE, a report from the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG) claimed that the
majority of private and public K-12 and college institutions [were] adopting a transformational model of leadership, to facilitate “the education of well rounded, … culturally and environmentally aware students who will function in a knowledge based economy to make the UAE economically competitive on an international scale” (Warner & Burton, 2017, p. 32). These institutions have also experienced a shift in leadership practice and cultural change, weaning off the former “Cultural Traditions” of the chief-subordinate or top-down model well known to kingdoms and the Arab world (Lightfoot, 2014, p. 32). Considering that KHDA guidelines reflect Western ideologies, Litz and Scott (2016) suggested that there may be a variation in interpreting best leadership practice that could be related to “Cultural differences between the Western orientation of the leadership model” adapted by local school leaders and the “Islamic orientation of the population” (p. 1). Hence, although the local School Inspection Report revealed that one third of Dubai’s underperforming schools “failed to provide strategic vision” (MOE, 2015, p. 84) or implement new leadership practices to meet the expected requirement for school quality of performance in the UAE (Government of the UAE, 2015), some of these schools may have been unaware of the cultural shift required by international standards (KHDA, 2014). This study examined how a sample of selected schools were able to make the necessary change, three years after the implementation of the UAE National Agenda Parameter, to provide insight on effective transformational leadership model. By looking at schools that met KHDA’s Inspection Framework, this research aimed at verifying whether the Modified Transformational Model, which takes into allowance cultural interpretation, could be a more effective approach in the Middle East context. Litz and Scott’s (2016) model gives insight into the exploration of the KHDA (2015) Inspection Framework definition of what constitutes “good” school leadership:
Leaders at all levels, including the Principal, set a clear strategic direction and promote a vision that is shared by the whole school community.... The school delegates leadership effectively to individuals and teams, and holds them accountable for ensuring good quality outcomes. (p. 85)

Their model begins with the principle of situating transformational leadership in its Arab world context where there is a preference for centralized leadership over more distributed leadership models (Al-Harthi & Al-Mahdy, 2017). Nevertheless, transformation is needed in the Middle East where a societal system, based on rank and titles, has established a “top-down management model” (Lightfoot, 2014, p. 169). The question remains if this culturally rigid perspective can be aligned to the progressive UAE National Agenda Parameter, requiring a first-rate education system by 2021 (Government of the UAE, 2016)?

The underperforming schools needed to change in order to survive and join Dubai’s high tech and “Smart” school landscape, outlined primarily by innovation within the Vision 2021 framework (KHDA, 2017, p. 9). Schools that remained “Acceptable” lost students to other schools and some institutions were even forced to shut down (Varkey, 2017). Furthermore, the UAE Educational Authority published a list of “Weak Schools” in July 2018, and banned Emirati pupils from attending these private schools. Although none of these schools were located in Dubai, “The Ministry of Education said that it will no longer allow Emiratis to register with 47 underperforming schools across the Northern Emirates” (Al Serkal, 2018).

KHDA suggests that innovation in education is used in improving pedagogy so that learning is conceptually understood, explored and visible (KHDA-DSIB, 2017). There is a global understanding that stakeholders need to be equipped with skills to be lifelong learners rather than knowledge banks of facts: “Lifelong learning is considered essential for individuals to keep pace
with the constantly changing global job market and technology” (Spring, 2015, p. 51). Therefore, to enact change and align with the UAE National Agenda Parameter, the underperforming schools needed to focus on enhancing the role of educational leaders through professional development and coaching, to improve collective learning and school effectiveness (DeMonte, 2013).

**Purpose of the Study**

Based on the Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) Framework (2015), which highlights specific indicators of quality education, this study revealed the shift in attitudes and practices toward transformation in Dubai’s educational leadership approach and its impact on school improvement and performance. The research traced the successes and the challenges confronting the development of education reforms towards a knowledge-based society, along with the current leadership styles, cultural shifts, and global opportunities which face Middle Eastern organizations (PwC, 2016). In an effort to unveil critical problems of practice that presently persist in Dubai and the Middle East region school settings, studies by Alfadala (2016), and by Al-Taneiji and McLeod (2008), highlighted the UAE’s attempt to build a modern nation based on foundation of economic development and social change (G-Mrabet, 2012). Moreover, this study examined, through a qualitative narrative design, how the senior leaders from four schools in Dubai, which rated “Good” in 2017, aligned their schools to meet the governmental requirements within a diverse society of over 200 nationalities (Government of the UAE, 2018). As pointed out by Litz and Scott (2016), “Very few studies have been conducted on the impact of the UAE change agenda, especially using transformational leadership as the lens for exploration” (p. 6). While Litz & Scott (2016) focused on the UAE public educational system,
this study examined Dubai multicultural private schools to determine how their leaders were meeting the transformations set by the UAE National Agenda.

**Research Questions**

The study identified a state mandated leadership approach that was based on a prescriptive, and primarily Western, embedded cultural model (McClusky, 2017) to improve the UAE’s school system with the guidance of KHDA’s Inspection Framework. While KHDA launched initiatives to encourage highly performing schools to share successful practice—What Works, The Lighthouse initiative, The Abundance Group Project—for the benefit of all Dubai-based schools (Hanif, 2016), the common goal to meet the UAE National Agenda challenged more particularly the underperforming schools. The purpose of this research was to gather data from a sample of four schools in Dubai which had been originally unsuccessful in meeting the national statutory requirements set by the UAE National Agenda and Vision 2021 expectations in 2014, but were then able to meet the prescribed ranking after three years, in 2017. For the purpose of this study, the collection of data used two sources—published inspection reports and school leaders’ interviews. The research examined whether applying a modified model of transformational leadership, such as one elaborated by Litz and Scott (2016), could contribute to school improvement, and align Dubai schools with the UAE National Agenda framework. The rationale for choosing these four schools was to understand how they all managed to receive the “Good” ranking in 2017, following the data collection and analysis of a three-year-period, from 2015 to 2017. The researcher first identified areas of improvement and key findings that served as background for interviewing the school leaders from the sampled schools. The second collection of qualitative data was recorded through the interview process and was used for a narrative description to identify any cultural shifts in leadership practices that fostered positive
education and school effectiveness in Dubai. “The idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature” (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007, p. 459). School effectiveness was structured around six performance standards, which directly impact school performance (Government of the UAE, 2015). To understand how four K-12 private schools managed to meet the quality of performance required by the UAE National Agenda, in 2017, the study focused on the school leaders’ stories in relation with their practice to answer the following questions:

1. Based on the analysis from the 2017 School Inspection Report, what leadership strategies used by the selected sample of international school leaders were identified as effective to change and improve school performance, over a three-year period?

2. Considering Dubai’s highly diverse population with over two hundred nationalities, what, if any, Modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approaches, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016) were evident in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools?

**Conceptual Framework**

School systems around the world are faced with increasing pressure to enact change and transform their organizations, due to the rapid advancement of technology and globalization (Litz, 2014). To apply change in Dubai (UAE), educational leaders and stakeholders need to work together to align existing schools with lifelong learning goals, as prescribed by UAE’s National Agenda Parameter and Vision 2021 (Government of the UAE, 2016). A look at the UAE’s current education system, more particularly, the Emirate of Dubai, showed that over 90% of its student population attended private international schools (KHDA, 2017), heightening the accountability of school leaders to meet the nation’s expected target of excellence by 2021.
This study used a qualitative research methodology based on the conceptual framework of Theory of Change, and Transformational Leadership. However, while the traditional model of Transformational Leadership may not have been in line with the UAE managerial culture, the Modified Transformational Model, or Cross-Cultural Transformational Leadership Model, proposed by Litz and Scott (2016), highlighted cultural considerations more adapted to the Middle East context. The study’s purpose was to investigate the challenges that school leaders face in Dubai while following the guidelines of the UAE National Agenda, and to explain how to apply transformation and align with the framework prescribed by the local private education authority, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). Positive education and school effectiveness present challenges in Dubai’s highly multicultural context (Zahran, Pettaway, Waller, & Waller, 2016). Through the lens of Litz and Scott’s (2016) Modified or Cross-Cultural Transformational Leadership Model, which considers interpretations of leadership practice in the Arab world context, this study compared three years of data, recorded in Dubai’s School Inspection Reports, to identify change that led to improvement in these selected schools, and met the quality required by the UAE National Agenda initiated in 2014. The comparative analysis was based on information recorded by the KHDA Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) which publishes every year the Dubai School Report, ranking from “Weak” to “Outstanding”. The analysis was done on four institutions, whose ranking went from “Acceptable”, since the introduction of the National Agenda, to “Good” in 2017. The data comparison between these schools’ three-year- consecutive inspection reports demonstrated how transformation occurred within this time frame, and analyzed the parameters that impacted their school performance.
The School Inspection Reports revealed that, by developing innovative and creative solutions, these schools made a positive contribution to current and future generations (Government of the UAE, 2016). The impact of the UAE National Agenda Parameter on school improvement demonstrated the levels of complexity international schools face within Dubai’s diverse community and culturally embedded managerial model (Warner & Burton, 2017).

**Assumptions, limitations, scope**

Several assumptions were made for the purposes of this study. First, the UAE National Agenda aligns with KHDA’s Inspection Framework and is the driver of organizational change in Dubai’s international schools. Second, the success recorded by improved schools rated “Good” in 2017 by Dubai’s School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) may be due to transformations brought by changes in leadership practice, collective accountability, engagement, school vision and continued professional development. Although outstanding schools have been reported since 2008, the evaluation of school leadership was added to KHDA’s School Evaluation Report only in 2012—to align with performance standards prescribed by AdvancED, New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), and other international accreditation requirements (KHDA, 2017). Moreover, certain assumptions needed to be made about cultural differences and the perception of best leadership practice (Jogulu, 2010). According to the World Migration Report (2015), the immigrant population of the UAE was 88.4% of the total resident population. Dubai, in particular, is one of the most diverse cities in the world with over 200 nationalities—where leadership styles vary from Western to Eastern ideologies. In addition, although Dubai is known to be inclusive and tolerant of other nationalities (Government of the UAE, 2017), there are embedded cultural traditions that emerge and bring complexity in managing organizations. Jogulu (2010) argued “that leadership styles are culturally-contingent
and that cultural expectations constrain the role of leadership, making it culture-specific” (p. 716). For instance, there are accepted racial inequalities in the job market regarding advancement and wages which collide with the concept of ethics from egalitarian societies (Tong & Al Awad, 2014). In this case, the study may show how employee diversity and inequalities affect organizational culture and management effectiveness. Furthermore, in most Middle Eastern households, formerly dominated by British rule, children were often cared for by nannies, limiting parents’ authentic involvement in their children’s education (Gulf News, 2011). In any event, the framework for understanding transformational leadership must examine cultural differences and reflect the context to effectively describe how the UAE National Agenda and Vision 2021 are impacting the society and its education system.

Despite offering theoretical and practical contributions, this study presented a number of limitations. First, the data collected for school ranking focused primarily on KHDA’s School Inspection Reports of 2015, 2016, and 2017, which were based on a rigorous framework that may not have been adapted to suit all international schools in Dubai. Although the principles of KHDA’s framework were well founded to meet 21st century and best practice of teaching and learning, it was fair to reflect on other school cultures in the context of the Middle East, and to evaluate whether being unfit for the new concept of modern education, guided by Technology, Vision 2021 and Innovation, should have necessarily labeled them as “Weak” or “Acceptable”. Second, a possible limitation of this study was the reliance on a sample of schools that may not had been willing to share full information on how they improved to “Good”, from being among the lower performing schools in Dubai. The researcher could have thus faced a challenge if school leaders felt that due to Dubai’s private school competitive market, it was best not to reveal explicitly what worked (Litz & Scott, 2016). The solution would have been to rephrase
questions and to provide feedback from the schools’ Inspection Reports—which were public information—to confirm and validate information through the interview process. Another point to be made would have been to remind interviewees that KHDA’s initiative was meant to encourage well performing schools to assist others and to guide them in using best leadership practice (Hanif, 2016). Since changes in Dubai were happening at a rapid rate, there were variations in the school landscape, as demonstrated by the School Inspection Report findings, which highlighted yearly key messages and set new projected goals for private schools in Dubai (DSIB, 2017). As Kotter (2012) claimed, in order to envision changes, leaders must establish a “Sense of Urgency” (p. 37). The Ministry of Education announced in May 2016, a five-year plan to have all teachers in the UAE federally licensed by 2021, thus ensuring the achievement of the National Agenda goal of a first rate education system.

The research demonstrated that to achieve their organizational goals and meet local requirements, school leaders needed to adapt their leadership style to encourage partnerships between key stakeholders and empower teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community. The involvement of transformational skills can have a positive impact on school improvement, as they are often associated with thoughtful and meaningful contributions, thus bringing positive changes (Northouse, 2015).

**Significance**

Dubai and neighboring countries across the Middle East North Africa Region (MENA) are dedicated in promoting education to alleviate poverty and stimulate economic growth (PwC, 2016). The changes faced by UAE schools are similar to those faced by many developing nations (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). The entire Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, which includes Kingdom of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab
Emirates), wishes to successfully integrate its people into the global economy in an ever changing world. The Middle East is fast emerging as an increasingly important destination for regional and global businesses (Alfdala, 2016). More specifically, Dubai’s advantageous geographical location, infrastructure, and impressive growth are combined to increase its visibility on the economic map of the world (Brook, 2013). However, despite these achievements, challenges persist in organizations, particularly in schools (KHDA, 2017). Identifying and dealing with these challenges require more rigorous research focused on the particular characteristics of institutions operating in the Middle East. Existing research tend to focus on certain areas of the Middle East where Ministries of Education are actively bringing change and overseeing proper implementation of reforms (Warner & Burton, 2017). Issues of quality and efficiency in management constitute pressing challenges for the education systems (Zahran et al., 2016). Although some countries, including the Gulf Cooperation Council, are publishing yearly school reports (PwC, 2016), identifying benchmarks, ensuring leadership accountability, and setting proper standards, remain challenging issues that many organizations are facing in the Middle East.

While the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is helping countries transform theirs schools into learning organizations, schools all over the world are responding to this initiative by aligning their educational requirements with a 21st century learning culture (OECD, 2016). Pedagogically, schools are adopting a student-centered and competency-based learning (Scott, 2015). Structurally, school programs are now referring to individualized and lifelong learning. Financially, opportunities for public-private collaboration now dominate the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region (World Economic Forum, 2017) and allow funding to support change and improvement. Managerially, schools in the Gulf region
are moving towards a decentralized and less hierarchical approach, whilst introducing aspects of transformational leadership (Litz, 2014). Summoned to adopt 21st century skills prescribed by the UAE educational authority, school leaders are attempting to be culturally more receptive by “Fostering collaboration, promoting professional development, having a shared vision, and encouraging success and achievements” (Litz & Scott, 2016, p. 17).

**Definition of Terms**

21st Century Learning: refers to certain skills required for 21st century education such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity, that schools need to teach to help students thrive in today’s world (P21, 2018).

AdvancED: Is the largest community of education professionals in the world. It is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that conducts rigorous, on-site reviews of a variety of educational institutions and systems to ensure that all learners realize their full potential (AdvancED, 2018).

Bottom-up model of leadership: Decision making that arises from the root and organized from the bottom by ones working together and having the closest view of the problem. (Matland, 1995).

Cross-Cultural Transformational Leadership Model: To be effective in managing a culturally diverse workforce, leaders need to understand how cultural values affect reactions to leadership as well as how various leadership behaviors interact with followers’ cultural values to influence their outcomes (Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Xiong Chen & Lowe, 2009).

DSIB: Dubai School Inspection Bureau of KHDA manages school inspections.

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, which includes Kingdom of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates).
International Baccalaureate (IB): Founded in 1968, the International Baccalaureate (IB) is a non-profit educational foundation offering four highly respected programmes of international education that develop the intellectual, personal, emotional and social skills needed to live, learn and work in a rapidly globalizing world.

International school leader: Is defined as a senior administrator of a school (Superintendent, Principal, CEO, Vice-Principal, Deputy Principal) who has the responsibility of leading a school that offers an international curriculum (US, UK, French, IB) offshore, as the UAE for instance (KHDA, 2014).

International schools in Dubai: International schools in Dubai are private and regulated by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). They comprise mainly British, American and Indian curricula that meet the educational needs of different nationalities residing in the Emirate (Government of the UAE, 2018).

K-12 schools: K-12 is a short form for schools prior to college that offer Kindergarten through grade 12.

KHDA: Knowledge and Human Development Authority. Ministry of Education authority that manages private schools and kindergartens in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Knowledge-based economy: Knowledge-based economy describes trends in advanced economies towards greater dependence on knowledge, information and high skill levels, and the increasing need for ready access to all of these by the business and public sectors (OECD, 2015).

Lifelong Learning: Is the ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. Therefore, it not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development, but also self-sustainability, as well as competitiveness and employability (London, 2012).
MENA: Acronym referring to the Middle East and North Africa region.

Modified Transformational Leadership: A new model of transformational leadership is proposed, based on the Cross-Cultural Transformational Leadership. This Modified Transformational Model may be useful to those leaders who wish to adopt transformational leadership with cultural accommodations (Litz & Scott, 2016).

NEASC: New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

PISA: The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in member and non-member nations of 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic performance on mathematics, science, and reading.

School performance: Is based on evaluating schools around six performance standards aligned with international benchmarks that define the essential aspects of quality education in the UAE (MOE, 2015).

The National statutory expected requirement: Refers to the quality of performance that meets the expectation of the UAE National Agenda—this is the expected level for every school in the UAE.

