The Hiring Process of Principals in Public Schools in the United Arab Emirates: Practices and Policies

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study aims to explore the current selection practices of school principals in the Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates. The study covers three main objectives: to investigate the current practices and policies regarding the recruitment of school principals in public schools in the UAE; to explore how the Ministry of Education equips school principals for leadership positions; and to survey school principals' views on recruitment and training and their on-going professional development needs. Currently there are three main stages in the recruitment process: the first stage is to submit an online application, the second stage is the interview, and the third stage is undergoing a probation period as a school principal. A significant finding was that school principals at present are not satisfied with the current recruitment process and see it in need of change. The recommendations made as a result of this study as based on the key findings and refections of the school principals. School principals felt they would benefit from more specialized training in leadership and management skills, as well as, visits to successful schools both in the United Arab Emirates and overseas. One important recommendation was to develop a new academic diploma focusing on management and leadership skills for school principals, a 'Principalship Diploma' which covers the fundamental core content, training and requirements for educational leadership and effective performance. School principals play an imperative role in supporting the school, staff, and student performance, and therefore it is extremely important to create a clear, transparent and effective hiring policies in order to hire the most competent, effective and best performing school principals to lead the educational reform process in the United Arab Emirates. **Key words:** Practice, Policy, School Principal, Recruitment, Educational Leadership, Recruitment, Professional Development, Ministry of Education, United Arab Emirates

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a Gulf country, established in 1971 by the late President H.H. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan. The UAE aims to be one of the most successful countries in the world by 2021. Their vision is 'United in Responsibility, United in Destiny, United in Knowledge, and United in Prosperity' (UAE Vision 2010 [online]). Accordingly, in 2010, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, established a national agenda in the form of a set of objectives to help achieve this vision. The UAE government considers education a critical factor. Eight key national agenda objectives relate to education: '…to ensure that 100% of public schools have highly effective school leadership' (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, (MOE) n.d. [online]). 'Educational leaders are the change agents in the schools and they can be tools for change, or

they can be barriers against change' (Al-Mashhadany, 2012: p.455). Change agents are those who inspire others to change (*Cambridge Dictionary* [online]), who motivate the organisation and its employees for the better, and in the process, do so with minimum resistance.

School principals play a vital role in the development of education in any country. According to Ken Leithwood, "Leaders are ultimately responsible for how well students are doing and the extent to which achievement is improving" (2012, p.2). It is essential to select school principals carefully because of their leadership role in developing and improving an organisation. The Supreme National Steering Committee (SNSC) of the UAE is a committee established by the National Qualification Authority (NQA) to help achieve its aims and objectives. The SNSC has been discussing the need to implement a Teacher and Educational Leadership Standard (TELSUAE), a licensing project for teachers and educational leaders. H.E. Dr. Thani Al Mehairi, General Director of NQA and Chairman of the Steering Committee,

said at the 25th meeting of the SNSC in January, 2017 that the purpose of the TELSUAE project was to ensure that teachers and school leaders could prove professional competency at different functional levels, in line with the UAE vision for international best practices. The establishment of the TELSUAE highlights the importance of leadership in the development of education. The NQA is still working on the TELSUAE, but educational leaders will have to meet TELSUAE standards to assess their ability and knowledge as school principals. Furthermore, school principals will need to develop leadership skills and learning objectives to meet licensing requirements.

In 2016 the Ministry of Education established a School Inspection Committee (SIC) to evaluate all government schools in the UAE using a specific evaluation framework. The framework consists of six performance standards, the last of which focuses on school leadership. The SIC assesses school leadership with regard to knowledge of the curriculum and best practices in teaching, learning, and assessment. Furthermore, it evaluates their capacity to innovate and improve, and their ability to solve problems creatively and efficiently. It also assesses the school and learners' performance (MOE, 2015/2016, [online]). It is clear that school principals require specific skills to be successful, but "… just as leaders can have a positive impact on achievement, they also can have a marginal, or worse, a negative impact on achievement" (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003, p.7). A competent principal can motivate teachers to change and develop, and that results in higher-level student performance. Hence, this study explores the strategies and recruitment criteria used by the Ministry of Education in selecting and equipping school principals in the public sector.

