

# Practices of and Roadblocks to Teacher Leadership in the United Arab Emirates' Schools

Shaikah Al-Taneiji<sup>1</sup> & Ali Ibrahim<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Education, United Arab Emirates University, United Arab Emirates

Correspondence: Shaikah Al-Taneiji, College of Education, United Arab Emirates University, United Arab Emirates. Tel: 97-13-713-6215. E-mail: shaikaha@uaeu.ac.ae

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## Abstract

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of their leadership practices in United Arab Emirates schools and the contextual and personal factors which support or deter them from becoming teacher leaders. The study used a mixed research design. First, a self-administered questionnaire was completed by 937 teachers in one big city in the UAE. Then, individual interviews with ten teachers were conducted. The study found that while certain leadership roles, as measured by the questionnaire items, are often practiced by teachers, other activities such as leading action research or participating in professional groups, are practiced infrequently. Interview data revealed that teachers perceive that school administrators usually encourage them to take on leading roles, but that administrators also rely heavily on "in-group" teachers to take on leadership activities. Further, school contextual factors such as lack of time, language barriers, and style of leadership; or personal factors such as teachers' assumptions about and willingness to take on additional leadership duties are roadblocks to a full realization of the potential for teacher leadership and its associated benefits in UAE schools. Recommendations on how to foster teacher leadership on a wider scale in the UAE schools are presented.

**Keywords:** teacher leadership, UAE schools, UAE teachers

## 1. Introduction

The UAE Ministry of Education (MoE) has historically been the only federal government body to manage the affairs of education in all seven emirates. By the turn of the century, schools had been criticized for using traditional teaching methods and the whole system was blamed for producing students who were not ready for college level education. Despite numerous attempts to improve the system through programs such as model schools and Schools of Tomorrow, the results were not promising (Dickson, 2012). The UAE leaders established the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) in 2005 to oversee education in the Abu Dhabi emirate, the largest and most populated emirate in the UAE. Since the establishment of ADEC, the Abu Dhabi education system has experienced major changes. A new standards-based curriculum was introduced to focus on critical thinking and problem solving skills. As part of this reform, Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) was initiated to enlist private educational companies in helping schools adapt to the new reforms. Further, new English medium textbooks for English, Science, and Math have been introduced in all Abu Dhabi schools (Farah & Ridge, 2009). At the end of the PPP project, in 2010, the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) launched the New School Model (NSM) with updated new curricula and teaching methods to encourage students to be creative, independent thinkers, and problem-solvers (Abu Dhabi eGovernment Gateway, 2015). These reform initiatives viewed teachers as leaders and provided them with formal leadership roles through which they can share their expertise (Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011). As educators meet the demands and challenges of reforms, the view of a school principal as the sole leader in a school has been superseded by trends toward distributed leadership (Harris & Spillane, 2008). In theory, the view of "teachers as leaders" stimulates excellence in practice and empowers the school community to participate in school improvement and embrace reforms easily (Childs-Bowen, Moller, & Scrivner, 2000; Wallace Foundation, 2013). As Shah (2014) puts it, with new feelings of responsibility and ownership, change can be easily achieved. However, change is not always easy or linear. New leadership practices can be expected to incur new responsibilities and challenges for educators throughout the educational system. Therefore, this research attempts to explore teachers' perceptions of the extent to which they practice teacher leadership and the factors which support or hinder them in becoming teacher leaders in

ADEC schools.

### *1.1 Research Questions*

The study was guided by the following questions:

- 1) To what extent do teachers practice leadership in Al Ain schools?
- 2) How do teachers perceive supporting and deterring factors to teacher leadership in Al Ain schools?

### *1.2 Significance*

The results of this study delineate factors that support or limit teachers in practicing their new roles as teacher leaders and thus will assist in determining the practices that should be adopted to foster teacher leadership in UAE schools. ADEC could build on the findings of this study to improve its new policies by providing training on specific leadership practices and removing roadblocks to teacher leadership. This study should also serve as an impetus for further research on teacher autonomy and development in the UAE context.

## **2. Literature Review**

Studies have shown that school leaders need to empower teachers and build collaborative cultures in order to meet students' needs and improve classroom practices (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Giving teachers more autonomy and allowing them to practice leadership roles develop their self-confidence and enhance their classroom practices (Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011). When the school principal shares leadership with teachers, teachers exhibit self-efficacy (Zinke, 2013) which impacts students' achievement positively (Mahmoe & Pirkamali, 2013; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006). Shared or distributed leadership among the principal, teachers, and members of the school lead to school development and a better school climate (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015).

According to Leithwood, Mascal, and Strauss (2009), distributed leadership maximizes the benefit from teachers' capabilities, encourages interconnection among colleagues, and enhances the sense of commitment to the school, thereby helping schools manage the significant challenges of reform more gracefully (MacBeath, 2009).