Top-down model leadership: Authority commanded by or originating from ones having the highest rank. Controlled, directed, or organized from the top (Matland, 1995).

Transformational leadership: Transformational leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group (Bass, 1990).
UAE: The United Arab Emirates is a federation of hereditary absolute monarchies, located in the Arabian Peninsula. It is governed by a Federal Supreme Council made up of the seven emirs of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujairah, Sharjah, Dubai, Ras al-Khaimah and Umm al-Quwain.

Vision 2021: The UAE aims at building a competitive knowledge economy while striving to preserve a cohesive society proud of its identity and sense of belonging.

Conclusion

While education is the foundation of the UAE’s development of best practices and is considered the most important investment in future generations, according to the UAE’s National Agenda, reforms in the education sector are a key pillar of the UAE’s Vision 2021 in ensuring that the nation is moving towards a knowledge-based economy (Government of the UAE, 2016).

As changes in schooling require changes in leadership, the UAE has begun to focus increased attention on innovation while seeking to improve the performance of organizations in its private sector. Motivated by the desire of its leaders to see the UAE ranked among the safest, most innovative, and happiest countries (Government of the UAE, 2016), the nation’s efforts to improve the educational system, through regulatory bodies, such as KHDA, is putting additional pressure on school owners and operators (Gulf News, 2017). Although the KHDA has been regulating the private school sector in Dubai since 2007, a new executive council resolution adopted in February 2017 gives a clearer mandate and greater authority to enforce the rules related to school leaders’ responsibilities (KHDA, 2017). The resolution ensures that all private schools employ qualified teachers, have a clear instructional vision, and a professional development plan for faculty and staff. Furthermore, the motion requires schools to have prior approval from the local education authority for their leaders and teachers (Al-Shabbani, 2015).
By setting an ethics and professionalism charter, the UAE offers a path for partnerships among stakeholders, thus aiming to create a high quality education sector focused on school effectiveness (KHDA, 2014). Finally, the resolution enhances good practices by providing greater transparency in line with Dubai’s strategic plan, and provides support and assurance to the community (Gulf News, 2017). Furthermore, the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has developed a set vision from being a transformational leader (Langton, 2016). Seen through the lens of Burns’s (2012) theory on Leadership, Sheikh Mohammed works with his followers to identify needed change, creating a vision to guide through inspiration, and executing the change in tandem with committed members of the society. To connect Sheikh Mohammed’s leadership style to the context of education, Northouse (2015) writes that school leaders who demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors “change and transform people”, as they empower teachers to rise above their personal expectations and help create and perpetuate shared beliefs and vision (p. 161). Furthermore, Dubai has a unique characteristic of being home to over 200 nationalities, and it is known for its tolerance, celebration of cultures, and vision of happiness (Government of the UAE, 2017). Within this spirit of togetherness, the leader of Dubai believes that “Thinking collectively and having open dialogues with the team create new ideas and bring us closer to success” (Asher, 2016, p. 13). Through the leader’s transformational attitude comes the UAE National Agenda Parameter and Vision 2021, whereby school leaders are expected to follow the path to progress and adapt to the cultural belief of change for improvement.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dubai, one of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has achieved impressive levels of growth and development in the last decade; nevertheless, the sustainability of the Emirate’s development and its transition to a knowledge-driven economy depends greatly on the availability of highly qualified and motivated educational leaders (Ahmed & Alfaki, 2013).

Studies have reported the benefits and/or cultural drawbacks of the transformational model in higher education system in the UAE (Judd, 2013, Madsen, 2010, Warner & Burton, 2017). There are fewer studies, however, analyzing the effects of transformational leadership on the K-12 school sector. Furthermore, the Dubai Government adopted a strategic plan for Vision 2021, whereas leaders are associated with improving the quality and accessibility to education, which represents a major strategic priority in sustaining economic prosperity and achieving social development goals (Government of the UAE, 2016). This study explored critical challenges and opportunities for K-12 private education in modern Dubai. Dubai’s transformation has impacted its education system since 2009 to reflect the growing population, cultural shifts and economic demands (Government of Dubai KHDA, 2017). Major topics addressed in this literature review revolved around the changes needed in education and school management in Dubai, UAE, due to globalization and the desire to be ranked among the safest, smartest, most innovative, and happiest nations (Government of the UAE, 2016).

The purpose of this literature review was to recognize previous contributions made in the area of 21st century school changes seen in the UAE, and to compare findings on transformational leadership practice for education within a multicultural context such as Dubai.
According to the 2017 School Report (Government of Dubai KHDA, 2017), 64% of private schools were considered “Good” to “Outstanding”. The remaining 36% of the underperforming schools were facing challenges in implementing education reforms that were needed, according to the UAE National Agenda Parameter, whose goal is to obtain a first-rate educational system to develop a knowledge-based society (Government of the UAE, 2015). Looking at how schools successfully made it to “Good” may be explained by leadership initiatives that managed to elude the culturally embedded hierarchical autocratic model common throughout the GCC (Tingle, 2016). The overall school ranking was based on inspection judgments consisting of performance standards that were drawn from evidence gathered by the inspection team, through classroom observations, assessment, and interviews with students, teachers, leaders, board members, and parents. Inspectors from the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) made judgments using a six-point scale which was consistent with the inspection framework (KHDA, 2017).

Figure 3. The DSIB Inspection Judgments using a six-level scale. (2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outstanding</th>
<th>Quality of performance <strong>substantially exceeds</strong> the expectation of the UAE National Agenda.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>Quality of performance <strong>exceeds</strong> the expectation of the UAE National Agenda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Quality of performance <strong>meets</strong> the expectation of the UAE National Agenda. <strong>(This is the expected level for every school in the UAE.)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Quality of performance <strong>meets the minimum</strong> level of quality required in the UAE. <strong>(This is the minimum level for every school in the UAE.)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Quality of performance is <strong>below</strong> the expectation of the UAE National Agenda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Weak</td>
<td>Quality of performance is <strong>significantly below</strong> the expectation of the UAE National Agenda.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

This research focused on a representative study which involved specific private international schools that improved their performance by following the guidelines set by the
UAE National Agenda. Ranked “Acceptable”, since approximately 2009, these schools earned a “Good” rating, according to the 2017 School Inspection Report (Government of Dubai KHDA, 2017). To identify the criteria that contributed to positive change and school improvement, the research was based on the transformational leadership model for education. Pioneered by Bass and Avolio (1994) and Leithwood (1994), and more recently applied by Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers (2010), the transformational model presented benefits in schools’ organizational development. The 21st century research claimed that transformational leadership was positively associated with schools’ “Innovative Climate” as it motivated followers to deploy greater effort and productivity (Moolenaar et al., 2010, p. 624). Moolenaar’s studies also demonstrated that school leadership, which fosters “Teacher Collaboration Networks”, significantly impacted school effectiveness and improvement (Moolenaar et al., 2012, p. 251). Equally, while preparing to host the next world fair, with the theme “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future” (Expo 2020, 2017), Dubai aimed to highlight the increasing role of ‘interconnectivity’ and innovation to further develop its knowledge-based society, primarily in the sectors of Education and Business (OECD, 2016). In addition, the local government agency responsible for Dubai’s private education, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), focused on performance standards aligned with international benchmarks that defined the essential aspects of quality education. To demonstrate the impact of the UAE’s National Agenda on school improvement, the transformational model proposed by Moolenaar et al., (2010) underlined specific indicators related to innovation, teacher collaboration, and effective leadership. Although KHDA (2017) encouraged leaders to promote accountability for school performance and standards, the government agency also recommended the need to face the challenges of
ensuring a high quality sector for the future of education, thus relying on strong partnerships, a professional learning culture, and effective school leadership.

In addition, Kotter (2012) explained how the context of an organization and the degree of collaboration can determine the rate and pace of change: “In a moderately paced context, teamwork is necessary to deal with periodic transformations, but … in a fast-moving world, teamwork is enormously helpful almost all the time” (Location 2212). In the context of the UAE, there is the added challenge of the highly multicultural workplace where school leaders need a unique set of skills, to be adept at decoding culture, and then using this knowledge to lead and manage teamwork effectively (Singh, 2017). Similarly, while Moolenaar et al., (2010) featured the benefits of using the transformational model in school organizational development, Litz and Scott (2016) focused on the cultural dimension with regards to adopting this approach in an Arab and Muslim context, such as the UAE. To facilitate the process of transformation, Litz and Scott (2016) recommended using the Modified Transformational Model which is designed to “encourage and promote change and innovation, while also respecting and retaining the unique cultural nuances and needs of the organization within the national culture” (p. 19). To participate in this rapidly changing world, the UAE’s education system was focusing on developing practices, and promoting innovative leadership required to meet Vision 2021 (Government of the UAE, 2016). This chapter starts with an overview of UAE’s education in order to contrast the country’s ambitious leadership goals throughout its society and historically rigid education system. To meet the need of a structured modern school system adhering to government policies, further plans for advancement of the Emirati society are explained in the UAE Vision 2021 and its National Agenda Parameter which emphasize the development of innovative skills and self-learning abilities, thus requiring transformational skills from school leaders. These reforms focus
on better preparation, cultural adaptation, greater accountability, higher standards and improved leadership (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008).

“The only thing that is constant is change” (Heraclitus, c. 475 BC)

Overview on Education in Dubai and in the United Arab Emirates

Economic demands of the global and local labor markets continue to dictate managerial trends in Dubai’s education sector. Since the earliest forms of schooling, in the 19th century, education in the Arabian Gulf belonged to the states and sheikhdoms (PwC, 2016). After the creation of the UAE in 1972, the newly established Ministry of Education (MoE) began to bring uniformity in the various schools that had been influenced by teaching methods from Egypt and the wider Middle East, in which teachers transmitted information by way of formal lectures and rote memorization. Standardization efforts gradually launched the country’s national curriculum project, designed to create a uniformed Emirati curriculum.

After the creation of the UAE in 1972, the newly established Ministry of Education (MoE) began to make the eclectic mix of schools more uniform. Standardization efforts gradually launched the country’s national curriculum project, designed to create a single Emirati curriculum. This project gained momentum in 1985. (Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi, 2013, p. 2)

Since then, education has become compulsory for all children through twelfth grade, the end of secondary school. However, since the Millennium, continued expatriate population growth across the UAE has contributed to the rise of a unique set of economic and social challenges (Zahran et al., 2016).

Since 2009, the Middle East appears to be the ideal platform for disruption, as characterized by Adler (2015). Dubai World Trade Center (DWTC) hosted the First Annual
Forum on Smart Learning Excellence in the Middle East in 2008. Ten years later, DWTC hosted a conference in March 2018 called: Innovate, Disrupt and Transform, a recurrent theme which highlights the Arab world’s growing interest in “innovative ideas anchored in creativity and entrepreneurship” (DWTC, 2018). Similarly, Gatsby (2017) claims that “The Middle East is on the verge of a massive digital disruption – the cross-border data flow connecting the Middle East to the world has increased by more than a hundred times” (para. 1). Through the lens of Burns (2012), “Revolutionary action, in disrupting existing structures and mobilizing new social forces, incidentally arouses new needs and establishes new goals” (p. 418). In the United Arab Emirates, revolutionary change in modern education has only been initiated in the early 2000, in response to the perceived needs of Emirati students to adopt a more intercultural grounded style of instruction (Crabtree, 2010). Although Crabtree’s (2010) study focused on liberal arts education in the UAE, she explained that the reasons for change and adopting a Western instructional application was closely related to the effects of globalization. Crabtree (2010) also indicated the impact of Western approaches on UAE’s mixed culture:

> The importing of this American educational model is, however, associated with the inexorable influences of dominant cultural forms through the effects of globalization. However, at the same time international teaching also requires that curricula are culturally empathic to the needs of students in ethnically diverse regions. (p. 85)

Crabtree’s (2010) key point while conducting her study revealed the cultural consideration which brings new challenges when implementing foreign instructional models into a culturally grounded setting: “Such strategies obviously tended to heighten anxiety by academics, especially those in the throes of culture shock, in which reassurance was more likely to be sought by falling back on the familiar, rather than through embracing the new” (p. 88).
Among these challenges relating to the provision of private education is the absence of a public option for Non-Emiratis (Ridge, Shami, & Kippels, 2015). The impact of globalization and the influx of other cultures, in the UAE and neighboring Gulf countries, have allowed major changes in school management expectations (Miller, 2011). With the thrust of technology and global pressures, governmental bodies are now encouraging schools to wean off the traditional universal model and adopt the 21st century approach instead.

The main goal is to enable all schools across the country to operate under a standardized framework that is developed on the best international practices…. It is essential to establish and support a well-informed education system capable of keeping up with future changes and developments. (HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, 2013, p. 72)

More challenging programs are offered in UAE schools, particularly in the mostly densely populated Emirates of Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, where more than 80% of the population is urban and influenced by expats’ demands for rigorous education (Gulf News, 2016). One of the key words emerging from these initiatives—which is changing educational practice in the Arab and Muslim culture—is engagement. In her study, Crabtree (2010) developed teaching material designed to engage deep learning activities with students from the UAE to observe the impact on teaching practice. The study’s conclusion was that while implementing international programs and new leadership approaches for school improvement, context and cultural considerations deserved equal attention:

Globalization, as manifested in imported Western curricula, also involves recognizing and utilizing the power and authority of localized, culturally grounded knowledge.
Without this commitment such curricula reveal themselves as insensitive to and disengaged from the needs of international students. (p. 93)

Similar findings on evaluating the importance of cultural consideration were observed by Litz and Scott (2016) within the UAE’s current context of intense educational restructuring in the K-12 public system: “Examining transformational leadership in various cultural settings, particularly in nonwestern cultures, is a necessary aspect of improving overall understandings of the theoretical foundations of transformational leadership” (p. 18).

One of the UAE’s highest priorities is education, as President His Highness Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founder of the UAE, noted, “The greatest use that can be made of wealth is to invest it in creating generations of educated and trained people” (Library of Congress, 2007). Hence, the UAE Ministry of Education launched a mentoring program which assigned Western principals across the UAE in an effort to modernize instructional strategies and implement international methods of teaching and learning (Government of the UAE, 2015). These leaders emphasized the necessity of deviating from the traditional methods of passive memorization and rote learning, to instead, encouraging active student participation (Mansour & Al-Shamrani, 2015). Today the UAE literacy rate is 95 percent, compared to 42 percent in 1975 (KHDA, 2017). Moreover, Dubai’s National Agenda introduced a curriculum in 2015 based on Western and international practices, to prepare graduates for a globalized workforce (Warner & Burton, 2017). This program implemented by Dubai’s Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) supports schools and communities in the delivery of a high quality student-centered education, that is also focused on developing technology and promoting wellbeing. Created in 2006, KHDA is responsible for the growth and quality of private education in Dubai. With the guidance of the UAE Ministry of Education, KHDA supports schools, universities,
parents, students, educators, investors and government partners, to create a high quality education sector focused on happiness and wellbeing (KHDA, 2017). While the general educational plan is determined by the UAE Ministry of Education, education councils are set up in individual emirates to assist in implementing government policy. For instance, the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), the Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), and the Sharjah Education Council are each tasked with reforming the educational program in the UAE while still preserving local traditions, principles and the cultural identity of the country (Khaleej Times, 2017). A recent report on Education in the Gulf presented by PwC (2016) predicts that an additional 175,000 seats or more are required in the K-12 Education sector by 2020 in the UAE, of which 90% are expected to be in the private sector. According to PwC (2016), “Dubai is forecast to require 74,500 additional seats in 50 new private schools by 2020, while 62,000 additional seats in 52 new private schools in the same period will be needed in Abu Dhabi” (p. 13).
UAE’s private school system has evolved over the last ten years to reflect the Gulf region’s growing population, cultural shifts and economic demands (See Figure 4). Today, the private school sector supports Dubai’s economic growth and plays an important role in strengthening social bonds and local identity in the UAE (KHDA, 2014). Interestingly, an increasing number of Emirati families prefer private to public schools, resigned to the reality that a private education better ensures their children will receive a higher education diploma (Martin, 2013). Furthermore, new initiatives, such as Dubai’s National Agenda, are being launched at all educational levels. A key area of focus has been to transform K to 12 programs, to ensure that UAE students are fully prepared to attend universities around the world and compete in the global marketplace (Government of the UAE, 2016). Because UAE universities face increasing pressure to deliver courses and programs that meet the needs of the regional job market, they must remain innovative and respond to the demands of a diversified economy (Tremblay, 2012).
Indeed, some of the world’s best universities are creating programs in the UAE, attracting talented students in the Arab world and globally. Global partnerships included the Sorbonne, opened in Abu Dhabi in 2006; New York University, the first comprehensive liberal arts and sciences campus with a robust research component in Abu Dhabi; Johns Hopkins’ Bloomberg School of Public Health is helping establish a public health doctoral program in the Emirates (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2018). Other American institutions include the University of Washington, Boston University and Rochester Institute of Technology. The Ministry of Presidential Affairs (MOPA) offers 200 to 300 scholarships a year to Emiratis travelling to countries such as Canada, Australia, the UK, and the US (Swan, 2016). There are currently over 3,000 Emiratis studying abroad, while approximately 60,000 are attending free public universities, and an estimated 30,000 study in private institutions of higher education in the UAE (PwC, 2016). As young Emirati students gravitate towards a more intercultural grounded education, they are faced with interactive assessment methods that encourage sharing personal reflections on their identity, family history, and culture, and even involve family participation (McClusky, 2017). According to Wright and Bennett (2008), “As these young people enter the labor market over the coming years issues of integration and cross-cultural teamwork are likely to become of increased importance” (p. 232). Furthermore, the UAE technology initiative has improved people’s lifestyle by advancing communication and making it available anywhere and anytime. Dubai’s Smart City initiative as well as innovation, used to create a sustainable environment and infrastructure, are also part of the indicators set forth by the UAE National Agenda (Government of the UAE, 2016. As per KHDA’s vision, schools aim to share the community principles of 21st century trends—by promoting the development of hard and soft skills, while endorsing the new era of Lifelong Learning (MOE, 2015).
Cross-Cultural Approach to Educational Leadership in the Context of the UAE

In a global society, such as the UAE, there is constant need to support practice that integrates the domains of culture and inter-cultures, cross-cultural management and learning and training (Calvin et al., 2017). By identifying essential strategies that facilitate communication, collaboration, and positive relationship, a cross-cultural approach to leadership can contribute to the future goals and needs of educational institutions (Calvin et. Al., 2017). The cross-cultural approach is described in global leadership practice as promoting “intercultural competencies, including the ability to view challenging issues from various perspectives, as well as the ability to approach social challenges with insight and appreciation, spanning cultural, historical, religious, linguistic, and political angles” (Global Leadership Summit, 2018). Research on Educational Leadership in the Middle East context coincides with the recent findings unveiling the impact school leadership can have on school performance (Hallinger, 2016). Although the Emirates, and particularly Dubai, have gone through a rapid transition, making the UAE’s private school sector one of the most prosperous in the Middle East and Asian-Pacific region (Zahran et al., 2016), the result comes from adopting and implementing successful educational systems influenced by Western ideologies (Verger, 2014). This study explored whether implementing these educational systems produces favorable outcomes, and if leadership can respond and adapt to a different context, such as the Middle East.