Problem Statement

Michael Fullan, an educational consultant and author who wrote many books on educational reform, stated that successful principals develop their staff members through influence and delegation (2010, p.14). For that reason it is essential to select the right person for the right position. "Appointing a new head teacher is probably the most important task a governing body will undertake in determining the success of the school. Although such appointments are infrequent, governing bodies need to give the process careful consideration" (On the Appointment of Head Teachers and Deputy Head Teachers, 2011, p.3). This is supported with a paper published by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, stating, "When considering a candidate for a specific job, we need to list requirements to ensure we hire the right person. We must consider the qualification, experience, and ability of the applicants." (2004, p.70)

For example, to work as a teacher, a certificate in education is needed, and to work as a doctor, a degree in medicine is needed. To be 'qualified' is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as holding "an official record showing that you have finished a training course or have the necessary skills". The required qualifications should be acquired through an educational course, be it a training program or university. There are some specific skills and competencies that school principals are required

to have which teachers do not need. According to Mumford, Campion, and Morgeson (2007), leaders in any organisation must have four necessary skills: cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, business skills, and strategic skills.

> … cognitive skills are the foundation of the leadership skill requirements. They are related to collecting, processing, and disseminating information. They include speaking, to convey the information as to what is needed to change or accomplish and why it is needed. Cognitive skills also include listening, to appropriately comprehend and question in order to achieve a complete understanding. (p. 156)

"Highly effective school leadership" is one of the objectives of both the MOE and the national agenda (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, (MOE). To achieve this goal, there is a need to reflect on the process of selecting school leaders; to rely on interview and test alone in selecting school principals is not satisfactory enough to achieve this goal. It is highly important for school principals to have a degree in educational leadership to gain the fundamental knowledge about leadership to support their performance in the field. However, according to the MOE, practiced teachers can acquire a school leadership position without having leadership certificates and only by going through an interview and a test. "The belief that specific preparation makes a difference to the quality of school leadership is underpinned by research on the experience of new principals" (Bush, 2009, p. 337).

Study Objectives

1. To investigate current practices regarding the recruitment of school principals in public schools in the United Arab Emirates.
2. To explore how the Ministry of Education equips school principals for leadership positions.
3. To explore school principals' views on the current recruitment process and their professional development needs.

Research Questions

1. How does the Ministry of Education hire and equip school principals for leadership positions in the public sector?
2. What are the current professional development needs of school principals in the public sector?
3. How do school principals view the existing principal hiring process?

Significance of the Study

The UAE aims to be one of the most successful countries in the world. For the UAE to achieve this goal, the government needs to carefully select leaders with the right skills and qualifications, especially school leaders, as they are primarily the ones who bring change to the educational system by influencing the school and student achievement. The Impact of School Leadership on Pupil Outcomes Final Report is research conducted in 2009 which supports this conclusion:

… the research demonstrates that heads in more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through who they are – their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competencies - the strategies they use, and the specific combination and timely implementation and management of these strategies in the unique contexts in which they work. (Day et al., 2009, p.5).

These are essential attributes needed by school leaders to fulfil their role successfully. Certification in a leadership program, either through a university or an intense training program, could serve to support readiness for such positions. There is currently a lack of research and available literature concerning the importance of selecting and equipping school principals in the UAE. This study is the first to explore strategies employed by the Ministry of Education to select and equip school principals.

METHODOLOGY

Research Method and Design

This study looks at the selection and recruitment of school principals in public schools in the UAE. In this study, a mixed approach using qualitative and quantitative methods was used to collect data from participants.

The use of both a qualitative and quantitative approach provided two different complementary perspectives. "Mixed methods research has a great potential to promote a shared responsibility in the quest for attaining accountability for educational quality" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.24). This is in line with Mora on the use of the mixed approach, stating, "….we should use both qualitative and quantitative research since they provide different perspectives and usually complement each other" (2010, [Online]). For the qualitative approach, face-to- face interviews were used to collect data from four cluster managers. The qualitative approach explored the research questions, and as stated by Mora, qualitative studies are "by definition exploratory, and used when we do not know what to expect, to define the problem, or develop an approach to the problem" (2010 [Online]). The data collected from the interviews provided information on the current strategies for selecting and equipping school principals. In-depth interviews formed a suitable data collection method for this study because they "go deeper into issues of interest and explore nuances related to the problem at hand" (Mora, 2010, [Online]). Semi-structured interviews also helped understand the strategies currently used to select school principals. The study used a pre- prepared question guide in semi-structured face-to-face interviews to collect data. "The semi-structured interview guide provides a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, [Online]). The advantages of a semi-structured face-to-face interview, according to Cohen and Crabtree, "are questions that can be prepared ahead of time. This allows the interviewer to be prepared and appeared competent during the interview. Semi-structured interviews also allow informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006,

[Online]). This research method was anticipated to be helpful in collating data from cluster managers because they each have various views and strategies for equipping school principals. After interviewing the four cluster managers, coding methods were used to analyse and compare the data to have clear understanding of the study. A quantitative approach was also used in this study.

A Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to school principals. "Questionnaires provide a relatively cheap, quick and efficient way of obtaining large amounts of information from a large sample of people. Data can be collected relatively quickly because the researcher would not need to be present when the questionnaires are administered. This is useful for large populations when interviews would be impractical" (McLeod, 2014, [Online]). The questions were a mixture of open and closed-ended questions to help understand how principals viewed their own recruitment process and that of their colleagues, and also to explore how they planned to develop themselves professionally.

Sampling

There are 20 school principals participated in this study. A larger number of school principals would have ideally created a representative sample. The researchers decided to go with convenience sampling; as the sample was selected primarily on the basis of what the researchers were able to access. Convenience sampling is a non- probability sampling technique where the probability of inclusion in the sample is unknown. School principals were selected because of the researchers' convenient accessibility and proximity. All school principals were invited to participate. No inclusion criteria was identified prior to the selection of school principals.

Whilst this is an approach in small-scale pieces of research, one of the strongest rationales for this method is in this particular study is that the group under study are not generally easy to access but the researcher were able to establish a sufficient degree of contact and trust with all the participants in order to be able to conduct a viable piece of research.

The researchers focused our research on an in-depth study on a smaller number of participants to allow us to develop more complex insights. This meant studying people who are not representative of a wider population, but who are worth studying precisely because they represent exceptional, critical or intense examples of the particular phenomenon (school principals selecting criteria) which the researchers are interested in. This particular source of data which researcher were able to access in a way that is unusually rich, and which could not be obtained in the same way by other researchers. Our findings are not, therefore, straightforwardly generalizable to a wider population, but nevertheless have the potential to generate valuable insights. The basic aim here, though, is to be able to say something theoretically about the findings from the particular sample the researchers have studied in a way that generates insights about other cases or contexts. One implication of this is that our study is based on non- probability samples is designed in a way that

is consciously informed by both existing theoretical debates and the development of new theories.

Data Collection

Before collecting the data, the Ministry of Education was contacted for permission to conduct the research. The Ministry of Education in turn gave their permission and emailed participants through the School Operation Center (SOC) to facilitate the work of the researcher. The SOC is a platform that connects the Ministry with field operations and facilitates the logistic work of school management by following and observing the learning process and other specific tasks which concern students, teachers, and administration. The data was collected using two research tools: interviews and questionnaires. Four interviews were conducted with three cluster managers and one sector manager. The sector manager was responsible for a number of cluster managers and schools, ranging from Dubai to Ras Al Khaimah (RAK). The interviews were conducted between the 1st of March, 2018, and the 7th of March, 2018. One cluster manager was from RAK Emirate, and the other two were from Dubai. Prior to the start of the data collection process, the aim of the study was explained to all participants, and the research objectives were clarified. The participants were very helpful and willing to share their experience with the researcher. The interviews were recorded with the approval of the participants.

The questionnaire was used to collect more detailed data, and was designed using the SurveyMonkey application, which can create, send, and analyze surveys (SurveyMonkey, 2017 [online]). The link to the survey was sent to these prospective participants with the help of Ministry of Education cluster managers.

Interviews

Before interviewing the participants, permission from the cluster managers was obtained and the topic of the study was explained. Participants were assured that all personal information would remain confidential and anonymous.

The interviews included five sets of questions. The first explored participants' background information and qualifications. The second and third set of questions consisted of questions that investigated the process of selecting school principals and equipping them for a leadership position, and to ascertain their views on the selection process and what needed to be changed, if anything. The fourth and fifth sets of questions explored the participants' view on the licensure program and community of practice in equipping school principals.

Questionnaires

For quantitative data, a questionnaire was used. A questionnaire is a "set of questions for obtaining statistically useful or personal information from individuals'" (Merriam-Webster, 2017, [online]). The questionnaire was a mix of open and closed ended questions. The open-ended questions give the researcher an overview of participants' needs and opinions. Three sets of questions were used in this study. The first set consisted of open-ended questions about participants' background, and the second set consisted of open-ended questions about participants' views and opinions concerning professional development. The third set included closed questions about participants' perspectives on the current process of selecting and equipping school principals. The closed questions were designed using a rating scale with a range of five options (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly agree). The data was analysed and processed through SPSS.