Teacher leadership as one facet of distributed leadership does not happen once; it accumulates over time through professional experience and developing self-efficacy (Hunzicker, 2012). Teacher leaders are the ones who interact and learn with others; reach consensus in decision making; act as role models; strengthen teaching skills; focus on classroom and curriculum improvement; and manage time effectively (Stephenson, 2011).

Gordon (2004) delineated three models for teacher leadership: lead teacher, multiple leadership roles, and "every teacher is a leader" model. A lead teacher could be an "advising teacher, staff development associate, and helping teacher" (p. 92). The role of lead teacher is to work with teachers to improve their classroom practices. The multiple leadership roles model consists of many possible leadership roles such as preservice teacher educator, member of a university team that plans, coordinates and supervises preservice teachers; mentor of beginning teachers; teacher trainer; school governance team member; or program developers in areas such as professional development, curriculum, student assessment, school improvement, school-community relations, extracurricular activities, or parent education.

The third model, "every teacher is a leader," is the most inclusive view of teacher leadership in that every teacher is seen as a leader who facilitates the development of others regardless of his/her position in the school. In this model, the teacher is a mentor, peer tutor, and coach who shares experience in an informal context. Gordon (2004) argued that this model of teacher leadership is well suited to reforming schools because it promotes the highest level of teacher investment and efficacy and eases the process of change.

Teacher instructional leadership is developed by working with colleagues to improve content knowledge and pedagogy through critical reflection on teaching practices formally and informally (Stephenson, Dada, & Harold, 2012). In this way, teacher leadership is cultivated collaboratively (Hunzicker, 2012) by engaging teachers in developmental tasks which build positive relations with colleagues and give teachers chances to work together (Gigante & Firestone, 2008).

Teachers who practice leadership roles possess curiosity, commitment to students' learning, and a positive orientation towards internal and external professional development (Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011). They have intrinsic motivation to improve teaching, learning, and assessment (Stephenson, Dada, & Harold, 2012) and they are not afraid of taking on responsibility (Muijs & Harris, 2006). They are humble, search for learning from everyone, and learn from their mistakes (Collinson, 2012). Teachers who are leaders have good interpersonal communication skills; they question the existing practices, and try to solve any conflict that

confronts them (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012).

Still, it is not feasible for teachers to practice leadership with no difficulties. Challenges come from a variety of sources including a tendency toward top-down initiatives, lack of time, extra work, and lack of experience or confidence. In addition, some school principals are not willing to relinquish or share their power, while others lack effective communication skills (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Other barriers to teacher leadership include a lack of trust among teachers if individuals receive credit for themselves over their colleagues (Stephenson, Dada, & Harold, 2012). Further, some teachers do not trust their abilities to lead their colleagues, and others describe experiences in which their work was not accepted or noticed by the school principal (Lizotte, 2013). Therefore, building trust and strengthening relationships among teachers is one of the essential roles that a school principal should play to maintain a supportive culture for teacher leadership (Roby, 2011; Gigante & Firestone, 2008).

Having clear expectations for teachers and empowering them to assume leadership roles promotes teacher leadership in schools. Teachers also need to feel that their principal views them as colleagues, and, unsurprisingly, they like their efforts to be recognized (Gigante & Firestone, 2008) with monetary compensation for assuming leadership roles (Lizotte, 2013).

### 3. Method

The study follows a sequential, exploratory mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2006) that consists of two phases: the first phase is quantitative data collection followed by a second phase of qualitative data collection. These two types of data were used to reach a deeper understanding of how teachers viewed their leadership practices and which factors helped or hindered them in ADEC schools.

#### 3.1 The Quantitative Phase

In this phase, a researchers-developed questionnaire was delivered to all Al Ain city schools and collected two days later by graduate student researchers. The questionnaire consisted of 35 items, drawn from literature on teacher leadership practices. The questionnaire was divided into two parts, the first of which collected demographic information about participants and the second of which contained statements investigating participants' degree of agreement on teacher leadership practices. A four-point Likert rating scale was used to measure responses (4 = strongly agree, always; 3 = agree, often; 2 = disagree, rarely; or 1 = strongly disagree, never). The questionnaire was reviewed for content and face validity by a team of experts consisting of four faculty members from the College of Education at the United Arab Emirates University.

Modifications based on their common suggestions were made before the researchers sent them to schools. Cronbach alpha coefficients for the questionnaire are shown in Table 1. All values are above 0.75 which indicates good reliability.

Table 1. Cronbach alpha coefficients

Questionnaire section	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Practicing teacher leadership	18	.92
School factors	9	.91
Personal factors	8	.76
All items	37	.94

#### 3.1.1 Participants

Of the 937 questionnaire respondents, 517 were female and 420 were male. Most respondents had a bachelor's degree (740), 164 had a master's degree, and eight had a doctorate degree. The composition of participants shows a mix of Arab teachers (766) and 171 expatriate teachers from South Africa, England, North America, and New Zealand. Table 2 has more details.