Although Fullan (2012) mentioned the need for cultural change instead of only implementing new policies, understanding and respecting the Arab world context can have an impact and contribute to significant improvements to the UAE education system (Bock, 2014). As this research highlighted cultural adaptation in a transforming social context, the challenge that expat leaders faced in the Gulf region, however, was to implement Western educational
philosophies within the Arab and Muslim hierarchical society (Malecki & Ewers, 2007). Bock (2014) investigated the impact of expatriate school leaders in the education system of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and his findings suggested that cultural barriers minimized efficiency of school leadership because it “inhibited the impact of expatriate school leaders” (p. 133). Bock (2014) further shared that “although expatriate school leaders were trusted to lead change, there were very few opportunities to contribute towards major decision making” (p. 117). Ibrahim et al., (2013) revealed similar views and concluded that expatriate principals were excluded from decision-making when involved in education reform plan. Moreover, Hargreaves and Shirley (2011) argued that leadership is at the center of effective reforms and that engagement with all stakeholders is necessary for change to occur.

Therefore, with more international exposure, local school leaders were grasping the meaning of effective modern leadership where stakeholders were guided to develop skills for lifelong learning as well as to encourage leadership aptitudes (Collins & Halverson, 2009). Litz and Scott’s (2016) study reported that some aspects of transformational leadership were practiced in the UAE, “such as fostering collaboration, promoting professional development, having a shared vision, and encouraging success and achievements” (p. 17). However, it also mentioned that “most principals continued to rely on hierarchical approaches while attempting to be culturally and emotionally more receptive than in the past” (p. 17). Through the lens of Litz and Scott (2016), adopting the Cross-Cultural Transformational Model allowed for gradual transformation to effectively blend elements of change within established cultural principles. The purpose of their study was to “investigate whether school principals in the UAE practiced transformational leadership, and whether they and their teachers perceived principals’ leadership styles differently to their Western counterparts” (p. 1). Their conclusion came to comparable
results with Crabtree’s (2010) findings when implementing Western approach to the context of the UAE:

Encouraging teachers to adapt to new and emerging leadership styles will inevitably be difficult; however, by placing emphasis on gradually modifying the organizational culture and context with full participation and transparency, teachers will most likely engage in the process and evolve with the changes expected of them. (Litz & Scott, 2016, p. 19)

Studies from Crabtree (2010) and Litz and Scott (2016) served as a platform for this research as they highlighted the UAE multicultural context and suggested adapting to setting when implementing Western leadership practice. In addition to modeling positive behaviors, today’s leaders, according to Collins and Halverson (2009), must generate awareness about the purpose and mission of education, while fostering a community of learners. Although educational authorities, are used to having control over all inputs of education development in the Gulf region, necessary partnerships between schools and communities now constitute one of the realities that bridge practical education and the workforce (PwC, 2016). Moreover, 21st Century Education is undergoing enormous reforms where the demand for greater engagement and accountability on the part of institutions and all stakeholders—including parents, students, administrators, shareholders, faculty and community—is paired with the demand for greater quality, efficiency, and relevance. (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009).

Leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students (Government of the UAE, 2015). Transformational leaders create a professional community that gives the opportunity for teachers to associate with middle and senior leaders in making decisions related to school quality performance. Furthermore, they care
about positive relations among teachers and inspire them while heightening their motivation (Marion & Gonzales, 2013).

Although the UAE government has summoned _English Speaking Nationals_ (or Westerners) to establish management systems within the government and schools, one of the challenges that expat Westerners face here is adapting their leadership style to the goals and objectives set by the Arab world’s perspective (Chaudoir, 2010). Goal setting and the capacity to assume responsibility are two key factors that make a leader successful in the Gulf region (Litz & Scott, 2016). Additionally, according to the UAE National Media Council (2016), Dubai has a relatively young population (80% is under 40), and young leaders are expected to bring fresh ideas and a vision that will lead the local population towards an increasingly competitive global market (Gulf News, 2016).

Figure 5. Differences in School Leadership Between West and Arab world (Al-Shabbani, 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Western School Leadership</th>
<th>Middle Eastern School Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long Term Vision</td>
<td>Short Term Vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive Approach to Management</td>
<td>Reactive Approach to Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective and Bottom-up Decision Making</td>
<td>Centralized and Top-Down Decision Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment as a Driving Force</td>
<td>Control as a Driving Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Leadership</td>
<td>Authoritarian Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect of Policies and Regulations</td>
<td>Respect of Islamic Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Communication and Transparency</td>
<td>Hierarchical and Limited Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to Change and Progress</td>
<td>Resistant to Change and Priority for Tradition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 2007, Dubai created the KHDA to bring education reforms to its diverse community, and introduced international benchmarks, while preserving local traditions, principles and the cultural identity of the UAE (Khaleej Times, 2017). As Kotter (2012) discussed the importance of communicating the vision and the impact of changes, interviews with leaders in the Middle East revealed that communication in the region generally lacked transparency (Al-Taneiji, 2013). The explanation may be culturally related to a hierarchical and top-down managerial model.

Beyond the UAE, there is a top-down perspective of leadership, that has been prominent within Arab education, and a hierarchical chain of command has contributed to the disconnect between the aspirations of policymakers and the reality of inappropriate or inadequate education to date. (Warner & Burton, 2017, p. 30)

Furthermore, careful planning and understanding efficiency may not always be perceived the same way everywhere (Litz & Scott, 2016), therefore, clear communication may be integral to improvement in a highly diverse setting like Dubai.

Moreover, Transformational Leadership as introduced initially by Burns (2012) focuses on the leader's personality, traits and ability to make changes through example, role-modeling, inspiration, and vision within one culture. Transformational leaders are often known for their personal charisma, which enables them to inspire and motivate followers to change their roles and perform in line with the new organizational philosophy (Antonakis & House, 2014). Adopting transformational leadership behaviors, however, is not seen throughout the UAE (Madsen, 2009), even though this practice might contribute to meeting the modern educational challenges that the country is facing. Most changes and improvements were recorded in the private sector of large cities, such as Dubai, because the schools go through rigorous inspections
where expected leadership practices promote innovative methods internationally recognized (KHDA, 2017).

Further considerations claimed that Transformational Leadership is an efficient model that fits Dubai’s school system, because it can be applied to a global market, and its approach to leadership reflects 21st century trends while strengthening organizational culture (Litz & Scott, 2016). While the key message of Dubai School Inspection Bureau was that all schools can improve through innovation (DSIB, 2017), Alsalami, Behery, and Abdullah (2014), suggested that Dubai had experienced greater success in using transformational leadership to incite organizational innovation. A report by KHDA (2018), *A Decade of Growth 2008-2018* revealed key findings which established the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational innovation in Dubai schools. Through the UAE National Innovation Strategy, which aimed to equip students with 21st century knowledge and skills, “The quality of leadership is the most significant factor affecting school effectiveness and improvement” (p. 14).

This report on the last ten years of school inspections in Dubai highlighted key principles of quality leadership, and started with “the willingness of the leadership to adapt and change” (KHDA, 2018, p. 17) which was similar to Kotter’s (2012) organizational change. The other principles featured in KHDA’s (2018) report reflected the literature review description of transformational leadership:

 Principals, leaders and teachers feel empowered to suggest, innovate and act as critical members of the team. Successful leaders establish a common vision and culture, and a consensus around what they want to achieve. Leaders get the best out of their staff by supporting staff to innovate. (p. 21)
This change was explained throughout the process of transformation observed in Dubai.

Although KHDA (2017) encouraged schools to adopt a transformational approach to leadership (Litz, 2014), the governmental education authority also recommended the need to face the challenges presented by the National Agenda Parameter and Vision 2021. Traditional and autocratic leadership, still prevalent in a number of schools (Zahran et al., 2016), was unsustainable when coping with a highly competitive and ever-changing market. Therefore, KHDA’s (2017) recommendations included: identifying effective leaders who understand the importance of innovation; developing self-evaluation procedures that encourage both staff and students to be creative; and establishing collaborative systems that promote sharing of professional knowledge about innovation. Skills that challenge the traditional top-down managerial style of leadership were presented by Alsalami et al., (2016) in their description of transformational leaders:

> Individuals who are not intimidated by competent subordinates, value employees' aspirations, and accommodate their needs have the potential to be much more effective in a dynamic [work] environment. This observation makes the need for transformational leadership a pressing organizational task for [institutions] in both the public and private domains. (p. 8)

The findings of Alsalami et al., (2016) had several practical implications which related to the school ethos and community. Furthermore, their study results suggested that “employees desire to work with transformational leaders who have the ability to inspire them to achieve new levels of performance, help them to discover their vocational purpose, address their needs, and listen to them carefully” (p. 8). Specifically, the results were consistent with those produced by Abdalla (2010) who concluded that “by appealing to subordinates’ individual needs, transformational
leaders are able to inspire and motivate them and thereby enhancing their level of commitment and performance” (p. 82). Overall, results showed that the majority of employees express a desire to work for forward-thinking inspirational leaders who can motivate followers (Garton, 2017). In addition, KHDA (2017) suggested that school leaders should empower staff and students to promote organizational innovation. Through a global education, leaders also emphasize the importance of enhancing stakeholders' resources and creativity, thereby giving them the opportunity to contribute to the overall school organizational development. Furthermore, the government of Dubai supported the UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda which clearly stated that the transformation of the current education system required leading-edge systems that bring together innovation and technology to enhance skills, knowledge and personal development (Government of the UAE, 2016).

Changes in Schooling Require Changes in Leadership

The pressure to fit in a context such as Dubai demands from leaders a great deal of vision, planning, innovation, and flexibility (Petrie, 2014). Despite the UAE’s important progress in the implementation of a knowledge-based economy, notably in the ICT sector, the country was facing several challenges that require concerted efforts and rigorous strategic leadership follow-up (Ahmed et al., 2013). In comparison to other GCC countries (Gulf Cooperation Council, a political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman), for example, “The UAE is (apparently) behind most transformation economies, when it comes to investment in education, as well as research and development activities” (Ahmed, 2013). According to Alsalami et al. (2014), “This hurdle impedes the country's ability to absorb, adapt and create new technology and knowledge” (p. 84). Nevertheless, as a result of rapid change in technology and
globalization, most UAE private schools have been compelled to adapt, to ensure their sustainability in this dynamic environment, similarly to businesses.

The new global economy has a great potential to shift economic power on a massive level resulting in a new and growing digital divide in the world. … To be well-educated and productive citizens in a computing-intensive world and to be prepared for careers in the 21st century, our students must have a clear understanding of the principles and practices of computer science and technologies. No other subject will open as many doors in the 21st century as computer science, regardless of a student’s ultimate field of study or occupation. (UAE Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 4)

Overall, organizations are indeed able to transform and achieve success as long as they have leaders who are able to motivate their community members to be innovative in their pursuit of present and future goals (PwC, 2018).

**The Impact of “Emiratization” and Modernization on Educational Leadership**

The term “Emiratization” stems from the UAE government’s initiative aiming to increase the current number of UAE nationals working in the private sector by the year 2021. As per the UAE Vision 2021, the country strived to shift towards a knowledge-based economy pioneered by UAE nationals with a skill set revolving around knowledge and creativity (Vision 2021, 2016). While the number of Emirati Nationals constituted 11% of Dubai’s population (Gulf News, 2016), the need for expatriates continued to rise as development and demand for skilled professionals, particularly in IT, was expanding (Gulf News, 2017). Notwithstanding, modern Dubai required professional readiness, and while UAE government schools for Emirati Nationals were still delivering a memorization instructional approach based on hierarchical top-down transmitted knowledge, there was an increasing number of Emiratis attending private schools, in
a quest for a holistic model of education, where the curriculum required student engagement strategies (Warner & Burton, 2017). Furthermore, ensuring that all schools (public and private) have highly effective leadership was one of the UAE’s priorities, according to the UAE’s Vision 2021. The KHDA (2016) and the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC, 2016) have focused on empowering school leaders, as research claimed that visionary leaders fostered school development and educational effectiveness (Hallinger, 2016). Other research suggested that:

Outstanding leadership has invariably emerged as a key characteristic of outstanding schools. There can no longer be doubt that those seeking quality in education must ensure its presence and that the development of potential leaders must be given high priority.

(Beare, Caldwell & Millikan, 1992, p. 99)

School leaders have the responsibility of following parameters set by the UAE’s National Agenda, while initiating the participation from teachers, parents and students (Government of the UAE Vision 2021, 2016). Furthermore, Gill (2003) suggested that the leadership in such a context of reform required vision and strategy in order to empower, motivate and inspire those who are affected by the change. However, based on a report from the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG), prior to school inspections starting in 2008, “Principals were measured based on their administrative skills, without any accountability for the academic effectiveness of the school” (Warner & Burton, 2017, p. 25). Since then, the education sector continues to attract high quality professionals because of Dubai’s infrastructure, evidence of innovation and visionary approach.

There are conflicting research results that questioned whether Dubai school principals exhibited more transformational than transactional leadership attitudes and behaviors.¹

¹ Transactional leadership focuses on results, conforms to the existing structure of an organization and measures success according to that organization’s system of rewards and penalties.
Behaviors can be interpreted quite differently by people from varied cultures and contexts, resulting in several approaches to leadership (Huber and West, 2002). Transactional leadership approaches prevail in countries that demonstrate strong centralized control structures. As decentralization occurs, the transformational model becomes more useful and relevant because the focus shifts from managing processes and administration to leading people and change processes. (Litz & Scott, 2016, p. 5)

On one hand, Ibrahim and Al-Taneiji (2013) claimed that school leaders conveyed more transformational leadership—and on the other hand, Litz and Scott (2016) believed that the transactional model remained prevalent in the region, and “that modifications to leadership approaches would need to be made with respect to the local culture and context, both in terms of the community and schools” (p. 16). Nevertheless, according to the KHDA Dubai Schools Inspections Bureau (DSIB), the researchers postulated that in order for school performance to improve, school principals should not depend solely on being transformative leaders; they should also become instructional leaders and work closely with teachers (KHDA, 2016). KHDA’s 2016 report pointed out that the work of teachers was more directly related to student learning and achievement than the work of principals. Ibrahim and Al-Taneiji (2013) claimed that in the UAE, principals spent more time with teachers, providing direction and guidance, assessing and delivering needed resources, and observing and evaluating performance, than with students. Furthermore, Al Nuaimi, Chowdhury, Eleftheriou, and Katsioloudes (2015), suggested that principals’ behaviors affected more directly teachers’ satisfaction, commitment to work, and working relations with one another. Accordingly, principal leadership styles had stronger relations to outcomes associated with teachers than with students. Therefore, the result of this contradictory research indicated that building on transformational leadership alone would not
create the necessary influence to improve student achievement; efforts should be combined with instructional leadership and training. Nevertheless, according to Ibrahim and Al-Taneiji (2013), Dubai educational policymakers should have exerted more effort to strengthen transformational and instructional leadership in schools if they expected improvement of school performance and student attainment. Further, the researcher wanted to investigate the impact of KHDA’s School Inspection Reports aligned with the UAE National Agenda, and identify specific leadership attitudes and practices that had strong impact on school performance, student achievement, teacher engagement and community’s well-being (KHDA-DSIB, 2017).

In addition, since 2008, KHDA has conducted school inspections showing that Dubai private schools have demonstrated significant improvement due to considerable efforts from schools, teachers and other stakeholders, to improve the quality of education. Parents are now much more likely to have access to a good school for their children than nine years ago. Currently, there are 169,021 students attending good or better schools. This is 134,736 more students than in 2008 …. We continue to emphasize the importance of effective challenge, support and intervention at all levels to bring about the improvements needed to ensure that students have the best chance of success. (DSIB, 2017, p. 5)

KHDA identified six key standards focused on factors that determined school effectiveness: students’ attainment, the quality of teaching, students’ development, curriculum, care and leadership (KHDA, 2016). KHDA inspected 143 schools (255,208 students) during the academic year 2015. Of these, fourteen were rated ‘Outstanding’, fifty-nine were rated ‘Good’, sixty-one were ‘Acceptable’ and nine were considered ‘Unsatisfactory’. Figure 6 reveals that
positive initiative from school leaders contribute to greater results and school performance (Gulf News, 2015).