Dimension

1. Educational background: participants' educational degree (Bachelor or master or PhD).
2. Years of experience: years of experience of participants as a school principal.
3. School type: participants were school principals for different type of schools (kindergarten, elementary, middle school and high school)
4. Academic history: the training and the courses they went through.

Table 1. List of variables

Dimension	Variables	Operationalize indicators (procedures for measuring variables, questions to ask and response categories
Educational background	Participants' educational degree (Bachelor or master or PhD)	Participant were asked in the questionnaire to state their highest educational degree they hold
Years of experience	Years of experience of participants as a school principal	Participants were asked in the questionnaire to state the number of years of experience as a school principal
School type	Type of school the participants work at (kindergarten, elementary, middle or high school)	Participants were asked in the questionnaire to state the school type they are working at currently
Academic history	The training and the courses that the participants went through	Participants were asked in questionnaire to state their academic history (the training they get and the courses they took to acquire leadership and management skills)

RESULTS

1.0 Interview Results

Four interviews in all were conducted; three with the three cluster managers, and one with a sector manager. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the method used by the MOE to select and equip school principals. Responses were categorized into three subheadings: selection process and professional development.

1.1 Selection Policy and Method

The selection process of school principals, according to the four managers interviewed, consists of three main steps: (i) applicant registration online; (ii) interviewing potential candidates, (iii) a six-month trial period.

The four participants agreed that the most important elements for selection are the interview and a six-month trial period. Candidates are assigned a school principal to observe their way of handling things in the field and to see what they can accomplish. During this trial period, the candidates' abilities and skills are observed and assessed by cluster managers, teachers in the schools, and school inspection committees. This multi-faceted approach ensures a fair and comprehensive assessment of the candidate's abilities and skills. Prior to that change, a pre- selection test was administered, and no six-month trial period was required, according to questionnaire responses by school principals.

One cluster manager stated that the interview serves as a filter to help select the most capable individuals from the candidate pool. The four managers agreed that the interview is difficult and thorough. At the time of interview, four or five specialists from different departments assess the candidates' abilities, skills and character, by means of specific questions and scenarios. Approximately 75-80% of candidates are successful. The interview lasts about one hour, and is recorded to ensure fairness and that the selection is justified. The sector manager stated that "the interview may not allow us to see the full potential of a candidate, for mistakes tend to happen, and we are all human, after all. However, the six-month trial period is the conclusive step that allows us to observe and assess the true potential of the candidate". However, according to the cluster managers, in practice sometimes the interview takes place only after the six-month trial period has been completed. According to the four managers, teachers can become effective school principals without having first served for years as a vice-principal. One cluster manager stated, "if I notice that a certain teacher has the ability and the skills of a leader, then why not make him or her one, why waste years of his/her life to reach what he or she can reach at a young age". This statement was supported by the other managers interviewed. All managers agreed the Ministry of Education is now looking for skills, abilities, and efficiency. The managers interviewed sometimes recommended candidates for school principal positions based on their accomplishments in the field. They encourage individuals who have won educational awards, participated in programs, or who have skills and abilities that are noticed and recognized by others, to come forward for promotion. As one manager stated, "It is

not about the years of experience. It is about the abilities and skills. Even a teacher who has been teaching for two years can become a school principal if he or she has what it takes".

When asked about the requirement for a degree in educational leadership, the four managers agreed it was preferable, but not compulsory, although "It is important to have the fundamental academic understanding of leadership to support performance in the field". They agreed a degree in educational leadership would improve skills and knowledge to enhance performance. They felt both theoretical and practical training was necessary.

When asked about the need to change the current process of school principal selection, one of the four managers felt that the current process bears rethinking, because otherwise in this fast-changing era one would be left behind. Another manager did not agree, stating that the Ministry of Education has already modified the selection process and it does not need any further adjustment. However, the other two managers agreed that the Ministry of Education is now still in the process of change.