Table 2. Demographic information

Participants	Cycle				Total	
	cycle 1 (grades 1-5)	cycle 2 (grades 6-9)	cycle 3 (grades 10-12)	more than one cycle		
Gender	Male	40	182	144	54	420
	Female	169	154	158	36	517
	Total	209	336	302	90	937
Experience	5 years	37	34	35	10	116
	5 -10 years	82	118	93	39	332
	11-15 years	81	167	156	38	442
	16+	9	16	17	3	45
	Undefined	0	2	0	0	2
	Total	209	335	301	90	937
Education level	Diploma	9	5	4	0	18
	Bachelor's	162	265	242	71	740
	Master's	32	63	52	17	164
	PhD	2	3	2	1	8
	Others	4	0	1	1	6
	Undefined	0	0	1	0	1
	Total	209	336	301	90	937
School Type	Female school	93	151	158	35	437
	Male school	94	185	144	55	478
	Mixed school	22	0	0	0	22
	Total	209	336	302	90	937
Nationality	Arab	163	270	253	80	766
	Expatriate	46	66	49	10	171
	Total	209	336	302	90	937

### 3.1.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS. The mean and standard deviation were used to show the central tendency of each response. The researchers used the following scale to interpret the means: *always* for means between 3.25 and 4.00; *often* for means between 2.5 to 3.24; *rarely* for means between 1.75 and 2.49; and *never* for means between 1 and 1.74. In addition, cumulative degrees of disagreement (for choices of never and rarely) were used to show the degree of participants' disagreement to each of the questionnaire statements, providing another lens to analyze the results.

### 3.2 The Qualitative Phase

Our purpose for the qualitative part of the study was to understand the perceptions of teachers with respect to their "disagree" responses, the realities of practicing leadership roles, and what factors might support or constrain teachers from practicing these roles. Quantitative analysis raised interesting questions and issues to start the interviews: why do teachers have infrequent leadership practices? How do teachers see the school administration as supporting them in taking on leadership roles? Do teachers have the time and willingness to fulfill leadership duties? What are teachers' assumptions of their roles as leaders?

To get a deeper understanding of these issues, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten teachers in seven schools. Most government schools in Abu Dhabi are segregated by gender. In Abu Dhabi, cycle 1 schools serve grades 1-5, cycle 2 schools serve grades 6-9, and cycle 3 schools cater for grades 10-12. We conducted interviews with four teachers in cycle 1 schools, three teachers in cycle 3 schools, one teacher in cycle 2 schools, and two teachers in KG schools. Each interview lasted for approximately an hour and a half. The interviews were tape-recorded after consent was granted by the participants.

#### 3.2.1 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and we read the transcripts individually. We wrote notes and descriptive codes (repeated words or phrases) in the margins. Then, we developed categories or themes for these codes. Each theme was supported by quotations from the interview transcripts. We shared the themes and discussed them to answer the research questions.

### 3.2.2 Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness ensures validity (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) and it aims to accurately present the perspectives of the participants. In the qualitative phase of this study, trustworthiness was established by having the two researchers individually examine the transcripts to verify the interpretations from the data and to check themes as they emerged from the transcripts. Then, the researchers discussed the themes and consensus was reached on important themes, which were once again reviewed in terms of the narratives from the transcripts.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Results of Quantitative Study

On average, male and female teachers often practiced leadership roles as measured by the questionnaire items. The means of most statements are between 2.5 and 3.24. Further, both male and female teachers agreed that they always helped colleagues plan for lessons, prepare activities, and communicate with parents. The data show that female teachers practiced more leadership roles in preparing extracurricular activities with other teachers.

Table 3. Means and % of disagreement between male and female teachers over leadership practices

Items	Means		% of disagreement	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
I help my colleagues to plan for their lessons.	3.31	3.46	14.45	6.09
I help my colleagues prepare classroom activities.	3.27	3.41	12.53	7.94
I help my colleagues prepare extracurricular activities.	3.10	3.27	22.51	17.96
I give my colleagues feedback after observing their classes.	3.18	3.14	16.90	21.20
I orient the beginning teachers about the school policies and rules.	3.36	3.27	11.80	17.61
I advise the beginning teachers in how to accomplish their work.	3.37	3.22	10.57	17.38
I train my colleagues to use different teaching methodologies.	3.06	2.98	20.28	26.17
I train my colleagues to use technology in teaching.	3.19	3.05	18.22	24.60
I provide my colleagues with articles and websites to develop their teaching skills.	3.13	2.98	16.38	26.01
I conduct action research to develop teaching practices in the school.	2.66	2.31	44.20	59.25
I participate in planning for professional development programs in the school.	3.09	2.76	23.00	38.67
I participate in developing assessment tools for assessing students' achievement.	3.14	2.98	18.26	23.19
I lead some school projects.	2.93	2.52	31.15	49.80
I participate in developing school projects as member in different teams.	3.08	3.06	21.01	25.19
I am a member in the school council.	2.59	2.31	43.79	55.75
I communicate with the community institutions to support school activities.	2.72	2.57	41.30	46.09
I communicate with caregivers for the best interest of children.	3.36	3.35	10.047	10.87
I participate in teacher professional associations.	2.27	2.04	58.51	69.16