Figure 6. Positive Results of Effective Leadership.

Improvements of the leadership from 2008 to 2015

Source: Gulf News (2015, May 12)

The reports included a ‘Parent Survey’ section which gave detailed information about the quality of education provided by their child’s school, and helped them make informed decisions. In addition, each report included surveys from students, teachers and principals, evaluating specific information about the quality of parent-school communication, school policies and procedures, delivery of curriculum, and general school atmosphere. Moreover, since 2016, KHDA’s
Initiative to measure stakeholders’ satisfaction (perceived as Happiness in the UAE) in Dubai schools, corresponded to one of the UAE National Agenda’s key priorities. Overall, Dubai rated in the “Outstanding Schools” reported that leadership and Parent-School Contract contributed to positive involvement and readiness to follow ethos of school transformational vision (KHDA, 2016).

**Conclusion**

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, launched a seven year UAE National Agenda leading to the UAE Vision 2021. This strategic plan comprised a set of long-term indicators in various government sectors, including education, health, housing, security and infrastructure, that measured performance outcomes in each of the national priorities, and compared the UAE against global benchmarks. To ensure that schools embraced the tenets of positive education, prescribed by the UAE National Agenda and KHDA’s framework, Dubai education authority was committed to supporting the development of high quality institutions to meet the needs of its expanding population. Based on the UAE Ministry of Education (ADEC, 2016), 61% of students (representing 154,000 from a total of 253,000 students) were in schools that offered a good or better quality of education, as compared to 30% in 2009. Today, the number of good schools in the United Arab Emirates could be an indication that focusing on engagement, positive leadership and accountability from all stakeholder provides nurturing schools that can better cater to students’ wellbeing. These are characteristics needed for building a knowledge-based society and may stem from transformational leadership, but a closer look at the UAE’s global context may determine that a Modified Transformational Model of Leadership was better suited for this research on Dubai’s school improvement.
With the support of expatriates and local government, Dubai was taking a step towards the UAE national goals, by actively engaging its school population in the process of establishing organizational systems and best management practices in all sectors of education (Government of the UAE, 2016). Furthermore, the UAE, and more particularly KHDA (2016), began to focus increased attention on innovation as it was perceived as a drive to commitment to excellence and continuous improvement (KHDA, 2016). While seeking to improve the performance of organizations in its public and private sectors, the UAE was making significant changes to the management processes that characterize school organization, to wean itself from the traditional top-down autocratic model, still common in the GCC. As a result of Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid al-Maktoum’s UAE Vision 2021, the country experienced significant growth in its innovative capacity (Ahmed & Alfaki, 2013). Sheikh Mohammed’s vision involved the promotion of creativity, engagement, and intelligence to keep Dubai a decade ahead of other countries in terms of innovation. Although Dubai sought to implement a culture of innovation across all organizations, the promotion of innovation in education required creative transformational leadership, the need for 21st century teaching and learning skills, and a solid framework for quality assurance and performance (KHDA, 2016).
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to examine how school leaders managed to bring their school rating beyond the acceptable threshold of the UAE National Agenda in 2017, after years of low performance. Because the UAE has been an absolute monarchy, based on a top-down managerial system (Warburton, 2017), it represented a challenging environment for school leaders to adopt a purely Western, and thus more fluid leadership practice (Litz, 2014) and align their school with requirements within the highly diverse setting such as Dubai. In view of this fact, one of the study’s underlying concepts was the modified transformational leadership approach, or Cross-cultural model, which, according to Litz and Scott (2016), constituted the primary process for initiating change because it was based on a paradigm that may be more appropriate for the Middle East and Dubai’s multicultural context. Since the UAE was committed in offering quality education in the Gulf region, through the UAE National Agenda and Vision 2021 framework, Dubai’s government education authority (the Knowledge and Human Development Authority, KHDA) was responsible for maintaining the country’s mandate and overseeing that school leaders foster positive education and school effectiveness.

Since 2009, KHDA had been conducting schools’ inspection reports to provide a comprehensive review of the performance and standards of private schools in Dubai. The overall school ranking was founded on inspection judgments based on performance standards that are drawn from evidence gathered by the inspection team, through classroom observations, assessment, interviews with students, teachers, leaders, board members, and parents, as well as surveys from these stakeholders (KHDA, 2016). Inspectors from the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) made judgments using a six-point scale which was consistent with the inspection
framework (see Figure 3, page 25). For the purpose of this study, private international school leaders were the target audience because previous literature on educational leadership had focused on K-12 government schools, colleges and universities (Alhebsi et al., 2015; Alsalami et al., 2014; Litz & Scott, 2016), and not on K-12 private international schools in the UAE.

To understand the process that brought four K-12 private schools to the expected National Agenda threshold in 2017—after consecutive years of low performance—the data collected during the comparison reports and interviews was aimed at answering the following two questions:

1. Based on the analysis from the 2017 school Inspection Report, what leadership strategies used by the selected sample of international school leaders were identified as effective to change and improve school performance, over a three-year period?

2. Considering Dubai’s highly diverse population with over two hundred nationalities, what, if any, Modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approaches, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016) were evident in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools?

The research design was carried out as a qualitative data collection divided into two phases, because the nature of the study required evidence from two separate sources. In the first phase, the researcher first analyzed published school reports from the four purposefully sampled schools, to draw comparative data that pinpointed how each school improved. The rationale for choosing these four schools was to understand how similar schools, in terms of performance, managed to receive the “Good” ranking in 2017. The comparative analysis was based on information recorded by the KHDA Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB), which published every year the Dubai School Report, ranking from “Weak” to “Outstanding”. The analysis was
done on these four institutions, whose ranking went from “Acceptable” to “Good” in 2017, and identified the parameters linked to Leadership and Management that enabled change in the organization. The data comparison between these schools was done over three consecutive years of inspection reports, from 2015 to 2017 to evaluate how transformation occurred—since the introduction of the National Agenda—and to analyze the parameters that impacted their school performance. Figure 2 (see page 5) identified standards used by inspectors to make their judgment. The six levels of evaluation that the KHDA used was measured by giving a value (5 to 0) in such a way to represent graphically the changes and improvements of each selected school.

Following the data collection and analysis of the three-year-period, which aligned with the introduction of the National Agenda Parameter, the researcher identified key findings that served as background for interviewing the school leaders from the sampled schools. In the second phase, the interviews were used for a narrative inquiry, which focused on the use of stories as data (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). The in-depth interviews with the four selected school principals were designed to obtain deeper annotated data from the school leaders’ experiences on their journey to improvement. In practice, the narrative inquiry design supported the collection of educational skills by drawing on peoples’ experiences: “The idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature” (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007, p. 461). Collecting testimonies on how change was made from the four sampled school leaders determined how linking UAE National Agenda initiatives and school improvement in Dubai highlighted key standards for school effectiveness. The rationale for choosing a qualitative data analysis and narrative design was to include a collection of data from published school inspection reports and conduct in-depth interviews, to unveil effective
leadership attitude and practice. Secondly, this comparative analysis served as a platform for collecting interview data, through purposeful sampling of school leaders from these four schools, developing and relating themes of information on school improvement, and composing a model for other schools that were underperforming in Dubai. In this way, Creswell (2012) suggested that “for educators looking for personal experiences in actual school settings, narrative research design offers practical, specific insights” (p. 502). From this explanation, the researcher constructed predictive statements (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010) about leadership attitudes and practice based on individuals’ experience as school leaders, and related them to school effectiveness.

Through the lens of Litz and Scott’s (2016) which considered interpretations of leadership practice in the Arab world, this research investigated the cultural relevance and implications of using a modified or cross-cultural transformational model of leadership in the context of Dubai. The School Inspection Reports and interview analyses further revealed that by developing innovative and creative solutions, these schools made a positive contribution to current and future generations (Government of the UAE, 2016). Whether a traditional transformational leadership model from Bass (1990), or other models such as Litz and Scott’s (2016) were used in these four improved schools, the results of this study provided insight on best practices that impact school performance, despite an embedded hierarchical top-down managerial style known to the Arab culture (Warburton, 2017). As the KHDA framework presented key components “that define the essential aspects of a quality education” (MOE, 2015, p. 7), and claims that “the quality of leadership is the most significant factor affecting (school) improvement” (KHDA, 2018, p. 14), the question for 36% of Dubai’s underperforming schools was how to get to the “Good” rating.
Similarly, an analysis on how leadership played an important role in school improvement could be seen in the international report published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016). With the release of the PISA results (Programme for International Student Assessment), the OECD identifies top performing countries around the world, and provides information and analysis on each participating countries’ education system. The results reflecting continuous school improvement are attributed to school leaders “who are key drivers to the success of schools”, serving as role models to teachers and working together to improve learning (OECD, 2016, p. 12). Thus a focus on the leadership was necessary to determine how change contributed to school improvement in Dubai. To gain additional insight on Litz and Scott’s (2016) concept of the Modified Transformational Leadership Model, the second step to the qualitative study consisted of conducting formal interviews with the four selected school principals, to identify cross-cultural considerations that may link effective leadership to overall school performance in Dubai. Further reasoning behind the use of the narrative research design is that it gathers data based on existing school reports and then builds on the analysis of interview findings to support the study (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). To best answer the research questions, this qualitative method was designed to provide a broad perspective on transformational leadership practice for international schools. The study investigated whether a modified transformational leadership style, based on goals to improve the UAE’s school system, with the guidance of the KHDA’s Framework, could improve school performance alongside the cultural reality of a diverse and hierarchical embedded managerial model. The impact of the UAE National Agenda Parameter on school improvement demonstrated the levels of complexity international schools face within Dubai’s diverse community and culturally embedded managerial model (Warner & Burton, 2017).
Setting

The researcher looked at how four K-12 private international schools went from ranking “Acceptable” to “Good” as defined by UAE’s National Agenda Parameter, to provide clarity alignment with education reforms, towards a progressive 21st century knowledge-based society. Figure 7 presents the list of these four schools that ranked “Good” in the 2017 Dubai School Report (KHDA-DSIB, 2017) and features general public information on each one for further data comparison and analysis.

Figure 7. The Four Private International Schools in Dubai that Rated from “Acceptable” to “Good” in 2017 (KHDA-DSIB, 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td>2130</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>1156</td>
<td>1624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of Students</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>4-13</td>
<td>4-18</td>
<td>4-18</td>
<td>4-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Special Needs Students</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largest nationality group of students</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Teachers</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Guidance Counselors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largest nationality group of teachers</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>UK/Ire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student ratio</td>
<td>1:15</td>
<td>1:11</td>
<td>1:16</td>
<td>1:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher turnover</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KHDA Rating since 2008</td>
<td>08/09</td>
<td>09/10</td>
<td>08/09</td>
<td>09/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/09</td>
<td>09/10</td>
<td>08/09</td>
<td>09/10</td>
<td>08/09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Weak**
- **Acceptable**
- **Good**

Except for School B, four schools had been in operation since the creation of the KHDA in 2008 and were yearly inspected. KHDA typically did not inspect schools during their first year of operation (KHDA, 2014), which explained why School B—Established in 2009—was inspected in 2010 and yearly onwards. These four schools were also rated “Acceptable” when the UAE National Agenda Framework was introduced in 2014. By unveiling how critical problems of practice in these four schools were identified in the Dubai School Report of 2015, 2016, and improved in 2017, the study examined if/and or common managerial practice had enacted change to meet the requirements set by Dubai School Inspection Framework. The researcher’s work experience in the Gulf region provided the ability to obtain authentic and practical governmental school reports as well as to facilitate on campus face-to-face interviews with the school leaders who contributed in their school improvement plan. The study aimed firstly at identifying the key elements that contributed to effective school leadership in these four schools, and secondly at outlining the strategies used for the overall school improvement. Its purpose was to investigate whether leaders in Dubai schools rated “Good”\(^2\) and better, had been practicing a Modified

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\(^2\) Good means that the quality of performance meets the expectation of the UAE National Agenda. This is the expected level for every school in the UAE. (KHDA, 2015).
Transformational Leadership approach, while implementing the National Agenda and Vision 2021 Framework—designed by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA, 2017).

Participants

The participants of this study were selected based on their representation of international school leaders of the four featured schools, thus using a purposeful sample. International school leader was defined as a senior administrator of a school—Superintendent, Principal, CEO, Vice-Principal, Deputy Principal—who has the responsibility of leading a school that offers an international curriculum such as US, UK, French, or IB, offshore, as in the UAE for instance (KHDA, 2014). These international school leaders had been purposefully sampled because they took part in bringing their school performance from the lower ranking “Acceptable”3 in 2015 and in 2016, to “Good” in the spring of 2017, and thus met the expectation of the UAE National Agenda. The sample included principals and senior administrators who were interviewed at their convenience, either on their school campus, or by phone, to evaluate how change had been implemented in their school. These four schools managed to join the ranks of qualified schools in 2017, whose performance met the expectation of the national statutory requirements, after nearly a decade at the “Acceptable” ranking (KHDA School Inspection Report, 2017). To facilitate the IRB review, none of the participants belonged to a vulnerable population. The ideal number of participants for the interviews was four school leaders, one for each school. These four in-depth interviews were designed to highlight the key drivers of transformation that may have contributed to the overall school performance. This number provided an effective balance of responses and showed the connection with the three-year KHDA School Report data. All

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3 Acceptable means that the quality of performance meets the minimum level of quality required in the UAE. This is the minimum level for every school in the UAE. (KHDA, 2015).
participants within this group were leading schools that offered different curriculum, varied in size, and had different school populations, thus bringing a rich diversity to this study. With the information generated from this research, future school leaders and operators may have a better idea of how to manage school change within a diverse population, and in an international setting.

These interviews were conducted with willing participants after an invitation was sent out by electronic mail in fall 2018. To ensure quality data retrieval, the researcher acted as the interviewer. Throughout the interview process, the researcher collaborated with the participants to be accommodating and provide a comfortable setting. Prior to the interview, a formal Interview Cover Letter (Appendix A) was emailed to the interviewees to introduce the researcher and the purpose of the interview. There was also a multiple choice Demographic Information Form (Appendix B) that the interviewees were asked to complete prior to the interviews, to understand participants’ profile.

**Data**

As a member of a Senior Leadership Team in a K-12 American school in Dubai, the researcher was in a position to use published reports on the targeted schools, and in this representative study, to follow the process of transformation that had led to improved results, according to the KHDA’s 2017 School Inspection Report. The School Inspection Report for all Dubai schools is made public in the spring of each year. Data collection for the three-year school inspections of the four targeted schools revealed improvement on a number of performance standards set by KHDA’s Framework (KHDA, 2017), including student progress and effective leadership, which directly impacted the school’s overall rating. The researcher included graphical and tabulated presentations of research findings illustrating the specific areas of improvements from one year to the next.
The researcher collected the data from school reports, which measured school performance based on Leadership, Teaching & Learning, and Assessment from one year to the next. Following this qualitative data collection, its analysis was conducted by the researcher using the relevant interview questions (Appendix D) to gain additional insight on how leaders adapted their leadership styles to ensure school performance and successful rating in an international setting. The research used in-depth standardized open-ended interview questions. In using this approach, the researcher prepared a set of open-ended questions which were carefully worded and arranged for the purpose of bringing insights on the Research Questions. This method was also preferred because four interviews were included in the data collecting process.

As the sampled schools had been underperforming in 2015 and in 2016, according to the Dubai School Inspection Report, published in the spring of each year, the interviews aimed to evaluate the overall school organizational development and identify the criteria that raised the school ranking over the threshold of “Acceptable”. In addition, questions were related to cultural and contextual considerations of transformational leadership as well as to the concept of change to reveal specific information on the school leadership practices. The rationale for using this qualitative data collection method and narrative inquiry design was: it allows for the researcher to capture the meaning of the school leader’s experiences in their own words. To ensure validity and credibility of the data being collected, frequent checks occurred by restating and summarizing statements made by the participant. When required, clarifying questions was a technique also used by the researcher to ensure that the meaning or position of the subject was clearly understood and properly portrayed. At the end of the interview, the researcher shared findings with the participant and asked for comments. When the transcripts and interpretation did not represent the participant’s meanings, views, or intentions, then each interviewee had the
opportunity to clarify his/her position. The researcher allotted an extra 15-20 minutes after the formal interview for additional clarification.

**Analysis**

By using a qualitative narrative research design (Creswell, 2012), the researcher strived to gather a more comprehensive collection of data to gain greater insight on identifying key elements that contributed to effective school leadership in Dubai private international schools, and secondly, on outlining the strategies used for overall school improvement. The researcher used in-depth interviews to gather the four school leaders’ stories in relation with their leadership practice and change. These narrative interviews were recorded and transcribed by identifying the key elements of the participants’ responses. The process used for narrative transcribing was “Restorying” (Creswell, 2012, p. 509) and it involved coding these key elements and categorizing the data into relevant themes. Through the lens of Litz and Scott’s (2016) Modified Transformational Model, the researcher explored connections between their cross-cultural approach and Dubai’s multicultural context. While comparing the results of the data, emergent themes were highlighted to potentially attribute school improvement to the impact of the UAE National Agenda and KHDA’s framework. The study adopted a qualitative method based initially on comparing performance standards from three years’ sampled school reports to identify the parameters that generated the change, and the researcher documented whether this change led to transformation attributed to a traditional leadership model or a modified leadership approach. After the collection and analysis of qualitative data, the intent of the narrative research design was to portray the school leaders’ stories drawn from the interview process. This process was meant to gain insights into the practice and applicability of transformational leadership in
Dubai’s educational context and explore whether change and school performance may be associated with a leadership model that understands essential cultural considerations.