1.2 Professional Development

If the candidate is presently serving as a vice-principal, then preparation for principalship starts with leadership training sessions while in their current position and continues for a duration of their probation period which is normally six-month. However, if the candidate being recruited to the principal position is a teacher and has no previous experience in administration, training commences during the six-month probation period and continues while on the job. Training is a continuous process that never stops. The training for principals focuses on leadership skills and objectives, as well as teaching and learning processes. School principals need to become familiar with new curricula in all subjects and know how to assess lessons. They must understand the process of teaching and learning so that they can improve the performance of the students, the teachers, and the school. The sector manager stated that the Ministry of Education wants school principals to move away from management tasks and engage themselves more in the teaching and learning process.

The MOE uses various approaches to develop school principals professionally, such as visits to leading countries in education, creating a training center for teachers and leaders focusing on their professional development, instilling the concept of Community of Practice (COP) throughout its jurisdiction, and creating the positions of cluster manager and others to support school principals and enhance their performance. The four managers stated that the MOE had sent many school principals and vice-principals to other countries, such as Finland and Japan, which were considered world leaders in the field of education.

According to the four managers, responsibility for the professional development of school principals fell to both the MOE training department as well as cluster managers. Cluster managers could help school principals in many ways. One cluster manager gave an example of developing school principals under his charge by using COP. He combined

three to four schools together as a unit. Those schools shared lesson plans, visited one another, and communicated best teaching, managing and planning practices. It was not only the teachers that communicated and shared, but the principals and school workers as well. Even the students visited other schools and gave lessons if they had the skills to do so. This method, he said, improved collaboration between the schools and gave students, teachers and principals the opportunity to present their abilities and learn from others' experiences and knowledge. He also stated that his COP unit can visit other units and exchange ideas and practices with them.

All the managers agreed that the most important skill school principals need to learn is how to assess a lesson. One cluster manager stated that school principals should give a lesson themselves from time to time, to understand the process of learning, assessment, and improvement. Another cluster manager gave an example of what he did to develop his school principals in this respect. He said that all principals under his charge gathered together, and one gave a lesson to the others. Afterwards they discussed and assessed the lesson and came up with methods and strategies for improvement. One cluster manager stated that no matter how much training was provided, if principals did not have the will to change, learn, and develop themselves, then they would not progress. Willingness is the most important factor. Principals must stay abreast of new developments in the field, be it how to lead, how to teach, or how to use technology. According to one sector manager, the Ministry of Education was working on a new project at the moment, a 'leadership department' concerned with everything to do with school leadership: criteria for selecting school principals, training given to school principals, and observation and assessment of school principals. Another project was the 'senior director,' to be responsible for improving three to four schools and reporting to the cluster manager.

1.3 Teacher Educational Leadership Standard (TELSUAE)

The Ministry of Education is launching a licensing project for teachers and leaders, however, leadership licensing standards have yet to be established. When asked their opinion of the project, the managers all agreed it would be a positive step to update leaders and teachers on new developments in the field of education. One cluster manager felt this project would encourage leaders and teachers to read more, seek out ways and methods to improve their performance, and learn new teaching and leadership skills. Another manager felt this project could become "a tool to assess the abilities of the workers (teachers and school principals) and help to improve the abilities of everyone by 90%". Another manager believed this project would help the UAE to fulfil its mission to become a world leader in education. However, they all agreed that this project alone was not sufficient to guarantee

highly qualified leadership in schools. As the managers said, it needed support from other areas as well. When asked about the challenges faced by this licensing standards project, three managers agreed the natural resistance to change, and the fear of trying and failing, would be the biggest hurdles to overcome. One of the managers stated that if this project was not introduced as a type of professional development scheme, aiming to improve skills and abilities, then resistance to what may be perceived as imposed standards may be seen as a threat, and would interfere with acceptance of the project. Such a situation could lead to dismissals and staffing gaps. Another manager stated that fear of failure to meet new licensing standards may cause many to leave, and that too would leave employee vacancies that needed to be addressed quickly by the Ministry of Education so as to not affect the teaching and learning processes.

2.0 Questionnaire Result

The targeted sample for the questionnaire was forty school principals, however, only twenty school principals agreed to participate. Of this group, years of experience working as a school principal scaled between two and seventeen years. Four out of 20 participants are still serving an assigned trial period, and had not yet been permanently appointed. The participants came from different types of schools, as shown in Table 2.

All participants held a bachelor's degree in education, and one had a diploma in leadership. The majority of the participants went through an interview before they were assigned, but only eight went through a test. Four out of 20 participants were still serving out their six-month trial period as school principal and had not yet been permanently appointed.