In general, the responses to questionnaire items suggest that both male and female teachers often practiced leadership roles. The means of most statements were between 2.5 and 3.24. Further, both male and female teachers agreed that certain practices were always performed such as helping colleagues to plan for lessons, preparing for classroom activities, orienting new teachers to school policies and rules, and communicating with caregivers. The data show that female teachers practiced more leadership roles in preparing extracurricular activities with other teachers while male teachers practiced more leadership roles in advising the beginning teachers to accomplish their work. Data show also that there were a number of rare practices. These were conducting action research, being a member in the school council, and participating in professional associations. In fact, the degree of nonparticipation in these practices was strikingly high, ranging from around 40% to 70%, particularly for the male teachers, 69.16% of whom indicated disagreement toward the statement, "I participate in teacher professional associations," as compared with a 58.51% level of disagreement among the female teachers in response to this question. With regard to the statement "I communicate with the community institutions to support school activities," the mean score was above 2.5 which means it is often practiced. However, the percentage of disagreement was still higher than 40% for males (41.3%) and females (46.09%). These quantitative results motivated the researchers to dig deeper into the reasons behind these trends by conducting a qualitative inquiry.

Table 4. Means and % of disagreement between male and female teachers over school factors that support or hinder their leadership practices

Items	Means		% of disagreement	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Teachers at this school encourage each other to lead different school activities.	3.23	3.22	12.70	13.00
The school provides an allowance to encourage teachers to participate in leadership tasks.	2.60	2.26	12.70	13.00
The Abu Dhabi Educational Council's policies encourage teachers to initiate projects and activities that develop their leadership skills.	3.12	2.75	18.55	34.24
The school principal encourages teachers to join professional development programs that support their leadership skills.	3.22	3.00	16.38	25.73
The school principal encourages teachers to search for new opportunities to improve their leadership skills.	3.23	3.06	16.78	23.00
The school principal distributes leadership tasks among all teachers.	3.34	3.17	12.25	18.30
The school principal gives teachers continued feedback to develop their leadership skills.	3.25	3.19	16.98	19.56
The school principal encourages teachers to work in groups.	3.46	3.50	8.63	5.82
The school principal trusts teachers' abilities to get the leadership tasks done.	3.45	3.48	10.31	8.03

Data on school factors that support teachers' leadership practices were mostly positive. Male and female teachers felt that the principal always encouraged them to work in groups and trusted their abilities to get the leadership tasks done. Male teachers felt, more than the female teachers, that the principal distributed leadership roles fairly among teachers and gave continued feedback. Female teachers, on the other hand, reported that the school rarely provided incentives to encourage teachers to take on leadership roles and that ADEC policies do not often encourage teachers to initiate projects.

Table 5. Means and % of disagreement between male and female teachers over personal factors that support or hinder their leadership practices

Items	Means		% of disagreement	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
I can assume different leadership responsibilities.	3.66	3.44	1.92	7.99
I have enough experience to assume leadership roles in the school.	3.60	3.30	2.16	12.47
I am curious to learn new things about teaching and learning.	3.61	3.56	3.38	4.65
I have enough time to work on leadership tasks.	3.19	2.72	16.19	38.44
I prefer to undertake leadership tasks without a formal request.	3.25	2.94	15.14	27.47
I prefer a formal leadership position which identifies my responsibilities.	3.35	3.22	8.61	14.48
I want my work to be recognized.	3.61	3.54	5.01	6.62
I need training to assume a leadership position.	3.06	2.95	18.57	27.62

The majority of male and female teachers believed that they have the ability and experience to take on leadership roles. They expressed that they were always curious to learn about leading teaching and learning and always needed their work to be recognized. The percentages of disagreement showed that many female teachers did not have enough time to work on leadership tasks (38.44%). Moreover, the majority of them expressed a need training to assume leadership positions (27.62%).

#### 4.2 Results of Qualitative Study

The findings of qualitative data were organized into three main categories. The first category focused on practices that teachers believed showcase their leadership roles in schools, including an activity such as action research, which was not frequently practiced by most teachers. The second and third categories concerned the personal and school-related factors which might have supported or hindered teachers from taking on leadership roles. When approached this way, the findings align smoothly with the quantitative data.