**Participant Rights**

Research participants had the right to participate or decline the interviews. Every measure was taken to protect participants' rights and confidentiality. Qualitative data was coded fairly to reflect authentic overall results. Participants were chosen to avoid any conflict of interest. Although the interviews were conducted in English, they were rigorously reviewed for the Middle Eastern context, to avoid misinterpretation or unveil any unethical cultural practices. In addition, a consent form (Appendix C) was required before data collection and covered the following areas:

1. It tells the participants what they are being asked to do, by whom, and for what purpose.
2. Participants must know the identity of the researcher, his or her affiliations if any, and whom to contact for information if they have problems with the research process.
3. It informs the participants of any risks they might be taking by participating in the research.
4. It informs the participants what rights they have in the process, particularly the right of review of material and the right to withdraw from the process.
5. It indicates how the results of the study will be disseminated and whether participants can expect to benefit in any way, monetarily or otherwise, from participating in the study.
6. It indicates whether participants’ names or school names will be used in the study.
7. It indicates that participants are free to participate or not participate in the research without prejudice to them.
Once the data was collected, the information was cataloged without interviewees’ identification to ensure de-identification and the privacy of each participant. Transcripts of the interviews were shared with the participants upon request to facilitate continual member-checking. Once the study was completed, each participant was provided with a copy of the results.

**Potential Limitations of the Study**

Despite bringing theoretical and practical contributions, this study did have a number of limitations. First, the data collected for school ranking focused primarily on KHDA’s three-year School Inspection Report recommendations—specific to each school—which were based on a rigorous framework that may not have been adapted to suit all international schools in Dubai. Although the principles of KHDA’s framework were well founded to meet 21st century and positive practice of teaching and learning, there was a concern over the fairness of labeling other schools “Acceptable” or “Weak” because they were unable to culturally adapt to the Western influence of the KHDA framework guidelines. Another possible limitation of this study was the reliance on a sample of schools that may not have been willing to share full information on how they improved to “Good”, from being among the lower performing schools in Dubai. The researcher faced a challenge whenever school leaders felt that due to Dubai’s private school competitive market and hierarchical accountability, it was best not to reveal explicitly the secret of their success (Litz & Scott 2016). The solution was to rephrase questions and to provide feedback from the schools’ Inspection Reports—which are public information—to confirm valid information through the interview process. Another point to be made was to remind interviewees that KHDA’s initiative was meant to encourage well performing schools to assist others and to guide them in using best leadership practice (Hanif, 2016).
As Creswell (2012) claimed that qualitative researchers strive for understanding, the present researcher believed that a representative study focused on these four sampled schools in Dubai may provide the reader with valid conclusions regarding the school improvement initiative implemented by the UAE National Agenda Parameter. The findings aimed at gaining more insight on adapting transformational leadership, using the lens of Litz and Scott’s (2016) Modified transformational Model which could serve as a platform for analyzing the impact of change on schools in international contexts such as Dubai.
CHAPTER FOUR
DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a selected sample of international school leaders in Dubai managed to bring their school rating beyond the acceptable threshold of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) National Agenda in 2017, after three years of low performance. More specifically, this study addressed two research questions:

1. What leadership strategies used by these school leaders were identified as effective to change and improve school performance over a three-year period?

2. In addition, considering Dubai’s highly diverse population with over two hundred nationalities (Government of the UAE, 2018), what, if any, Modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approaches, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016) were evident in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools?

This chapter summarizes the results from two sources: 1) Published school report analyses and 2) Transcripts of recorded one-on-one interviews with four participants from these schools (one from each school) conducted over an eight-week period. The comparative analysis was based on information compiled over a three-year period by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) and more specifically the Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) which publishes every year the Dubai School Report ranking international schools from “Weak” to “Outstanding”. The analysis was conducted on the four institutions whose ranking went from “Acceptable” in years 2015 and 2016 to “Good” in 2017. The research sought to identify the parameters linked to Leadership and Management that enabled change in these organizations. In the second phase, the narrative inquiry approach focused on the use of stories as data (Ary et al., 2010; Creswell, 2012; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). The interview questions (Appendix
D) were the same across the four schools\(^4\) (Schools A, B, C and D) and were designed to obtain deeper and richer data from the school leaders’ experiences on their journey to school transformation. Each interview lasted 25-30 minutes, and all of the participants related their experience in first-person account.

**Emergence of Themes**

After the analysis of these reports and from coding the interview data, six themes emerged out of the overall data analysis:

1. National Requirements
2. Major Changes that Brought School Improvement
3. Leadership
4. The UAE Context
5. Cultural Diversity and Implications
6. Following the KHDA Framework

Prior to providing a description of the interconnected themes, an explanation of the school report data, background information on the four participants and synopsis of each school are detailed below. To keep schools’ names and their leaders’ identities confidential, the researcher identified schools as School A, B, C and D. School B followed the American curriculum and Schools A, C, and D followed the British curriculum.

**Findings from School Reports**

Findings from School Reports established patterns related to the six major themes:

KHDA Requirements, Major Changes that brought school improvement, Leadership, the UAE

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\(^4\) There was another American curriculum school that was part of the initial data collection. Although the researcher analyzed this school’s three-year KHDA inspection reports, the principal preferred not to take part in the research and declined any involvement or interview.
Context, Cultural Diversity, and the KHDA Framework. The data comparison between the four sampled schools reflects three consecutive years of inspection reports, from 2015 to 2017, analyzing six levels of evaluation by KHDA (See Figure 2, page 5).

A list of indicators developed by KHDA provided a framework within which inspectors made judgements on the basis of evidence of observed practice (KHDA, 2015). The purpose of these indicators was to create “a vocabulary for a conversation with schools about the key purposes of education and the key factors of educational quality” (KHDA, 2015, p. 17). More specifically, “The use of a common set of standards and indicators supports consistency in judgements across different inspection teams” (KHDA, 2015, p. 17). In addition, by publishing descriptive performance standards and indicators, KHDA’s goal was to provide transparency in the inspection process, a clear picture of educational excellence to which schools can aspire, and a template for self-evaluation and school improvement (KHDA, 2015).

Additionally, specific to this research, KHDA’s Leadership and Management Standard included five indicators: The Effectiveness of Leadership, School Self-Evaluation and Improvement Planning, Parents and the Community, Governance, and Management, Staffing, Facilities and Resources.

**Background Profiles**

A demographic profile of the four interview participants is shown in Figure 8 and provides information on the senior leaders of Schools A, B, C and D.
Figure 8. Table of Participants’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education: Highest Degree Completed</td>
<td>Bachelor, Master, Doctorate</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title/Position held at your School</td>
<td>Principal, Vice Principal, Deputy Principal, HOD</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in International Education</td>
<td>&lt; 1 Year, &lt; 3 Years, &lt; 5 Years, &lt; 10 Years</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;3</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in a Senior Leadership Position</td>
<td>&lt; 1 Year, &lt; 3 Years, &lt; 5 Years, &lt; 10 Years</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Dubai</td>
<td>&lt; 1 Year, &lt; 3 Years, &lt; 5 Years, &lt; 10 Years</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;3</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in the Middle East</td>
<td>&lt; 1 Year, &lt; 3 Years, &lt; 5 Years, &lt; 10 Years</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>&lt;3</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male, Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61+</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>61+</td>
<td>41-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of origin</td>
<td>UK, Other EU country, North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Australia</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>North America</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8 indicates the study comprised three women with Master’s degree and one man with a Bachelor’s degree. All of the participants were principals of their school. Previously, Schools A and B Principals were assistant principals during the 2016-2017 inspection. School C Principal had join the school two weeks before the 2016-2017 inspection, while School D Principal had been in position since 2014. Their length of service in an international school setting ranged from three to ten years, although they had all been in a senior leadership position for minimum 10 years. All of the principals interviewed had started their Middle Eastern school administrator journey in Dubai, three to ten years prior to 2018. There were three Western
principals (two from UK and one from USA), and one from Asia (India) and their ages varied between 41-61+ years-old.

A synopsis of each school featured in this study is presented below to both inform the interpretation of the findings and also to frame the analysis and recommendations.

**School A Synopsis**

School A was a private British Curriculum primary school, open since 1994 with 2,130 students, ranging from 4-13 years-old. The largest nationality group of students was Filipino and there were 142 teachers, mostly Indian with 24 assistants and five guidance counselors, with a teacher-student ratio of 1:15, and a 10% teacher turnover (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a). From 2008 at the first inspection until 2012, School A had been rated “Acceptable” twice and twice “Weak”. From 2013 until 2016, it was ranked “Acceptable”. Recommendations from the Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) focused on the need to improve leadership and governance; improve teaching by developing the use of assessment; improve students' learning skills and attainment and develop the provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The 2015-2016 inspection findings indicated that “the school needed to use more robust international standards of comparisons for students’ attainment and progress” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 5). In the 2016-2017 inspection report, there had been, however, significant improvements in many areas of attainment and progress “due to the well-planned training and monitoring provided by leaders” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 6). In addition, the DSIB highlighted three major changes which impacted School A’s performance. First, “The ethos and vision of the school, shared by all staff, [were] the main drivers of its success”. Second, “The quality of professional development for teachers, and the improvements in the use of assessment, [were] having a significant impact on
students’ outcomes”. Third, “School leaders [had] an accurate view of the school, based on strong self-evaluation” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 7). While the overall rating of School A Leadership was “Good”, the 2016-2017 inspection reported “the principal had established a clear understanding of what the school needed to do to improve” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 22). Moreover, School A Principal, the staff and the students had implemented innovative ways to develop areas of the school which led to improvements that were “secure and sustainable” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 22).

School B Synopsis

School B was a private American Curriculum Pre-K to Grade 12 school, open since 2009 with 776 students, ranging from 4 to 18 years-old. The largest nationality group of students was American and there were 68 teachers, mostly American with 23 assistants and three guidance counselors, with a teacher-student ratio of 1:11, and a 30% teacher turnover (KHDA-DSIB, 2017b). From 2010 at the first inspection until 2015, School B had been rated “Acceptable”. Recommendations from DSIB -KHDA focused on the need to improve the attainment and progress in Arabic; the development of teaching strategies at all grade levels; the inclusion of Emirati history and culture; and to apply the UAE national priorities in the wider curriculum in all phases. In the 2016-2017 inspection, improvements were attributed to leadership: “The new heads of school provide clear direction and are leading school improvement effectively” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017b, p. 22). A particular strength of the school was the ethos of a positive learning environment “with the distinctive features and character of an American curriculum in an international setting” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017b, p. 22). The inspection report recognized four major changes which impacted School B’s performance. First, the new leaders had established a positive ethos by building on existing strengths to address recommendations. Second,
responsibilities were distributed effectively; the strategic steps were measured and appropriate, and reflected the school priorities to improve students’ outcomes. Third, communication channels were effective and relationships were positive. Fourth, leaders at all levels were driving change, as evident in curriculum development, teaching innovations and students’ personal development. The positive impact on the overall effectiveness of leadership demonstrated the capacity for sustained improvement, as well as “pride in the growth of the school” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017b, p. 22).

**School C Synopsis**

School C was a private British Curriculum Pre-K to Year 12 school, open since 1998 with 1,156 students, ranging from 3 to 18 years-old. The largest nationality group of students was Arab and there were 71 teachers, mostly Indian with 10 assistants, no guidance counselor, with a teacher-student ratio of 1:16, and a 14% teacher turnover (KHDA-DSIB, 2017c). From 2008 at the first inspection until 2011, School C had been rated “Good”. From 2012 until 2016 however, it was ranked “Acceptable”. Recommendations from DSIB-KHDA focused on the need to improve the provision and outcomes in the early years’ program; assessment across the school; provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); and the quality of leadership and management (KHDA-DSIB, 2017c). In the 2016-2017 inspection, there had been significant improvements in students’ attainment and progress; students’ personal and social development, and the quality of teaching and learning across the school. In addition, the DSIB highlighted four major changes which impacted School C’s performance. First, the recently-appointed deputy principal had played a strong role “in establishing a sense of common purpose and direction based on enhancing the breadth of provision for students, and further strengthening teaching and learning” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017c, p. 23). In addition, leaders at all
levels were committed to, and engaged in, improving students’ outcomes. Second, subject leaders had an increasing knowledge of the recently revised National Curriculum in England, and most understood effective practice in teaching and learning. Third, leaders’ commitment to inclusion were reflected by the improvements made in support for students with SEND. Additionally, the school provided some training for its leaders. Fourth, relationships across the school were professional and staff was mutually supportive. Regular heads of department meetings provided as well adequate channel for communication (KHDA-DSIB, 2017c). The DSIB report recognized that leaders had begun to focus on “enriching students’ overall experience of school” and most of the recommendations from the previous inspection had been addressed (KHDA-DSIB, 2017c, p. 7).

School D Synopsis

School D was a private British Curriculum Pre-K to Year 13 school, open since 2004 with 1,624 students, ranging from 4 to 18 years-old. The largest nationality group of students was Pakistani and there were 110 teachers, mostly from the UK and Ireland, with 34 assistants, and one guidance counselor, a teacher-student ratio of 1:15, and a 27% teacher turnover (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d). From 2008 at the first inspection until 2016, School D had been rated “Acceptable”. Recommendations from DSIB-KHDA focused on the need to improve provision and outcomes in the early learners’ program as well as the Self-Evaluation and improvement plans. These had both been addressed effectively during the 2016-2017 inspection. Improvements were also required for provision in Islamic education and Arabic (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d). In the 2016-2017 inspection report, there had been significant improvements in teaching and the development of effective learning skills, stronger links with Emirati culture and UAE society; and the level of protection and safeguarding for all students was rated “Outstanding”. In
addition, the DSIB highlighted three major changes which impacted School D’s performance. First, leaders had set a clear direction based on the school’s mission and vision. All leaders were also fully committed to the UAE national priorities and to achieving the National Agenda targets. Second, all senior leaders had “a clear understanding of how students learn best” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d, p. 23). They were well supported by middle leaders and provided “the positive environment necessary for the academic and personal development that students will need to meet the challenges of the 21st. century” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d, p. 23). Third, relationships between all leaders were strong and communication between the different levels and areas of responsibility were effective. “Senior leaders [had] demonstrated that they [understood] how to improve the performance of the school [and had] the capacity to continue to move the school forward.” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d, p. 23). The DSIB report recognized that leaders had collectively demonstrated “the necessary drive, perseverance and skills to address remaining areas for development—ensuring the school is compliant with statutory regulations—whilst building effectively on the many areas of existing good practice” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d, p. 23).

The Analysis of the School Reports in Relation to the Themes

After providing basic information on KHDA requirements, demographic background for each interview participant, as well as a synopsis for each school, part of this research explained the role of school inspection in defining and measuring educational quality to support the growth of education in Dubai. The Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB) through the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) provided comprehensive information on the standard of education in Dubai, which informed improvement planning at school and policy level (KHDA, 2017). The appointment of an international school principal, as mentioned in Chapter One, received prior approval from KHDA as the principal plays a key role in following National
Agenda requirements while leading its team through the school improvement process. Following the analysis of the school reports and interviews, several themes emerged. These are discussed next as they relate to school improvement, common practice and leadership styles.

**Thematic Finding One: National Requirements**

The first theme derived from reports and interviews was related to National Requirements as the UAE National Agenda and Vision 2021 were represented throughout the KHDA Inspection Framework (MOE, 2015). To understand the UAE National Requirements, the Ministry of Education launched a strategic plan for 2014-2021 “to develop an innovative education system for building a knowledgeable and globally competitive society” (Government of the UAE, 2016, para. 1). The system aimed at meeting future labor market demand. Moreover, schools participated in many international tests to examine and benchmark the performance levels of the UAE education system. To ensure quality education and to support schools’ improvement and students’ outcomes, the Ministry of Education carried on regular school inspections in the UAE, following the School Inspection Framework, with the guidance of the KHDA and the DSIB specifically in Dubai. To compare the four sampled schools, the researcher collected data through the three-year school inspection reports (2015, 2016 and 2017) to show the correlations between school leadership and school improvement. These sampled schools shared the same indicators that contributed to the overall school performance and demonstrated that similar leadership decisions were made to focus on these particular indicators. Each school was presented in a graph to reflect how the Performance Standard Leadership and Management was articulated over the three-year inspection from 2015 to 2017 through five indicators: The Effectiveness of Leadership, the School Self-Evaluation and Improvement Planning, Parents and the Community, Governance and Management, Staffing, Facilities and Resources.
Findings from School A (Figure 9) indicated an improvement from 2015 to 2017, mainly in Management Staffing, Facilities and Resources, and also in the Effectiveness of Leadership and the School Self Evaluation which all ranked from “Acceptable” to “Good” in 2017. In addition, while the quality of partnerships with parents and the community was evaluated as “Very Good”, both school and community benefitted from a strong partnership that effectively supports students’ development (DSIB, 2017a, p. 23). In the 2016-2017 School Report, DSIB highlighted the contribution of the school’s leader: “The principal, with the support and dedication of her leadership teams and other staff, has built a strong and secure ethos and bold vision for the school” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 22).
School B (Figure 10), with its American curriculum had new ownership in 2013, also shows the school’s Leadership and Management was rated “Good” in some areas although Governance was considered “Acceptable”. In schools, the key difference between governance and management is the distinct separation between strategic leadership (Governance) and the operational running of the school (Management). Governance is the role of boards while management is the responsibility of the principal (KHDA, 2018b). International research and school inspection results showed that good school governance had a positive impact on school performance—where governance was rated “Good”, standards of student attainment were likely to be higher (KHDA, 2018).
School C (Figure 11) showed very little improvement in Leadership and Management over the three-year period; in fact, when rated “Good” by KHDA in 2017, the indicator related to Management, Staffing, Facilities and Resources went down from “Good” to “Acceptable”, although the Effectiveness of Leadership went up from “Acceptable” to “Good”.