2.1 Selection Policy and Practice

The responses demonstrate that 60% of the participants strongly agreed/agreed that the interview enabled them to demonstrate all of their leadership skills, while 15% chose the neutral option, and 25% disagreed. Regarding the test of administrative skills (the test is one selection method), 45% strongly agreed/agreed that the test enabled them to present all of their management skills, 30% chose the neutral option, and 25% disagreed. Only 20% of the responses agreed/strongly agreed that the current selection and recruitment process was effective enough for selecting qualified and competent school principals, while 55% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 25% of the responses were neutral. Concerning the need for postgraduate leadership qualifications, 35% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed these qualifications were required to manage and lead schools effectively, 20% were neutral, and 45% disagreed.

Table 2. School type

KG	KG+elementary school	Elementary school (grades1- 5)	Middle schools (grades 6-9)	High school (grades 10-12)	Elementary+Middle+High schools
6	1	7	3	2	1

Participants were asked their opinion of the current selection process and whether it needed to change. 65% agreed/strongly agreed with the need for change, one participant disagreed, and 5 participants out of 20 remained neutral. Meanwhile, 6 out of 20 (30%) participants agreed that the current screening and selection process for school principals was effective, and 6 participants chose to remain neutral. Eight participants out of 20 (40%) disagreed with a need for change.

2.2 Professional Development

As to whether the MOE provides sufficient professional development training for school principals to lead schools effectively, 70% of the respondents agreed/strongly agreed, 20% were neutral, and 10% disagreed. Concerning the provision of adequate training on how to manage the school budget, 90% agreed/strongly agreed that training was sufficient, 5% remained neutral, and 5% thought training was insufficient. While 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed the MOE provided sufficient training on how to write action plans, 10% remained neutral, and 10% disagreed. However, 65% of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that training on communication skills and emotional intelligence skills was sufficient, while 20% were neutral, and 15% disagreed. The participants were asked about key skills and competencies they thought essential for school principals to function as effective leaders. Participants' responses varied. Some stated that management skills were essential, whether it was time management, knowledge management, human and resources management, crisis management or change management. Others stated that problem-solving and decision-making skills were very important for school leaders. However, the majority agreed that communication skills and the ability to plan were the most critical skills. One participant stated that a diploma in these areas: leadership, understanding of leadership, and teaching and experience were key elements of an effective principal. Another participant stated that "going through the hierarchy of the job" was necessary to become an effective leader of a school. Accepting and adapting to change was an important skill mentioned by participants, as well as the ability to speak English, and the knowledge and ability to use technology. Others stated that teamwork skills and being accountable for all that happens in the school were also important. However, only one participant felt emotional intelligence was an important requirement. Many responses indicated that having a positive view of the future, creating initiatives, enthusiasm, a keen mind, and the ability to provide a pleasant environment, were all components of an effective leader. However, to understand participants' perspectives on school leadership, they were asked to examine fifteen specific elements of the job description of school principals, and allocate them to three categories representing different areas of effective leadership (communication, creativity, and planning and evaluation).

Table 3 summarizes the participants' responses to scale the fifteen items from 1 to 5 (1 being the most important, and 5 the least important). The responses indicate that participants viewed the most important skill as the ability to set

Table 3. Categorisation of the fifteen skills

	Categories	%
Planning and evaluation	Setting goals and determining outcomes	95
	Financial knowledge	90
	Understanding evaluation of school performance	80
	Designing, implementing and evaluating curriculum	65
	Creating a learning environment	55
	Building teacher professionalism and instructional skills	40
Communication	Resolving conflict	95
	Teamwork skills	90
	Communication skills	84.2
	Problem-solving	70
	Emotional intelligence	70
	Building a shared decision-making environment	47.3
Creativity	Innovative thinking	85
	Technological skills (smart technology use in the school)	70
	Understanding student development and learning	40

goals and determine outcomes. Emotional intelligence was seen as the least important.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

1.0 The Selection Practices of School Principals

According to the cluster managers, currently there are three main steps to selecting school principals: 1) online registration, 2) the interview, and 3) a six-month trial period. The selection process was changed about three years ago. The cluster managers all agreed that the interview should be used as a filter to select high quality and competent leaders. However, only 60% of school principals who responded to the questionnaire agreed. Not all questionnaire participants considered the interview an adequate forum to demonstrate relevant skills and abilities. They felt the interview was not a sufficient method for selection. Although it helped filter the candidates initially, it did not display the actual true abilities of candidates. According to Kwan and Walker, "… competence in timetabling, curriculum design or staff relationships could not be as readily or effectively demonstrated at the interview, whereas [candidates] could highlight their communicative competence" (2009, p. 55). As the sector manager stated "the interview may not allow us to see the full potential of a candidate, for mistakes tend to happen, and we are all human, after all. However, the six-month trial be the conclusive step that allow us to observe and assess the true potential of the candidate." This suggests that the MOE rely more heavily on the six-month trial period than the interview to assess candidates' abilities and skills in actual field practice.