##### 4.2.1 Leadership Practices

When it comes to practices that demonstrate teacher leadership, professional development was usually *the* number one example given by teachers. For the past few years, ADEC hired private companies such as Nord

Anglia, GEMS Education, and CfBT to provide training for the teachers. This changed last year. Presently, professional development is to be done locally by teachers and administrators, and ADEC requires every school to organize and deliver professional development sessions. Schools work on reorganizing teachers' schedules to find the time for all or most teachers to attend the sessions, either during the school day or after school. This change helps bring the school community together and allows teachers to take on leadership roles in their schools and support the professional development of their colleagues.

Another leadership practice, which directly includes the element of student development, is leading student projects. Some teachers believe that the curriculum itself allows them to take on leadership roles or develop service learning projects with their students. According to Hessa, a female Islamic cycle 3 teacher, the "curriculum [has] certain activities, which help teachers in attaining leadership roles" related to those activities. Teachers and students in Abu Dhabi schools work collaboratively on many such projects, some of which were subject-related and served the content being taught. For example, in Biology, students conducted outreach programs for families to examine blood pressure and screen for diabetes. As Hessa expressed, "for every subject, we are asked to lead projects with students. We plan for and carry out those projects together."

Teachers were also involved in leading community service learning projects, in which teachers of given subjects cooperated with relevant community service units to facilitate student projects. In one such example, social studies teachers collaborated with the Family Development Foundation on "the 'supply basket' [program] where students brought food items such as sugar, flour, oil, milk, etc. and gave out those baskets to needy families," as Aysha, a female social studies cycle 1 teacher, described. Students in other schools "bought calling cards for the workers and gave them gifts," said Anna.

It was obvious that the work teachers do with students does not stop at leading projects but extends to forming student-teacher relationships, where students start to trust their teachers and seek their advice, thus forming another arena where teachers practice leadership roles. Anna, a female English cycle 3 teacher, is one example of a teacher who listens deeply to student concerns. "My girls do come to me whenever they have problems or issues -- whenever, I would say. Other students as well come so I actually have to help with that." We found this attitude with other teachers. Ali, a male Islamic cycle 2 teacher, stated that his role is not only teaching the subject but being with students when nobody is there for them. "Some students have social problems, their parents are separated, or one of them is dead; so I need to be with them." Fatema, a female Arabic cycle 1 teacher, reiterated, "I love working with my students especially those who need assistance and those for whom I know that I can make changes in their lives. I always look for those students and I love to release their potentialities."

On the other hand, as the quantitative data showed, action research was infrequently practiced in schools. This was confirmed in the interviews. Not all teachers are aware of how to do action research. They try to solve school or classroom problems but these solutions are not pursued through a formal action research approach. Some teachers articulated that they sometimes collected information from the students and their parents to solve problems related to students, but they were not aware that what they did could be formulated as action research. This is what Ali, a male Islamic cycle 2 teacher, stated, "We try to look at why some students behave in certain ways that distract their classmates. We meet with their parents to find out means to solve the problems." But these efforts went undocumented and thus the resulting benefits were not shared with other teachers.

#### 4.2.2 School-Related Factors

School-related factors can be divided into two main sections: supporting and deterring factors. One important factor that helped teachers to take leadership roles is when their school administration is supportive. ADEC emphasizes that teachers should work together in teams to attain school goals. To do so, each school divides the teachers into committees according to the school improvement plan. This is one way for teachers to practice leadership. In fact, as Aysha, a female social studies cycle 1 teacher, mentioned, "Every year, ADEC sends a letter to all schools asking principals to divide the schools into teams to carry out the school improvement plan." On the other hand, this could raise a problem if, as Fatema suggested, "The teachers have to be assigned to teams even if teams do not fit their needs or desires. There is no motivation, only we have to be in teams!"

Another supporting factor is when "the assignment is clear and there is trust from the administration," as Zahra, a female English cycle 1 teacher, expressed. Heather, a female English cycle 1 teacher, added, "when choosing someone to lead is not instigating any bad feelings in fellow teachers," this would be a supporting factor.

In addition, evaluating teachers based on their contributions to extra activities encourages teachers to assume leadership roles in schools. "One of the teacher's evaluation criteria is to show incidents when you lead school projects or other teachers," Zahra said. "When I do extra work outside their classroom, I get credit for it... the

administration keeps track of teachers' activities," Noura, a KG teacher explained. This encouraged teachers to volunteer for leadership roles. In some schools, however, this was not perceived to be true. Rhonda, a female special education cycle 1 teacher who leads many initiatives said, "My evaluation was the same as other teachers who did not do much."