Figure 12: School D Chart- KHDA School Reports from 2015 to 2017
Findings for Schools D and C were similar. School D (Figure 12) made most of the changes in 2015-2016, where minimal adjustments secured a “Good” rating in 2017, including the School Self-Evaluation and Improvement Planning which went from “Acceptable” to “Good”.

**The Interview Revelations in Relation to Thematic Finding One**

While these findings from the KHDA School Reports indicated all four schools had been rated “Good” in 2017, after years of low performance, the question remained how school leaders went about making the necessary changes within the National Agenda Framework. How these leaders managed to transform their school was revealed during the interview process. Seen in Appendix D, the interviews’ opening question asked: What is your understanding of the aspects of 21st century educational practices as essential for the KHDA Inspection Framework and the UAE school ranking? Aimed at revealing each principal’s interpretation of the National Requirement, all four principals answered they understood the government’s initiatives towards a 21st century vision which requires school leaders to be more effective instructional leaders and to use the Inspection Framework as a guidance for transforming their school: “Understanding of these practices does have a major impact on the outcomes of inspections” (School B Principal).

In addition, the four principals all agreed that they were under pressure when they prepared for the next yearly inspections: “I always remember the inspectors saying that leadership and management would probably be judged as inadequate at the end of that inspection” (School D Principal). Despite challenges related to the inspection process, understanding and embedding the framework requirements and involving all stakeholders, including owners and parents, did have a major impact on their school’s outcomes. “All those things really match to the National Framework expectations of KHDA, in their framework and expectations for outstanding really
do raise the bar” (School D Principal). The four interview participants mentioned the importance of aligning their educational practices to the National Framework expectations of KHDA in order to raise their school’s rating to the next level: “So this is the approach we followed, and then we made sure that we did all that was mandatory by KHDA for the National Agenda” (School A Principal). In addition, the principals all mentioned they modeled their practice not only to address KHDA inspection requirements as such, but they viewed the Framework as a guide to identify, as School D Principal described: “What outstanding schools should look like” (School D Principal).

**Thematic Finding Two: Major Changes That Brought School Improvement**

Key findings related to major changes that brought school improvement were recorded in the first phase of the school reports. To understand what constituted major changes, the DSIB provided an inspection journey for each school in the KHDA-DSIB yearly report to illustrate the progress of the school and its rating over the years. The report reviewed the list of recommendations recorded during the last inspection and took a close look at how the school made major changes to address these recommendations. School A’s most revealing change was seen in the Management, Staffing, Facilities and Resources indicator which jumped two levels, from “Acceptable” in 2016 to “Very Good” in 2017 and was directly linked to the Effectiveness of Leadership. In this case, improving management by ensuring quality staffing, providing a safe environment conducive to learning, and supplying educational resources impacted the performance of Teaching and Assessment, which positively affected the overall ranking of the institution. This improvement was attributed to Principal A’s initiative. In the 2016-2017 School Report prepared by the Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB), the principal with her senior leaders were described as holding staff accountable “for their work robustly and effectively” and
this approach was highlighted as being “an important factor in the improvements across the school” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 22).

As seen in School A, there was improvement in Teaching and Assessment in School B. The school’s overall Assessment against international benchmarks had improved in 2017, as per the UAE National Agenda key objectives. In the case of School C, there were two factors that allowed the school to change its rating to “Good”. The first one was a clear improvement in Teaching and Assessment, and the second one was related to another indicator that was rated unacceptable in 2016. Although the school was judged “Weak” in Health & Safety and Quality of Support in 2016, Management, Staffing, Facilities and Resources were rated “Good”.

Improvements in the infrastructure of the school within a year allowed the protection, care, guidance and support of students to return to an “Acceptable” level in the 2017 school inspection report. The Effectiveness of Leadership also improved to “Good” and also contributed to the overall school performance.

To relate these findings to the participants’ explanations, the second interview question was: “Could you describe how you went about making the necessary changes that improved your school ranking in 2017?” (Appendix D). All four principals related the most important change to the Inspection Framework and the recommendations made by KHDA regarding the effectiveness of leadership and school improvement. Judgement on Leadership also involved the Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) and Improvement Planning. The Dubai School Inspection Bureau considered the SEF as a guide for school inspectors “to measure the impact of their work in different areas, leading to an overall evaluation of the quality of education” (KHDA, 2015, p. 2). The accuracy of the SEF indicated how well the leaders knew their school as it needed “to analyze attainment and progress data, draw conclusions about why the data results [were] and
what actions [were] going to be taken to improve results” (School B Principal). The four school principals focused on immediate and urgent matters listed under the inspection report recommendations: “Because these KHDA inspections in fact somehow force us to go beyond, stretch ourselves through that extent, that we make sure that we do best for the school, so it becomes like mandatory” (School A Principal). They agreed that the implementation of the UAE National Agenda through the inspection process completely shifted the role of Leadership and Management: “If this National Agenda Parameter was not forced on to us, perhaps the schools around us, as well as ours here, we would not be ensuring that children are getting quality education. The Quality Assurance would not be there” (School A Principal). With the guidance of KHDA, school leaders agreed they had a clear conception on how to bring change as they shared similar key contributors that lead to school improvements:

- Financial investment (human resource and school upgrades),
- Data analysis to optimize curriculum adaptation,
- Professional development, and
- Modelling best practice of positive attitude and behavior towards the school.

Three out of the four school leaders admitted having to persuade their school owner(s) to agree that a financial investment was necessary to bring improvement as planned by Vision 2021: “It was quite a big job in convincing the investors that we needed more money, and we did, because we had to remodel the staff completely to give capacity for these changes to happen” (School D Principal). Findings from interviews also revealed that following the Framework while managing a tight budget was challenging. School A Principal voiced concern about school’s fees which are the lowest compared to other British schools, therefore restricting the budget considerably, and limiting the resources and quality space needs.
In addition, all four principals brought up the challenge of the private (for profit) school sector, whereby there is a need to fill the school somehow “to try to appease a school owner” or whoever the school operating company may be, and that “they have a particular vision in terms of what they see as their profitability” (School C Principal). This pressure to generate profit was mentioned by three out of four principals who felt they had been constantly pushing against the boundaries, whether dealing with school owners, governance, or parents, trying to ensure they can continue to obtain investments for the changes they needed to make to enable their school to grow, and students to reach their full potential: “Investment is ok when the numbers are high; but if numbers of students are down … that could have an impact on whether you can or whether there’s the support to be able then to fund those things” (School D Principal).

As Governance was one of the leadership indicators, school operators and owners were expected to be involved in the school’s strategic planning and to understand how to benefit school management. There were mixed feelings related to the efficiency of Governance. On one hand, School D Principal explained that before the Framework was implemented, the governance of the school wasn’t focused on the success of the school in terms of continuous academic growth; since then, “There’s a community vision, an ethos now that is contributing to that continued success” (School D Principal). On the other hand, School C Principal voiced the challenge over leading the change effort because of the lack of support from the school owners: “Their lack of general life experience discounts against them, in terms of getting the best outcomes and win-win situations, in terms of moving the school organization forward” (School C Principal). Additionally, School C Principal blamed the owners for not changing an “outmoded and ineffective” school operating system which the principal felt didn’t reflect 21st century progress and innovation: “They [KHDA] obviously pushed the whole aspect of
technology …. The irony of that is that I would say, our school is probably technologically in the dark ages” (School C Principal). One of the research questions intended to unveil what leadership strategies used by the international school leaders were identified as effective to change and improve school performance, over a three-year period. The next thematic findings obtained from the interviews are discussed in detail below to explain what leadership strategies were used by the four principals.

**Thematic Finding Three: Leadership**

After identifying each school’s specific change, the third question asked participants to describe the four principals’ leadership style. In terms of KHDA expectations, Leadership was considered effective when leaders at all levels, inspired by the Principal, set an exceptionally clear strategic direction and promote a vision that was shared by the whole school community. The Framework expected senior leaders to be highly committed to the UAE National and Emirate priorities which were very firmly embedded within the school’s vision and strategic plans. The school’s distributed leadership “builds capacity, empowers individuals and teams, and creates an ethos of collective responsibility” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 85). To find out whether the four participants were in line with KHDA’s expectations, the leaders were asked more specifically: “What is your leadership style? What leadership traits do you believe you convey that have been useful to make this transformation?” (Appendix D). Findings revealed all four school leaders believed they conveyed a distributed leadership style where shared vision, collaboration, transparency, and communication are paramount. “Making staff accountable for their errors, giving leaders some autonomy to make decisions really has moved us forward” (School D Principal). While the participants favored a shared leadership, they also mentioned the importance of: 1) Accountability, 2) Shared responsibilities, and 3) Teamwork.
Accountability

School B Principal highlighted the importance of including the entire Senior Leadership Team, as well as heads of department and other mid-level leaders in their preparation for inspection and in writing the SEF as a team effort. The principal had brought in experienced heads and others from peer schools for a mock inspection. They had to defend their ratings, their analysis, and their action plans, just as it happens during a real inspection, to ensure “everyone would be accountable” (School B Principal).

Shared Responsibilities

Similarly, School C Principal explained that one of the most important leadership qualities was “first of all to have a vision, to communicate well to the people, and involving all stakeholders to share the vision” (School C Principal). By linking leadership with student’s achievement, Principal from School A highlighted the importance of making school decisions to benefit the children, ensuring positive impact on the children: “If it has a positive impact, it is the right thing we are doing. That’s how I measure new practices” (School A Principal). School D Principal shared a liking “to lead a team that is prepared to take risks and to be innovative in the way that they want to see the school moving forward, and how they feel that particular areas need to be shaped” (School D Principal). Findings revealed the four school leaders agreed on the importance of involving all stakeholders and making them accountable in the shared responsibility of moving their school forward. Stakeholders include staff, students, parents, the community, and Governance and before the inspection, the views of parents, teachers and students are surveyed by KHDA-DSIB. Key messages from each group are considered during the inspection and these help to form inspection judgements (KHDA-DSIB, 2017). As reported by the Dubai School Inspection Bureau, School A Principal’s initiative in involving all staff
benefitted the school’s progress: “The ethos and vision of the school, shared by all staff, are the main drivers of its success” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017a, p. 7). Similarly, School D Principal was also praised by KHDA-DSIB in the 2017 School Report for bringing stakeholders together: “These improvements are a direct result of better leadership, governance and partnership with parents” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d, p. 5).

In addition, the participants highlighted leaders’ responsibility in providing the necessary training and professional development, to ensure guidance and understanding to achieve the expectations that the school has set. For instance, in School B, “Teachers feel supported by school leaders through the professional development offered, and the time and resources provided for planning good quality lessons” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017b, p. 25). Furthermore, the DSIB School Report of 2017 acknowledged School D’s approach to professional development: “The recent initiative of supporting traditional professional development with collaborative research projects is innovative” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017d, p. 25). To help schools develop systems that benefit education, KHDA had put in place training programs through the “What Works” initiative, launched in 2012, to promote effective leadership and self-evaluation school planning. “What Works is a series of ongoing professional development events, designed to promote collaboration between schools and share best practices among teachers and leaders in Dubai” (KHDA, 2017, p. 5). While school inspections had created a common understanding of government expectations and on how to promote continuous discussions focused on improving education in Dubai, schools were encouraged to foster professional development following the “What Works” philosophy (KHDA, 2017, p. 5). In favor of the collaboration system and sharing professional knowledge, School A Principal in fact mentioned her appreciation of a supportive
KHDA: “So I think we all leaders owe a lot to KHDA for helping us move ahead” (School A Principal).

**Teamwork**

The four school leaders explained the role of the leadership team was to build a learning community to make everyone feel they were part of the vision and the mission statement. There is teamwork if all stakeholders are contributing to the success the school is continuing to experience: “So we involve teaching staff, our students and parents in our School Development Plan, in our Self-Evaluation; everyone has a part to play” (School D Principal).

**Thematic Finding Four: The UAE Context**

Findings related to the UAE context highlighted one of the theories used to guide the study. This theme is discussed in Chapter Five. Briefly, Litz and Scott (2016) described the leadership style in the UAE as “top-down [and] readily accepted in this cultural setting” where “controlled freedom and authoritative leadership [are] the norm” (Litz & Scott, 2016, p. 16). To this leadership description the researcher asked the four participants: “How or hasn’t this type of leadership affected your efforts to make the necessary changes at your school? Is their assessment valid from your point of view?” (Appendix D). While Instructional Leadership is favored by the National Agenda and KHDA Framework (MOE, 2015), findings detailed below described two styles of leaderships experienced in UAE schools: 1) Authoritative Leadership, and 2) Corporate Leadership.

**Authoritative Leadership**

Principals B, C and D agreed that the leadership style in the UAE was top-down and authoritative in the government sector and in private schools. When top-down leadership was discussed during the interview process, participants considered this approach as an obstacle to
moving forward and pursuing the nation’s vision. With some reservation, School B Principal believed in applying a top-down leadership style in schools that needed to improve management: “While this is helpful to bring weaker school into line, and to support weak leadership, this style can possibly restrict strong schools and strong leaders” (School B Principal). Not in favor with the top-down style, School D Principal mentioned this approach hindered team spirit: “People get despondent, they don’t feel they are part of the contribution, people feel isolated, because they are removing themselves from the day to day running of the school” (School D Principal). Although Principal A mentioned not believing in this style of leadership, the response was: “It doesn’t work for long” because “if I start doing micro management, then I don’t think I trust my people, so that is not something which I believe in. I trust the people here, and I hold them accountable” (School A Principal). According to the KHDA Framework, “Outstanding Leadership” was described as promoting positive relationship and communication: “The school’s distributed leadership builds capacity, empowers individuals and teams, and creates an ethos of collective responsibility. Morale throughout the school is highly positive” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 85). The four participants commented they did not favor the top-down style of leadership, as it “restricts strong schools and strong leaders” (School B Principal). School A Principal added it promoted “distrust” and failed to align the team in a “distributed leadership model” (School A Principal) The four principals shared similar opinions about a dictatorial and authoritative leadership style, as they all claimed it doesn’t work for long: “A lot of them have got this erroneous idea that if you shout at people, if you make them feel they are incapable or inferior, that you are going to keep them under your thumb” (School C Principal). By having experienced this style of leadership in their work place either in the UAE or previously, the four principals mentioned that Micromanagement didn’t work as it sent the message that people can’t
be trusted for doing their jobs. School C Principal added: those “weak” leaders end up “losing out on so much potential in terms of seeing some really effective development taking place” (School C Principal).

**Corporate Leadership**

School D Principal mentioned seeing leaders who were detached, kept their doors closed, and didn’t really feel part of the daily running of the school. This type of leader was described as a more corporate school principal focused on the profitability and business aspect of the school (School B Principal). KHDA Framework described the effectiveness of leadership unlikely to be acceptable when “leaders and in particular the principal lack competence or professional ethical standards, there is complacency about standards and quality; and commitment to improvement is lacking. The school’s vision is not explicit or shared amongst stakeholders” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 89).

School C Principal voiced concern over the lack of involvement from the leadership found in the school which hinders progress and growth. In addition, School C Principal believed that corporate leadership was very present “not only in education, but in all sphere of commerce, and any kind of industry that was operating in Dubai” (School C Principal). As part of the UAE culture, School C Principal mentioned there was a desire to be progressive and forward thinking, while managerial styles tended to prevent change: “Although obvious things needed to be put into place or to happen quickly, they weren’t going to happen here … because the culture [of change] just isn’t there” (School C Principal).

All four principals favored the Instructional approach to leadership. They mentioned the need to be “out there”, to “make a difference”, to be “involved in the quality assurance, observing lessons … so leaders can support the team, identify weaknesses, identify strategies to
improve [while] talking to the students and their parents to understand the needs of the school” (School D Principal). Participants mentioned another benefit of using the Instructional Leadership style in the UAE as it addressed the cultural and learning diversity of the school community. School B Principal also highlighted the importance of conveying “strong leadership in such a transient community like Dubai because ensuring consistency of educational experience for all students is crucial” (School B Principal). This statement was closely tied to another comment from School A Principal regarding the importance of vision for international schools in Dubai, supporting the evidence of the fifth interconnected theme explained below: Cultural Diversity.

**Thematic Finding Five: Cultural Diversity and Implications**

As most of these international schools have students and staff from 40 to 70 different nationalities, running this type of school as a principal can be challenging. The KHDA School Inspection Framework ensured schools had a broad knowledge and understanding of the traditions of the UAE, and of the multi-cultural nature of modern UAE. Staff was expected to display the highest standards of professional conduct and cultural sensitivity. Moreover, inspectors required students to have an understanding of “their own culture and awareness of other cultural influences from around the world” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 42). The next question related to cultural diversity was: “What challenges, if any, might school leaders face in a period of transformation while most private schools in Dubai are highly diverse?” (Appendix D). Principal A was the most vocal and transparent regarding the cultural challenges that school leaders faced. Although dealing with different cultural backgrounds was not easy, Principal A added, there were nevertheless some important advantages: “Children are now aware of so many cultures all across the world within their school premise, and being exposed to these
differences—various nationalities and cultures—serves as the stepping stone to the outside world” (School A Principal).