However, as school principals are not required to hold a degree in educational leadership, they may not have all the necessary knowledge to manage and lead a school. The cluster manager stated that a postgraduate degree in educational leadership is preferable, but not mandatory, and 35% of school principals agreed to the importance of such certification to raise the performance of the school, students, and staff. All cluster managers agreed it is important to have the fundamental academic understanding of leadership to support performance in the field. They felt both theoretical and practical training were necessary.

School principal training is continuous throughout their tenure. The MOE has designed diverse methods to help increase school principal performance. They have created a training center for teachers and school leadership, which is responsible for their professional development: 70% of school principals agreed that the MOE provides sufficient professional development training for them to lead their school effectively. The training is given for one week per semester. The MOE also created the position of cluster manager to support school principals and develop their abilities by giving them specific training according to their individual needs. There are many creative methods that cluster managers use to equip school principals for their positions, for instance, the communities of practice (COP) approach. In the study interviews, each cluster manager gave creative examples of how they equip school principals and increased their performance. However, results all depended on the abilities of the individual cluster manager, and not all cluster managers employed the same or similar strategies.

The MOE has also developed a licensing project for teachers and school leadership to assess their abilities and to develop their skills, although the standards for the school leadership license have not yet been developed, unlike the teaching standards. Nonetheless, according to the cluster managers, this project will face many challenges. One of the managers stated that if this project were not introduced as a type of professional development, aiming to improve skills and abilities, then resistance to what may be perceived as imposed standards may be seen as a threat, and interfere with the acceptance of the project. Such a situation could lead to dismissals and staffing gaps. Another manager stated that fear of failure to meet new licensing standards may cause many to leave, and that too would create employee vacancies that needed to be addressed quickly by the MOE so as to not affect the teaching and learning processes. However, all agreed that the licensing project alone would not guarantee the recruitment of highly qualified and competent school principals. In addition to scheduled training sessions, the MOE sends school principals to visit leading countries in education to gain experience and learn various other effective leadership methods and approaches.

The licensing project is a great step toward school reform; however, it is not sufficient in itself. The position of cluster manager was created to support school principals and raise their performance; however, success mainly depends on the ability of the particular cluster manager. There is no set standard or procedure to equip school principals, except for the training centre and ability to visit other countries. No matter what externalities are made available, the motivation to learn independently remains crucial. One cluster manager stated that no matter how much training was provided, if principals did not have the will to change, learn and develop themselves, then they would not progress. Willingness was the most important element. Principals must stay abreast of new developments in their field, be it how to lead, how to teach, or how to use technology. This statement was supported by many school principals who completed the questionnaire, in which they stated school principals themselves must provide the motivation to read and search the web to remain current and informed.

Recommendations for Professional Development

The participants were asked about their current professional development needs, and the majority asked for more specialized training, and visits to other schools both inside and outside the country. Some stated they needed more administrative staff. One participant indicated they needed "a stable evaluation committee in the school." The participants asked for training in various areas, such as how to implement an action plan, the use of technology, English language training, problem-solving, planning and evaluation, time management, teamwork management, communication skills, leadership and management, and change management. They also said they would benefit from visiting other schools inside and outside of the country to learn new strategies and skills. One respondent stated that they needed more purposeful training and exchange visits between school principals.

When participants were asked about how the MOE could help them meet their needs, the answers were varied. However, one respondent stated that the MOE should prepare a fixed and continuous support plan in the schools and put a temporary stop to the inspection committee visiting the schools. Other participants suggested that the MOE should employ national experts to advise and guide school principals. Increased staffing in the school (both administrators and teachers) was suggested by more than one participant. However, many proposed that the MOE should provide intense and continuous training focusing on how to lead and manage the school, while others recommended the MOE to allow school principals to visit other successful and productive school principals. Two participants suggested that the MOE to consult the workers in the field and survey their needs and opinions.