While we found a handful supporting factors, the deterring factors were many. The first among deterring factors was lack of time. The teachers we interviewed argued that they were overwhelmed by too many classes and administrative work. Every day "new tasks pop up and are thrown to [teachers]." According to Ahmed, a male chemistry cycle 2 teacher, "You cannot be a leader and inspire others with all these demands from the school, the Council, and work. We are multitask teachers. We have no time!" Heather explained, "They ask you to lead some activities like Open Days but they keep your other duties unchanged... it is hard to cope with those demands, especially with no other privilege or support." Zahra concludes, "Do not expect an exhausted teacher to give... the thinking of a pressured teacher is usually negative even if you provide good facilities... we need time."

Lack of recognition was an important deterring factor. When leading teams or activities came with no recognition, teachers tried to withdraw or run away from leadership work. Fatema explained, "The status of those who work hard is the same as those who do not work at all; at the end we have the same salary and the same benefits. Why should I bother myself to do extra work?" Further, Ahmed said, "some of us have family commitments and home responsibilities; we are not willing to take extra work for nothing... without incentive or formal position."

Another deterring factor is fear of sharing power or authority. In some schools, the administration believes that "as far as we give some teachers more leading roles, this might have adverse effects on us," said Heather. Some administrators seem to feel threatened by teachers who have informal authority over other teachers or students, and some teachers might share these feelings as well. Zahra expressed, "a powerful teacher is to be feared. I remember one teacher from New Zealand who was seen as a leading figure in the school. Once he objected to one of the decisions of the vice principal; many other teachers started to support him."

Another deterring factor was when the administration overwhelmed willing teachers through assigning more and more leadership roles. Teachers were selected to take on leadership roles because of their abilities. Anna, who was given leadership tasks not the least of which was the coordinator of the English department at her school, said, "I have a strong work ethic, and they know if they give me something, I'll do it. I think it's a personal preference for the administration, to be honest, about who they prefer, who they trust to do things." However, it seems that trust invested in those teachers can easily become a burden. Heather explained, "I would say that administration does pick a certain group that certainly does the leadership things in this school... but I think that gets me in trouble sometimes because then, I'm overworked." Speaking to the administration about the issue would not have changed the situation because the administration believed that those were the able teachers who got things done. Noura viewed this as a mistake: "If you always select certain people to do the work, other teachers will know that even if they abstain, others will do it." The administration should plant "a sense of responsibility in teachers." The problem, as Rhonda viewed it, was "when you show abilities and do something creative, you are given more assignments... This made [her] withdraw and hide [her] skills for fear of getting more work."

Language barriers were yet another deterring factor for taking on leadership roles. Teachers in ADEC schools are of three categories: nationals, expatriate Arabs, and native speakers of English. This composition created a noticeable language barrier and consequently it was not easy for all teachers to take on leadership tasks because teachers inside a school could not fully comprehend each other. English-only teachers also faced communication difficulties with Arabic-speaking parents. Heather explained, "Because there is lack of communication, the English department does have a severe language barrier. For example, when we have parents' conferences, we have to have one of us on a different table with Arabic speaking teachers who are trained to talk with the parents." Sometimes circulars are distributed in Arabic and this is another hassle to English native teachers. In a context where communication is an issue, teachers cannot fully commit themselves to leading activities.

Another important school-related factor which hinders teachers from taking on leadership roles is when they identify with their departments, rather than the school, creating leadership within the department, but not at the school level. It was clear that some leadership effort is done within individual departments, but it does not spread out to other departments which raise concerns about school-wide leadership practices. This was a feature of an English department in which, Anna explained, "We lesson plan together, we meet, we cling together, and I know for a fact that the other departments don't, and each person does tons of things alone." Heather described the situation in her school: "Before, each one did their own thing; now they are very much working together, so

there's a big difference than before." However, this is not the norm in many schools. Many teachers still prefer working individually and when they are asked to work collaboratively, they do it in a technical sense.

#### 4.2.3 Personal Factors

Qualitative data revealed two major personal factors which can support or hinder teachers thinking of taking on leadership roles. These are how teachers perceived the definition of teacher leadership; and the extent to which they were willing to take on leadership roles. While a few teachers understood the true meaning of the leadership role they could play, many of those we met were not familiar with the concept of "teachers as leaders." Ahmed correctly understood teacher leadership as inspirational -- "inspiring each other and being a role model for teachers and students." Hessa, however, views it as using new methods of teaching. "We had frontal teaching before, but now we use different strategies." She defined her leadership role as a teacher in mostly managerial and pedagogical terms, "I suppose a teacher leader is not to carry all the load by herself; she should distribute the work, she has to become a facilitator, not controlling teaching." Other teachers thought that dividing and organizing work amongst themselves was teacher leadership, as when a group of teachers sit together and agree on who is going to plan for what lessons. Or as Rhonda said, "to be in a group... to help organize and to assign roles... to give them ideas." This limited view applies to administrators as well. Ali explained, "Administrators in some schools understand teacher leadership in terms of assigning teachers to teams and having team leaders according to the school improvement plan." These examples suggest that the term itself is not commonly used in the schools we visited.