All four principals agreed that managing any highly diverse population was challenging, especially when: 1) There is an inherent transience within the expatriates, and 2) There is a resistance to change within the population.

**Challenges due to transient population**

What participants saw as particularly challenging was “the turnover rate among expat teachers which is typically higher than at schools in [their] home countries” (School B Principal). Retaining staff for Schools B and D was the biggest issue, as they had a 27% (School D) to 30% (School B) turnover, compared to 10% (School A) and 14% (School C), where their largest nationality group of teachers came from India. The international schools, as reported by the selected principals, usually lost staff either because expat teachers continued their adventure in another country (the case for School B where most teachers come from USA), or their school couldn’t compete salary-wise with schools that were better ranked and charged more (the case for School D where most teachers came from UK/Ireland): “So you know, we are not in the Dubai location that they see on the front page of the newspaper; no Burj Al Arab outside the window, so retaining is a problem” (School D Principal).

Within the issue of transience, challenges due to communication were also mentioned through the participants’ interviews. On one hand, communication and listening for understanding were for participants the most important skills to display, as challenges were usually in the forms of parents or staff not understanding why the school was making certain decisions. On the other hand, the school leaders admitted that it was inspiring to work with such a diverse group of people because every day they felt they were “learning something new” and
they realized “the need for a leadership that can embrace that cultural diversity and encourage other people to embrace it as well” (School C Principal). In general, the selected school principals felt a difference of opinion was sometimes healthy for schools to grow.

**Challenges due to resistance to change**

As families (parents and students) were also quite transient in the Middle East, the kind of heterogeneity at times made change difficult, reported three principals out of four. On one hand, they encountered sizeable groups of parents who really did want to see things moving forward, to embrace change, and to ensure their children were getting full benefit of the tools and skills they needed to be effective citizens in the 21st century. On the other hand, the principals nevertheless felt push back from other groups of parents who, they claimed, were still very conservative, traditionally based, and uncooperative in terms of developing what they would see as a truly holistic and rounded education for their children.

In terms of nationality, School A employed mostly non-Western local teachers allowing for a lower salary scale, being able to attract notwithstanding a considerable number of dedicated staff (Ratio=2,200 students to 25 middle leaders & 145 teachers). Only one school principal (School C) found it particularly challenging working with staff who not only had been established in Dubai for a long period of time but also were resistant to change: “You can’t always be as vocally critical of things that you might be, even if that criticism is coming from a desire to improve things, not to denigrate anything” (School C Principal). Although the majority of teachers in School D were from the UK and Ireland, the principal did appoint staff from other nations “based on how good they are”. He claimed that the school had to train their teachers anyway, “because when they arrive, they don’t know the Framework. They have to align their
expectations to the ones listed in the Framework, wherever they come from, unless they come from another school in Dubai” (School D Principal).

While all four principals undeniably mentioned challenges due to cultural diversity and transience within their school population, they highlighted the need to understand the local and expat population in Dubai. They agreed that their ability to move their school to the next level was based on their experience not only with the local and expat population, but also with the inspection process, as described in the KHDA Framework.

**Thematic Finding Six: Following the KHDA Framework**

To conclude the interview, the researcher asked: “Is there anything you want to add that would be helpful to the analysis of change at your international school?” (Appendix D). Since its formation in 1971, the UAE promoted “active collaboration among the Emirates, with integrated national planning and policy in many areas” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 7). While educational reform was a common goal, this consolidated UAE School Inspection Framework represented “a unified approach to moving education closer to the 2021 Vision” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 7). This UAE School Inspection Framework has been designed to support the inspection “of the full range of schools in the UAE … and inspectors will take full account of the proprietorial and governance systems that characterize all schools when applying this framework” (Government of the UAE, 2015, p. 7). Findings revealed that following the Framework was the key to school improvement. Two school principals mentioned their appreciation of KHDA inspections as they “somehow force us to go beyond, stretch ourselves through that extent, that we make sure we do best for the school, so it becomes mandatory” (School A Principal). School C Principal wasn’t in favor of having a yearly inspection however: “It is completely a waste of time. There’s no way you can show meaningful progress in usually
less than twelve months” (School C Principal). School C Principal thought a different approach of assessment every alternative year would be much more sensible. This principal also favored a less judgmental type of inspection, where inspectors would actually come in and align the Framework with the school’s Self-Evaluation, highlighting strengths and areas of development, rather than ranking areas “Weak” or “Acceptable”. Summary of the findings revealed the school leaders felt the inspection process was actually something good for the schools, not only as it maintains the overall standards in the UAE, but also as well in every school. In addition, this “Framework helps move schools ahead” (School A Principal). While having to retain a targeted number of students to ensure a private school can continue to be sustainably funded and satisfy the owners’ profitability, the challenge is to convince moving from “Good” to “Very Good” and “Outstanding”: “You need to have cutting edge resources that continue to enhance, you need to have infrastructures that can support them, making sure that ICT facilities are continually updated to cope with the demand” (School D Principal).

**Summary**

This chapter described the results and findings from school reports and interviews with four international school leaders who managed to bring their school rating in Dubai beyond the acceptable threshold of the UAE National Agenda in 2017. After more than three years of being rated “Acceptable”, these schools made every effort to bring the necessary changes which satisfied the KHDA and the Dubai School Inspection Bureau. Overall, findings from the published school report analysis and transcripts of recorded interviews unveiled six interconnected themes and answered the two primary research questions of this study. The first research question was related to leadership strategies used by the selected sample of international school leaders and identified as effective to change and improve school performance. The second
research question considered Dubai’s highly diverse population to find out if any Modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approaches, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016) were evident in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools. Chapter Five will present the researcher’s interpretation of these findings, their implications, recommendations for action, recommendations for further studies, and the conclusion.
CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

By looking at these schools that met KHDA’s Inspection Framework, this researcher aimed at verifying whether the Modified Transformational Model, which takes into allowance cultural interpretation, can be a more effective approach in the Middle East context. Litz and Scott’s (2016) cross-cultural model began with the principle of situating transformational leadership in its Arab world context where there was a preference for centralized leadership over more distributed leadership models (Al-Harthi & Al-Mahdy, 2017). Nevertheless, Lightfoot (2014) believed transformation was needed in the Middle East where a societal system, based on rank and titles, had established a “top-down management model” (p. 169). How did the leaders of the four improved schools in this study manage to meet the requirements set by the UAE National Agenda? Was there a transformational leadership model for the UAE context, as described by Litz and Scott (2016) where school leaders consider “the unique cultural nuances and needs of the organization within the national culture” (p. 19)? The question remained if this culturally rigid perspective can be aligned to the progressive UAE National Agenda Parameter, requiring a first-rate education system by 2021 (Government of the UAE, 2016). In particular, the second research question was directly tied to the UAE context, cultural diversity and implications, as how change brought school improvement. A look at the four participants’ transformational model highlighted key standards for school effectiveness in a global setting. In this final chapter, the findings for each of the research questions are presented in the context of implications for practice. In addition, the chapter continues with the limitations and closes with the recommendations for future research and conclusion.
Summary of the Findings

Overall findings from the published school report analysis and transcripts of recorded interviews unveiled six interconnected themes which were described in Chapter Four: National Requirements, Major Changes That Brought School Improvement, Leadership, The UAE Context, Cultural Diversity and Implications, and Following the KHDA Framework. This chapter contains interpretation of thematic connectivity and discussion on future research possibilities to help answer the main research questions:

1. What leadership strategies used by these school leaders were identified as effective to change and improve school performance over a three-year period?

2. In addition, considering Dubai’s highly diverse population with over two hundred nationalities (Government of the UAE, 2018), what, if any, Modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approaches, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016) were evident in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools?

Research Question (RQ) 1: Effective Leadership Strategies

The first research question was related to leadership strategies used by the selected sample of international school leaders that were identified as effective to change and improve school performance over a three-year period. Leadership in this instance was directly tied to the UAE National Requirements and the Guidelines of the KHDA Framework whereby schools must follow state mandated specifications called “Indicators … to guide inspection judgements and school improvement” (MOE, 2015, p. 7). By comparing the four sampled schools, the researcher reported these schools shared related indicators that contributed to the overall school performance and demonstrated that similar leadership decisions were made to bring the expected school improvement. Findings from interviews identified two major strategies that were present
in each school as contributing to change and performance: Establishing a school vision and positive ethos, and a model of shared leadership and accountability. These strategies were also in line with Kotter’s (2012) concept of Organization of the Future featuring a positive outlook on change, teamwork within executives and broader empowerment.

**Strategy No. 1: Establishing the School’s Vision and Ethos**

As Kotter (2012) emphasized the critical importance of organizational vision to lead change, the results of the study indicated that following the 2016-2017 inspection report, each of the four participants were described by KHDA and the DSIB as senior leaders promoting a clear vision and positive ethos of the school (KHDA, 2015). Indeed, one of the major changes which impacted School A’s performance was highlighted by the DSIB: The ethos and vision of the school—shared by all staff—were the main drivers of its success. Similarly, a particular strength of School B was the ethos of a positive learning environment paired with the distinctive features and character of an American curriculum within an international setting. The DSIB also highlighted a similar change that impacted School C’s performance whereas the leaders had played a strong role in establishing a sense of common purpose and direction. Furthermore, School D’s performance was attributed to its leaders’ initiative as they had set a clear direction based on the school’s mission and vision. These findings were aligned with Alsalami et al., (2016) suggesting that practical implications related to the school ethos and community established relationships between transformational leadership and organizational innovation in Dubai. The results from Alsalami et al. (2016), further suggested that employees preferred working with transformational leaders who have the ability to inspire them to achieve new levels of performance and to help them discover their vocational purpose. Through KHDA’s Dubai School Inspection Bureau, the quality of school leadership and a shared ethos of collective
accountability had been key drivers underpinning school improvement since 2012 (KHDA, 2017).

**Strategy No. 2: Establishing a Model of Shared Leadership and Accountability**

As Kotter (2012) underlined delegating tasks and responsibilities to lead change, the results of the study indicated that following the 2016-2017 inspection report, the four participants were described by KHDA and the DSIB as senior leaders establishing a model of shared leadership and accountability in moving schools forward (MOE, 2017). School A leaders had an increasing knowledge of the recently revised National Curriculum in England and most understood effective practice in teaching and learning. In addition, School B leaders at all levels were driving change, as evident in curriculum development, teaching innovations and students’ personal development. As Kotter (2012) emphasized the critical importance of organizational vision to lead change, these four leaders of international schools were committed to the UAE National Agenda Parameter and Vision 2021, and engaged in initiating governmental priorities, including establishing an improved education system through innovation and change. Similarly, Kotter’s (2012) Eight-Stage Process of creating major change included developing a vision and strategy to help with direction, while building the guiding team to work together and lead the change. In the context of the UAE, a report from the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG) claimed the majority of private and public K-12 and college institutions were adopting a transformational model of leadership to facilitate the education of well-rounded students who will participate in the UAE knowledge based economy (Warner & Burton, 2017). Findings revealed the four sampled schools had adopted a transformational approach evidenced by equity in learning practices, creating a vision, building human resource partnerships, and providing instructional leadership at different institutional levels (Warner & Burton, 2017).
Moreover, the transformational approach of the four participants confirmed KHDA’s (2015) Inspection Framework definition of what constituted “good” school leadership. The four sampled principals established a clear strategic direction while delegating leadership effectively and holding the team accountable for ensuring good outcomes.

**RQ 2: The Impact of Cultural Perception in Dubai School Leadership**

While Moolenaar et al., (2010) featured the benefits of using the transformational model in school organizational development, Litz and Scott (2016) focused on the cultural perception with regards to adopting this approach in an Arab and Muslim context, such as the UAE. To facilitate the process of transformation, Litz and Scott (2016) recommended using the Modified Transformational Model which is designed to “encourage and promote change and innovation, while also respecting and retaining the unique cultural nuances and needs of the organization within the national culture” (p. 19). They also described the leadership style in the UAE as “top-down [and] readily accepted in this cultural setting” where “controlled freedom and authoritative leadership [are] the norm” (Litz & Scott, 2016, p. 16). To answer the second research question, findings concluded the four participants adopted a transformational approach aligned with Litz and Scott’s (2016) model, by understanding foremost the UAE context and how to bring the necessary change to transform the schools. In their transformation, however, the four principals did not consider the cultural diversity in making the changes. Examining how the four sampled schools successfully made it to “Good” was explained by innovative leadership initiatives that managed to elude the culturally embedded hierarchical autocratic model common throughout the Middle East (Tingle, 2016). The perception of traditional and autocratic leadership may still be prevalent in a number of schools (Zahran et al., 2016), but in the case of the participants, this approach was considered unsustainable, especially within Dubai’s highly competitive and ever-
changing market. Moreover, the four school leaders conveyed skills that challenged the traditional top-down managerial style of leadership. These leaders followed KHDA’s (2017) recommendations which included: Identifying effective leaders who understand the importance of innovation; developing self-evaluation procedures that encourage both staff and students to be creative; and establishing collaborative systems that promote sharing of professional knowledge about innovation. Similarly, these skills were also highlighted by Alsalami et al. (2016) in their description of transformational leaders.

Although this research highlighted cultural adaptation in a transforming social context, the challenges these four expat leaders faced in Dubai, however, were different from Litz and Scott’s (2016) reality where they concluded Western educational philosophies were not in line within the Arab and Muslim hierarchical society. Rather, the structures of the inspection requirements in this study were so specific that the focus was on following these national requirements to affect the change. Fullan (2012) further supported the need for cultural change that can impact and contribute to significant improvements to the UAE education system by not only implementing new policies but understanding and respecting the Arab world context (Bock, 2014). This further confirmed Kotter’s (2012) perception of the Organization of the Future where the UAE National priorities along with a clear cultural perception has led to change in these Dubai private international schools.

**How the UAE National Priority Leads the Way to Transformation**

A report by KHDA (2018), *A Decade of Growth 2008-2018* revealed key findings which established the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational innovation in Dubai schools. This report of the last ten years of school inspections in Dubai highlighted principles of quality leadership, and stated schools’ willingness to adapt and change.
Furthermore, the government of Dubai supported the UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda which affirmed that the transformation of the current education system required leading-edge systems that bring together innovation and technology to enhance skills, knowledge and personal development (Government of the UAE, 2016). Findings further confirmed the four school leaders in this study emphasized the importance of enhancing stakeholders’ resources and creativity, thereby giving them the opportunity to contribute to the overall school organizational development. Whilst the overall rating of the four schools’ leadership was “Good”, principals had established a clear understanding of what the school needed to do to improve. Additionally, they took into account the UAE's national priorities and used innovative strategies to develop areas of the school leading to sustainable improvements. These four school leaders adapted their leadership style to encourage partnerships between key stakeholders and empowered teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community. As per Kotter’s (2012) Theory of Change, these effective leaders empowered others to take action and generate success. In addition, their description of sustainable success involved stretching resources and capabilities (Kotter, 2012). Indeed, the involvement of their transformational skills had a positive impact on school improvement, as they were associated with thoughtful and meaningful contributions, thus bringing positive changes (Northouse, 2015). Findings from the 2016-2017 reports recognized that the four participants had focused on enriching students’ overall experience of school through innovative instruction focused on lifelong learning (KHDA-DSIB, 2017). In addition, Leaders at all levels encouraged innovative practices and were committed to improving students’ outcomes (KHDA-DSIB, 2017). Furthermore, the DSIB highlighted similar change which impacted the schools’ performance: All leaders were fully committed to the UAE national priorities and to achieving the National Agenda targets. As Kotter’s (2012) Eight-Stage Process of creating major
change, findings confirmed that innovative leadership was at the center of effective reforms within these sampled schools and that engagement with all stakeholders, including KHDA, was necessary for change to occur. Moreover, Kotter’s (2012) perception of the Organization of the Future was shaped by the economy’s globalization, trends and technology, and suggested a process for transformation leading to change. As reported in the four schools’ inspections, findings did indeed relate to Kotter’s predictions. First, Kotter (2012) stated the need for a persistent sense of urgency. This study demonstrated that the UAE Government’s willingness to establish a first rate education system by 2021 constituted Dubai’s sense of urgency to enact change. Second, Kotter (2012) highlighted the importance of teamwork, and, although a new concept in the context of the UAE (Hayes, 2017), the four participants affirmed that the role of the leadership team was to build a learning community, and to make everyone feel they were part of the school’s vision and mission statement. The four leaders considered teamwork—including all stakeholders—as essential in contributing to the success of the school.

**Transformational Leadership Model Through Innovation**

To participate in this rapidly changing world, the UAE’s education system has been focusing on developing practices and promoting innovative leadership required to meet Vision 2021 (Government of the UAE, 2016). The 2016-2017 school inspection reports revealed that by developing innovative and creative solutions, the four sampled schools made a positive contribution to the current educational system in Dubai (MOE, 2017). Similarly, 21st century research claims that transformational leadership is positively associated with schools’ “Innovative Climate” as it motivates followers to deploy greater effort and productivity (Moolenaar et al., 2010, p. 624). To identify the criteria that contributed to positive change and school improvement, the research was based as well on the transformational leadership model for
education. Pioneered by Bass & Avolio (1994) and Leithwood (1994), and more recently applied by Moolenaar et al., (2010) the transformational model presented in this study benefited the schools’ organizational development. Further considerations claimed that Transformational Leadership is an efficient model that fits Dubai’s school system, because it can be applied to a global market, and its approach to leadership reflects 21st century trends while strengthening organizational culture (Litz & Scott, 2016). While the key message of Dubai School Inspection Bureau was that all schools can improve through innovation (DSIB, 2017), Alsalami et al. (2014), suggested that Dubai had experienced greater success in using transformational leadership to incite organizational innovation. Moolenaar’s studies also demonstrated that school leadership, which fosters “Instructional collaboration networks”, significantly impacted school effectiveness and improvement (Moolenaar et al., 2012, p. 251).