The participants were also asked how the MOE could help up-skill and develop their competencies. The responses varied from training, to visits, to self-development. Most participants agreed that the MOE must provide more practical training in the field and follow up on that training. The training must be related to the particular needs of school principals. Visiting other schools and countries to improve and exchange experience and information was suggested by the majority of participants. Many respondents

suggested that school principals themselves must provide the motivation to read and search the web to remain current and informed. One participant suggested the MOE make field visits to ascertain the needs of school principals and then provide purposeful training to address their specific situations.

2.0 Professional Development Needs of School Principals

In the questionnaire, school principals were asked about their professional needs and how the MOE could best address them. The majority of participants asked for more specific training in management and leadership skills, which coincided with principals' comments about the limited professional development training available. Nevertheless, the MOE wanted school principals to move away from management tasks and get more involved in the teaching and learning processes. That was why principals, in addition to training in management, were given training along with teachers to increase their understanding of the curriculum and student learning processes.

Principals also asked to visit other schools inside and outside the country that were known for their excellent performance to learn and exchange experience with them. School principals were asked to scale fifteen management skills to assess their thoughts on what skills were necessary for an effective school principal. Setting goals and determining outcomes (85%) was seen as the most important skill, whereas emotional intelligence (42.11%) was seen as the least important. Setting goals and determining outcomes is certainly an important and crucial leadership skill in any organization, especially schools. Nonetheless, emotional intelligence is no less important. Interpersonal and social skills related to interacting with and influencing employees and members of society are often described as emotional intelligence; it means the ability to understand and manage emotions and motivate others in order to cope or adapt. It involves recognising and understanding others' feelings and monitoring oneself to help maintain relationships with others (Mumford et al., 2007). Principals require emotional intelligence to understand indirect communication from others, and to realise the effects of their directives on those around them. Interpersonal skills also encompass negotiating skills to reconcile differences among employee perspectives and establish mutually satisfying relationships (Mumford et al., 2007). Professional tools of persuasion are vital to influence others more effectively and to accomplish the required objectives. Communication skills are key to relationships within the hierarchy of a school and govern how effective a principal is within a team and meeting job objectives.

3.0 The Current Recruitment ProcessViews of the Principals

When school principals were asked their opinion of the current recruitment process, 65% agreed that the current process needed to change. One cluster manager interviewed also agreed, stating "we will be left behind if we do not adapt in this fast-changing era." However, another cluster manager disagreed, stating that the MOE had already modified the selection process and it did not need any further adjustment. The other two managers agreed that the MOE was in the process of changing its approach. Although processes have indeed changed drastically in the last three years, more change or adjustment may still be required. According to 55% of school principals, the current selection process is not effective enough to select qualified and competent school principals.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand the current selection practices of school principals in the MOE. It had three main objectives: 1) to investigate current practices regarding the recruitment of school principals in public schools in the UAE, 2) to explore how the MOE equips school principals for leadership positions, and 3) to survey school principals' views on recruitment and training and their on-going professional development needs. Three cluster managers, one sector manager, and twenty school principals participated in this study. Three steps in the selection of school principals were identified: 1) online registration, 2) interview, and 3) a six-month trial period. Currently a pre-selection testing process does not exist. A degree in educational leadership is not required, although it was thought preferable, with 35% of school principals as well as all cluster managers supporting its implementation. Additionally, 55% of school principals were not satisfied with the current process and viewed it as ineffective for selecting qualified and competent school principals, and 65% of school principals and one cluster manager believed the current process needed to change. Furthermore, the majority of school principals asked for more on- going professional training, and visitations to other schools inside and outside the country. Principals wanted the MOE to provide more practical training in the field, and to follow up on that training which should relate to the particular needs of school principals and their schools. The participants asked for training in specific areas, such as how to implement an action plan, the use of technology, English language training, problem-solving, planning and evaluation, time management, teamwork management, communication skills, leadership and management, and change management.

It is hoped, this research has contributed to the education field and will encourage further work and collaboration. Towards the end of this study, the researcher can say with confidence that the Ministry of Education in the UAE has made major changes over the past three years and is still continuing to make changes to its policies and practices as part of the reform process. It has been an informative and rewarding journey learning more about what the Ministry of Education plans for the future of education, particularly in the field of educational leadership. It has also been a mind opening explore the reflections and attitudes of school principals in terms of the whole hiring process. Research as we know needs effort and patience, nevertheless sound research which has a direct impact on policy and practice is an imperative role in the development of any country and its people.

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