One last supporting factor for taking on leadership roles is gaining better understanding of what happens in the school. This occurs when a teacher has the willingness to come forward and volunteer for leading roles. It usually happens with newly-hired teachers or native English teachers who come from abroad to teach in ADEC schools. Anna explained, "You'll kind of create a bigger picture of the school... I can actually see the connection, where other people who don't get to see every detail of it ... they really don't see the connection."

Our data revealed that many teachers preferred to be asked formally to do a certain leadership task. Hessa said that in a school of 100 teachers, only 10 would come forward with ideas and suggest to do something. "Others would want the administration to assign tasks." Fatema said, "I would like to have leadership work assigned to me by a decree, so I know my responsibilities." According to Anna, "Very few actually volunteered to do outside things... It's only a handful of people who have this desire to volunteer." Anna explained the fact that "on their own teachers will refuse any 'extra' work."

On the other hand, when teachers are assigned leadership tasks or forced to take them on, they do them without much desire." As Noura expressed, "The message is: you go do it. Ahhh! Let's go, let's do it. Or do you [want me to] bring more to it? They are not the same." Hessa explained the "do the job" attitude by saying, "I prefer to have the desire... I will do more, I will feel my achievement. Giving me a task becomes a must and I have to do it, but it does not have the same impact."

### 5. Discussion

This study utilized a mixed research method to explore teachers' leadership practices and the factors which helped or hindered them from being teacher leaders in ADEC schools. The quantitative results showed an optimistic picture of leadership practices in schools; however, the qualitative data showed a rather different reality. The quantitative results indicated that male and female teachers often practiced leadership roles, as ADEC and school principals require teachers to work collaboratively to establish and implement improvement plans in their schools. This result is supported by the qualitative data as ADEC schools establish themselves through many reform and change attempts. It is not surprising that teachers in ADEC schools often undertake active leadership roles in teaching and learning as part of the new school reform. For instance, they are required to plan their lessons and activities collaboratively. In fact, school principals always encourage teachers to work in groups. Also unsurprisingly, and in line with the same idea that ADEC requires teachers to do certain tasks to support the new reform, the results of the interviews indicate that two of the most common leadership roles teachers currently play is being providers of professional development sessions and being advisors to students. Providing professional development for colleagues, Gordon (2004) stated, is one mode of leadership that teachers could practice to improve schools (see also Heck & Hallinger, 2009).

Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative data confirmed that there were some rare teacher leadership practices such as conducting action research and collaborating with community institutions or professional associations. Many teachers did not practice action research. Indeed, they were asking us what we meant by action research during the interviews. The reason for not having action research in schools might be that the current educational changes by ADEC do not emphasize it, but it could also be attributed to the lack of attention to action research in

teacher preparation programs and internship training. As to why teachers were not collaborating often with the community or participating actively in professional associations, this could be due to system-wide policies and cultural norms. During the interviews, we came to know that whenever an activity involving a visitor from outside the school system was planned, security clearances were needed to protect schools from intrusion by religious or political interest groups. The government discovered at one point, for example, that the Muslim Brotherhood was attempting to penetrate the professional associations of teachers. Therefore, teachers had limited their activities or become hesitant to seek membership in such associations.

Most teachers perceived their “leadership” roles as mainly focused on teaching students in the classrooms and trying to have students improve their achievement. In fact, the term ‘teacher leadership’ is not commonly used in the schools we visited. Many of those we met did not know what was meant by “teachers as leaders,” and they associated the term “leadership” with formal leadership positions. This could be because they understood that, as Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) found, their work focused on teaching and learning, not on leadership. This conclusion is evidenced by the fact that none of the teachers we interviewed mentioned coaching or mentoring among the roles they believed they should play. Similarly, Xie and Shen (2013) found that most teachers understood their leadership roles as limited to the classroom level.

The quantitative data revealed that school administrations mostly supported teachers’ leadership practices. The principals encouraged teachers to work in groups and trusted their abilities, distributing leadership roles fairly among teachers and giving them continued feedback. However, qualitative data pointed to plenty of factors that deterred teachers from practicing leadership roles. It is true that principals routinely encouraged teachers to work in groups. However, fair distribution of leadership roles was an issue since in most schools, the principals had a preferred group of teachers who were given more chances and support to claim leadership roles than others. This suggests that leadership roles in schools are not as equally distributed as the questionnaire responses indicated.