While preparing to host the next world fair, with the theme “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future” (Expo 2020, 2017), Dubai aimed at highlighting the increasing role of ‘interconnectivity’ and innovation to further develop its knowledge-based society, primarily in the sectors of Education and Business (OECD, 2016). To demonstrate the impact of the UAE’s National Agenda on school improvement, the transformational model proposed by Moolenaar et al. (2010) underlined specific indicators related to innovation, teacher collaboration, and effective leadership. Furthermore, while KHDA (2017) encouraged leaders to promote accountability for school performance and standards, the government agency also recommended the need to face the challenges of ensuring a high quality sector for the future of education, thus relying on strong partnerships, a professional learning culture, and effective school leadership (Scott, 2015).
Limitations of the Data and Discrepancies in Findings

While data showed the four participants adopted a transformational approach aligned with Litz & Scott’s (2016) model, by considering foremost the UAE context and how to bring the necessary change to transform the schools, findings on cultural diversity however did not bring similar conclusions. Litz and Scott’s (2016) study suggested that there may be a variation in interpreting best leadership practice that can be related to “cultural differences between the Western orientation of the leadership model” adapted by local school leaders and the “Islamic orientation of the population” (p. 1). As their study was based on a UAE Arab school system, they believed adopting the Cross-Cultural Transformational Model allowed for gradual transformation to effectively blend elements of change within established cultural principles. After interviewing the four participants, findings unveiled that the school context in Dubai applied a more Western approach to leadership as it is rigorously controlled by the inspection Framework through KHDA and the DSIB. In addition, stakeholders had to comply with specific performance standards set by the School Inspection Framework whereby all schools integrate essential aspects of the UAE national priorities and participate in achieving the National Agenda targets. Therefore, the UAE Vision 2021 ensures that schools embrace the tenets of positive education, prescribed by the UAE National Agenda and KHDA’s Framework.

In contrast to Litz and Scott’s (2016) conclusions, findings from interviews with the four participants indicated that working alongside KHDA and the DSIB helped maintain an overall understanding of the standards required for UAE private international schools. These standards are clearly described in the Inspection Framework and therefore leave very little ambiguity that can prevail from cultural interpretation. The hierarchical and top-down managerial model described by Litz and Scott’s (2016) findings were not prevalent in the sampled schools, perhaps
because the DSIB along the KHDA’s Framework adopts a purely Western, and thus more fluid, leadership approach. According to the KHDA Inspection Framework, outstanding leadership involves leaders at all levels to be instructional, including the principal.

Finally, the 2016-2017 inspection revealed that relationships between leaders within each specific sampled school were strong. Communication between the different levels and areas of responsibility were effective. Discussions between leaders had an appropriate focus on student achievement. Middle leadership posts had been newly formed, and “these leaders [were] starting to make significant contributions to the school's performance” (KHDA-DSIB, 2017, p. 23).

**Implications**

Today, the number of good schools in the United Arab Emirates can be an indication that focusing on engagement, positive leadership and accountability from all stakeholder provides nurturing schools that can better cater to students’ wellbeing. These are characteristics needed for building a knowledge-based society, as prescribed by the National Agenda, “which aims to make the UAE economically competitive on an international scale” (Warner & Burton, 2017, p. 32). With the support of expatriates and local government, Dubai is taking a step towards the UAE national goals, by actively engaging its school population in the process of establishing organizational systems and best management practices in all sectors of education (Government of the UAE, 2016).

**Recommendations for action**

Collecting testimonies on how change was made from the four sampled school leaders determined that linking UAE National Agenda initiatives and school improvement in Dubai may highlight key standards for school effectiveness. As Dubai is growing, it continues to attract many talented leaders who can transform whilst being sensitive to a multicultural setting and to
the Islamic faith. For education leaders, for instance, collaboration with local families can become a challenge, as a student-centered education results in empowering children and also involves parents’ contribution and engagement (ADEK, 2015). The KHDA Framework serves as a guide not only for schools but also for parents. Similar to Abu Dhabi’s guide to families, the framework helps schools to engage “with families and the community as full partners in the education decision-making process” (ADEK, 2015, p. 8). In addition, the guide reveals the following: Grounded research on family and community involvement reports that parental engagement strengthens partnerships within school communities and promotes “working together to maximize student learning” (ADEK, 2015, p. 8). By adopting a leadership style where shared vision, collaboration, transparency, and communication are paramount, the selected school leaders are in line with a 21st century approach to leadership (Pont et al., 2008).

**Recommendations for further study**

Through the UAE National Innovation Strategy, which aims to equip students with 21st century knowledge and skills, “the quality of leadership is the most significant factor affecting school effectiveness and improvement” (KHDA, 2018, p. 14). The end result of this study demonstrated that the sampled schools met the guidelines of the UAE National Parameter and further participated in establishing a first-rate education system through innovative practice and change to ensure that all schools are rated “Good” or better by 2021 (Government of UAE, 2016). But the question remains for future research whether the overarching desire for 21st century education outcomes is actually occurring in Dubai. In other words, do the KHDA and DSIB guidelines provide enough recommendations for innovative leadership to create a sustainable education system? Is KHDA’s vision to share the community principles of 21st century trends by promoting the development of hard and soft skills, while endorsing the new era
of Lifelong Learning (MOE, 2015), actually taking place in Dubai’s private international schools? Within the UAE, Dubai has been pioneering a Western model of education which may work better in a highly diverse and receptive society such as Dubai; can this model, however, be applied outside Dubai and extend to other dominantly Arab conservative emirates?

In addition, while Dubai is the largest city in the UAE, expatriate communities are increasing in the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) and Asian regions. Data collection pertaining to 21st century school leadership and cultural adaptation in neighboring countries can open a broader scope and orientation. Further studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of future international school organizational challenges and identify key leadership styles that promote student attainment and school improvement in different parts of the world.

Finally, international research and school inspection results have shown that good school governance has a positive impact on school performance, where governance is rated “Good”, standards of student attainment are likely to be higher. Conversely, weak governance is often cited as a reason why schools fail (KHDA, 2018). This is reflected in Dubai and throughout all member countries of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016). Warner and Burton (2017) further claim that whilst the board of governors is often formed of investors, the expectation of a return on their investment suggests that schools operate using a business model. A guide published by KHDA (2018) called The Gift of Good Governance has been created to act as a reference document for private schools’ governance committed to make positive change in Dubai by serving their communities. Further research is needed to explore the role of the governing board of schools in the UAE and its impact on the national education transformation agenda.
Conclusion

This research aimed at identifying criteria that may help other school leaders apply an understanding of highly effective leadership in a global context and contribute to school improvement. Using the lens of Kotter’s (2012) Theory of Change and Bass’s (1990) Theory of Transformational Leadership, this study was based on a qualitative data collection to determine whether the four school leaders unveiled a specific transformational model of leadership fit for international schools. Through the findings from school reports and the four school leaders’ stories, this research aimed at linking Litz and Scott’s Modified Transformational Leadership, also referred to as Cross-Cultural Transformational Model (Litz & Scott, 2016) to a more global model that can be used to promote school improvement in other international settings. In view of this fact, one of the study’s underlying concepts of the Modified Transformational Leadership approach was the primary process for initiating change because it was based on a paradigm that may be more appropriate for the Middle East and Dubai’s multicultural context. Since the UAE is committed in offering quality education in the Gulf region, through the UAE National Agenda and Vision 2021 Framework, Dubai’s government education authority (the Knowledge and Human Development Authority, KHDA) is responsible for maintaining the country’s mandate and overseeing that school leaders foster positive education and school effectiveness. Considering Dubai’s highly diverse population with over two hundred nationalities (Government of the UAE, 2018), this concept of Modified Transformational Leadership is interconnected with the UAE context as this nation strives to be a role model of cohesion (Government of the UAE, 2016). Based on the UAE’s nature to promote Tolerance among the diversity of its expatriates (Government of the UAE, 2017), the narrative interviews also reported findings related to the second research question which suggests using a cultural-based leadership approach in Dubai.
schools. Although the impact of the UAE National Agenda Parameter on school improvement demonstrated the levels of complexity international schools face within Dubai’s diverse community (Warner & Burton, 2017), this modified or Cross-Cultural Transformation Leadership approach, as defined by Litz and Scott (2016), was evident in the improvement of the selected sample of international schools. Further research is needed to follow the progress initiated by the UAE National Agenda, to explore the growth after Vision 2021 and determine whether Dubai has indeed reached its goal to be ranked among the safest, smartest, most innovative, and happiest nations (Government of the UAE, 2016).
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Appendix A

Interview Cover Letter

Date

Dear Participant:

My name is Marie-Pascale Addison and I am a doctoral student at the University of New England, Maine, USA. For my dissertation, I am examining how private international school leaders meet the National Agenda educational transformation in Dubai. Since you are an International School Leader who successfully brought your school to the prescribed UAE requirement in 2017, I am inviting you to participate in this research study by taking part in an interview to share your story. We can schedule this meeting at your convenience in the next few weeks.

This narrative interview will require approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. There is no compensation for participating nor is there any known risk. In order to ensure that all information will remain confidential, we will not include your name or the name of your institution. Copies of the dissertation & research documentation will be provided to the Affiliated Faculty of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England, Dr. Leslie Hitch, Lead Advisor University of New England, Dr. Laura Bertonazzi, Secondary Advisor University of New England, and to Dr. Waller, Affiliated Committee Member American University of Ras Al Khaimah, UAE.
Thank you for taking the time to assist me in my educational endeavors. The data collected will provide useful information regarding school improvement in Dubai. If you would like a summary copy of this study, please complete the Request for Information Form and email it back to me. If you require additional information or have questions, please contact me at the number listed below. If you need any official verification or additional information, you may directly contact the Affiliated Faculty of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England, Dr. Leslie Hitch lhitch@une.edu +1 617-373-7310.

Sincerely,

Marie-Pascale Addison

Marie-Pascale Addison

+971 502735002 maddison@une.edu

If you would like a summary copy of this study, please complete the Request for Information Form Below, copy & paste it and email it back to me maddison@une.edu

Request for Information Form

Please email a copy of the study results to the email address listed below:

Email: _______________________________
Appendix B

Demographic Information Form

The purpose of this section is to provide some needed demographic information to assist in the analysis and in the development of recommendations for this research. Please make a selection for each of the following questions by clicking on the box that corresponds to your profile. Once completed, please save as a PDF and email saved document back to maddison@une.edu

1) Education: Highest Degree Completed

☐ Bachelors  ☐ Masters  ☐ Doctorate

2) Title/Position held at your School

☐ Principal  ☐ Vice Principal  ☐ Deputy Principal  ☐ Head of Dept.

3) Years in International Education

☐ < 1 year  ☐ < 3 years  ☐ < 5 years  ☐ <10 years  ☐ > 10 years

4) Years in a Senior Leadership Position

☐ < 1 year  ☐ < 3 years  ☐ < 5 years  ☐ <10 years  ☐ > 10 years
5) Years in Dubai

☐ < 1 year  ☐ < 3 years  ☐ < 5 years  ☐ <10 years  ☐ > 10 years

6) Years in the Middle East

☐ < 1 year  ☐ < 3 years  ☐ < 5 years  ☐ <10 years  ☐ > 10 years

7) Gender

☐ Male  ☐ Female

8) Age

☐ 25-30  ☐ 31-40  ☐ 41-50  ☐ 51-60  ☐ 61+

9) Place of origin

☐ UK  ☐ Other European Country  ☐ North America

☐ South America  ☐ Asia  ☐ Africa  ☐ Australia
Appendix C

Consent Form for Participant

I, ........................................................................................................have read the information contained in the Interview Cover Letter for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

1. I consent to participate in this interview, realizing that I may withdraw at any time........☐

2. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be quoted and published
   using a pseudonym ..................................................................................☐

3. I consent to having my interview audio recorded and transcribed........................................□

4. I would like to receive a copy of the transcription of the interview...............................□

5. I was well informed by the interviewer regarding my rights and that there is no compensation for participating in this interview .................................................................☐

6. As a Participant, I know the identity of the researcher, her affiliations, and whom to contact for information if I have queries with the research process.................................□

7. As a Participant, I was informed that there was no risk by participating in this research.................................................................☐

.................................................................................................................................

Participant          Date          Researcher          Date
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Marie-Pascale Addison, UNE Doctoral Student, (+971) 502735002, maddison@une.edu.

Interviewee: Ms/Mr XXX, School Principal- XXX International School Dubai.

Ms/Mr XXX’s current job description at XXX: Head of School (XXX Curriculum-Year Grades)

- Responsible for improving the quality of instructional practices school – wide
- Line manager for Heads of Department (Upper School) and Supervisors (Lower School)
- Part of the Senior Leadership Team of the school

Location, Date, Time: TBA

Purpose

1. Learn about the interviewee’s background: education, employment, international experience, influences, and understanding of the UAE framework requirements.

2. Find out what type of Leadership Ms/Mr XXX practices and how it is reflected in her/his current school.

3. Determine how and why his/her current leadership practices affected the overall structure of the school.
4. Understanding the challenges in aligning leadership practices with a highly diverse school population.

5. Procuring advices from experts in the field of school improvement plan in the context of Dubai.

6. Understanding how leadership practices may need to be adapted for international schools and their context and how these findings can contribute to future research.

Rationale

The interviewee, Ms/Mr XXX, possesses a solid background in international school leadership and has brought change in her/his school to meet the UAE National Agenda Parameter. The UAE National Agenda is inspired by a knowledge-driven society which implies that the school system needs to have different objectives and characteristics in laying the foundation for lifelong learning within a transformational culture. The questions below are meant to generate stories from the interviewees on how they managed to make changes and improve their school, and to open other topic related to the UAE’s mission. The outcome I seek is to understand how challenges, such as meeting the UAE mission, might transform leadership and help schools adapt to new learning environments that correspond to the UAE’s vision. Finally, another purpose of this interview is to explore key challenges facing international school leaders in the UAE, and identify implications for researchers and school leaders when using a transformational model of leadership that is based on a unique cultural management system seen in the UAE.

Introduction

Ms/Mr XXX, thank you kindly for taking the time to speak with me. As you know from my emailed invitation, I am pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership through the University
of New England, Maine. My study is qualitative and requires that I conduct narrative interviews with leaders from international schools that improved their KHDA rating, after a course of several years, in the 2017 School Report. I am examining more specifically how your school managed to meet the prescribed ranking since the National Agenda Parameter was introduced in 2014. I hope that you feel comfortable if I record this interview. The Information you provide will be used to complete my research on the UAE National Agenda and Dubai school leadership. If you feel you would like me to stop the recording at any time, just let me know. The recorded conversation will be transcribed and used to fulfill my research. Your school name and yours will remain confidential and will not appear in the final Data Analysis or Conclusion. The only information related to your school or your name is drawn from the online KHDA school report, but these will be anonymized in this proposal. This interview will not reveal your identity and your school’s name will remain anonymous. At this time, do you have any questions regarding the interview or process? Then with your permission we will begin with the first question.

Question #1

What is your understanding of the aspects of 21st century educational practices as essential for the KHDA Inspection Framework and the UAE school ranking?

Note
Question #2
Could you describe how you went about making the necessary changes that improved your school ranking in 2017?

Note

Question #3
What is your leadership style? What leadership traits do you believe you convey that have been useful to make this transformation?

Note

Question #4
One of the theories I am using to guide my research is from Litz and Scott who describe the leadership style in the UAE as “top-down [and] readily accepted in this cultural setting” where “controlled freedom and authoritative leadership [are] the norm” (Litz & Scott, 2016, p. 16). How or hasn’t this type of leadership affected your efforts to make the necessary changes at your school? Is their assessment valid from your point of view?

Note

Question #5
What are the challenges, if any, might school leaders face in a period of transformation while most private schools in Dubai are highly diverse?

Note
Question # 6

Is there anything you want to add that would be helpful to the analysis of change at your international school?

Note

Closing

Ms/Mr XXX, many thanks for your generous time. I will be happy to follow up with you once I have the recording transcribed. If you wish to add anything at a later time, please let me know. In the meantime, I wish you all the very best in your position at XXX. Thank you again. It was a pleasure interviewing you. While I have learned a lot about your impressive leadership skills, I am honored to have met a leader such as yourself.
To: Marie-Pascale Addison

Cc: Leslie Hitch, Ed.D.

From: Lliam Harrison

Date: September 17, 2018

Project # & Title: 18.09.12-009 How Private International School Leaders Meet the National Agenda Education Transformation in Dubai

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the above captioned project and has determined that the proposed work is not human subject research as defined by 45 CFR 46.102(l).
Additional IRB review and approval is not required for this protocol as submitted. If you wish to change your protocol at any time, you must first submit the changes for review.

Please contact Lliam Harrison at (207) 602-2244 or wharrison@une.edu with any questions.

Sincerely,

William R. Harrison, M.A., J.D.
Director of Research Integrity

IRB#: 18.09.12-009
Submission Date: September 10, 2018
Status: Not Human Subject Research, 46 CFR 46.102(l)

Status Date: September 17 2018