The bureaucratic and centralized nature of the education system in ADEC explains why female teachers perceived schools as rarely providing them with incentives to take on leadership roles. In addition, while ADEC promulgates a culture of teamwork in schools, the policies and procedures were silent about incentives for teachers to work on projects or lead teams.

In contradiction to the questionnaire data, teachers in the interviews expressed that they were loaded with teaching and administrative duties, and did not have sufficient time to perform their leadership tasks. In fact, the percentage of disagreement to the statement that teachers have enough time reached around 40% for female teachers. This finding concurs with Muijs and Harris (2006) who found that lack of time was one challenge to teacher leadership.

Some teachers felt that they would be overworked if they were known as hard workers. If true, this attitude from school administration toward hard work would make diligent teachers not only keep a low profile and avoid showing leadership skills, but also do the assigned tasks in a mediocre fashion so that they would not be selected in the future for leadership tasks.

Qualitative data showed that some school administrators felt insecure when teachers showed leadership charisma. It is widely considered acceptable for most schools to have multiple formal and informal leaders (Spillane, 2005), and Fowler (2014) argued that “wise administrators are able to identify these people and welcome their cooperation in building a good school; foolish ones seek to dominate them, showing them ‘who’s the boss.’” (p. 41). Our data showed that in most cases, school principals, while encouraging teachers to claim leadership roles, were watchful of the fact that charismatic teachers can influence school operations. This indicated a traditional leadership style where principals feel overshadowed by effective teachers and therefore try to keep things under control. Unfortunately, most school principals in the schools we visited held to the traditional view that they were the only leaders based on the hierarchical system in their schools and teachers should be limited to teaching and the extra work given to them by the administration.

At the same time, many teachers felt that they were forced to be in teams and they asked for incentives if they were to be assigned leadership duties. Many of them preferred to be asked formally to do leadership tasks. We consider the views of principals and teachers as explained above to be serious roadblocks to genuine teacher leadership practices in schools. Gigante and Firestone (2008) supported the same concept by stating that limited views do not build teacher leadership in schools.

Qualitative data showed that departmentalization is one barrier to the practice of leadership roles in ADEC schools. In fact, most teachers see themselves as belonging to departments and assuming roles within those departments, but they tended not to identify as strongly at the school level. Although ADEC schools have mission and vision statements which should direct the schools as integrated units, it seemed that school

principals were not able to foster a sense of unity among teachers, and this needs to be addressed as Roby (2011) posited. This issue is compounded by language barriers that affect oral and written communication in ADEC schools. Whether a native English speaker or native Arabic speaker is given a leadership role at the school level, communication is an issue.

### 5.1 Implications

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations and implications could be adopted to foster teacher leadership in UAE schools and to eliminate the roadblocks to teacher leadership:

- Educational policies should be reviewed to empower teachers. ADEC's new policies require that school principals demonstrate the ability to lead people. The same should be required from teachers. Leadership ability should become one of the evaluation criteria for teachers. Those teachers who show clear evidence of leadership should be rewarded.
- Teachers should be oriented to and trained on teacher leadership. Traditional views of teaching and teachers should be examined and changed accordingly. ADEC should target this change as one of the means to foster current reform.
- Obsolete views of leadership and the fear of influential teachers should be dealt with through training.
- School principals need to distribute leadership roles fairly to all teachers and encourage all teachers to participate. They should not overload hardworking teachers; otherwise, they may withdraw from undertaking leadership roles in schools.
- Teachers should be consulted on the formation of school teams. This will increase their investment and motivate them to work with other teachers and ensure the quality of the work.
- Teachers need to be trained on how to conduct action research in teacher preparation programs and during their in-service training.
- School leadership should provide teachers with needed support to practice leadership roles whether it is time or some other incentive.
- Teachers who are capable of leading their colleagues or students should be asked formally to assume leadership positions, and to document their work as such.
- Collaboration among school departments should be encouraged to exchange experience and share best practices to the whole school.

School leadership should encourage Arabic teachers to reach out to and communicate with English native speakers, especially because most Arabic teachers are bilingual.

### 5.2 Further Research

Among the most salient results from this study are the discrepancies that we observed between the quantitative and qualitative data that we collected. We believe that in most quantitative studies in the UAE, respondents give the socially acceptable responses. Many factors come in when they complete questionnaires. Therefore, we advise future researchers not to be satisfied with quantitative data alone, as multiple tools will likely be needed to obtain credible data. Further, it is important for researchers in the UAE to be open to other researchers who could audit their data collection, data analysis, and interpretations. As a continuation of this research, we suggest collecting qualitative data from school principals to explore their perceptions of the leadership opportunities for teachers in their schools and how teacher leadership could be enhanced. Another study can investigate teacher leadership and principal leadership in a few schools through detailed interviews and observations.

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