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What Hinders Educational Change? School Principals' Perspectives in the UAE Context

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Abstract

In light of the ambitious reform that the education sector in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has undergone over the last decades, the present study attempted to delve into the challenges inherent in change management, and precisely into the barriers and resistance to change encountered in the schools operating in Al Ain city. Hence, a qualitative study was conducted, seeking to record school-principals' views on the barriers and resistance confronted with in the educational reforms implemented. The results entail weighty implications for education policy formulation in the UAE, as the highly centralized structure of the UAE education system was indicated as a major barrier to educational reform, interrelated with all the other barriers identified in the study, while additionally clashing with the flexibility demanded in order schools to keep pace with the exigencies of the knowledge economy. It should be noted though that the study was susceptible of significant limitations as regards the subjectivity of responses and a limited sample.

Keywords: Educational Change, Barriers, Resistance, Qualitative Research.

The Context

School systems globally need to undergo substantial changes to meet their goals closely interrelated with improving student outcomes within the knowledge era (Dorman, Fraser &

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McRobbie, 1997; Fullan, 2007). Indeed, the rapid rate of change, especially in the new millennium, has greatly impacted any school setting, from the small rural to the large urban school district (Calabrese, 2002, 2003). In effect, change is integral to any contemporary educational setting, as schools strive to reinforce their organizational and instructional efficiency and increase learning effectiveness, among rising demands for excellence and innovation.

Yet, change initiatives call for leaders who deeply understand the intricacies and complexities inherent in any change effort (Hall & Hord, 2014). As Calabrese (2003) has stressed, an effective school administrator needs to understand the significance of the change required, as well as the consequences of what it takes to be a change-driven school administrator. Managing these complexities is actually the main challenge in the change process, with resistance to change being the most eminent problem leaders are largely confronted with. Hence, Willower (1971) has argued, any educational administrator who is to pave the way for innovation should firstly recognize all potential sources and forms of resistance to change.

In this context, the present study attempted to delve into the challenges inherent in change management, and precisely into the barriers and resistance to change in schools operating in Al Ain city, as the education sector in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has undergone an ambitious reform over the last decades (National Qualifications Authority, 2013). In detail, a qualitative study was conducted, seeking to record school-principals' views on the barriers and resistance confronted with in the educational reforms implemented. Effectively, recording the barriers encountered, as well as the practices mobilized to handle them, as reported by participants in the study, might be of interest to policy makers, as well as to change agents in general, in subsequent reform agendas.

The Theory

In the first place, to answer the question 'what does it take to be an effective leader', we need to distinguish between the concepts of leadership and management, a rather overwhelming task indeed. According to Brinia (2011), the review of relevant literature indicates that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept, which are actually numerous as leadership has been a popular and highly debated topic. Definitions most often differ on the basis of the angle taken to describe the concept, as a set of traits, behaviors, relationships, perceptions, or as various types of influences over followers, goals and organizational culture. As Yukl (1989) has observed, the most apparent controversy in literature revolves around whether leadership should be defined as an organizational process, as opposed to an individual behavior. Further distinguishing the characteristics of leaders from those of managers, one could posit that while managers 'do things right', concerned with the 'how', and execute on the basis of responsibilities and authority, leaders 'do the right things' concerned with the meaning to people, and operate by influencing commitment (Appelbaum et. al., 2015; Yukl, 1989, 2001).

Thence, in the current study we are concerned about identifying 'the right things' to be done so as the change initiative will make meaning to everyone involved and will gain the commitment required. And this takes us to another critical question 'how does a leader manage change'? It is evident that planning, initiating, implementing, and consolidating change largely depends on the personality traits of the person in charge. Yet to answer the specific question, we need to define change and how it is perceived in educational settings. In this regard, a strand of

relevant studies have been conducted, trying to elucidate the critical issues around educational change, in terms of context, processes and interpretation.

First and foremost, educational change is regarded as inevitable, as education systems globally lead under the impact of socioeconomic internationalization, digital technology advancement as well as demographic reallocation (Fullan, 2007; Giddens, 1990). In this context of dramatic changes, education leaders need to lead initiatives that seek to reform education so as to facilitate and reinforce the 'preparation' of citizens to cope with the increasing complexity of society, impacting people in their everyday lives (Alptekin-Oguzertem, 1997)

According to Macri, Tagliaventi and Bertolotti (2000), organizational change is a coherent set of attitude and behavior alteration in the setting of an organization, coming as direct response to its environment. Their study drew on resistance to change in small manufacturing firms, conducted through observations, ethnographic interviews and document analysis. Their results indicated that the process of organizational change is in fact incremental, diffusing in the form of continuous small change actions rather than as a revolution or a traumatic event, while resistance to change can be seen as a complex mixture of context, attitudes, and processes.

In this respect, Fuller (1969) attempting a categorization of individual resistance to change through in-depth interviews, came up with four overarching categories of concerns: unrelated concerns, self-concerns, task concerns and impact concerns. Unrelated concerns do not center on the innovation as the individual appears rather indifferent at this stage, while self-concerns, may either be informational (more information is demanded) or personal (how the innovation will affect the individual). Task concerns revolve around management issues, that is, how to work effectively with the innovation. Finally, impact concerns are distinguished in consequences (effects of using the innovation), collaboration (ways of co-operating with other people) and refocusing (refining the innovation) (Hall & Hord, 2014).

Current understandings of leadership in the school context reiterate the critical role of the principal for leading and managing change in schools. In this regard, Calabrese (2002) has posited that the school principal as a change agent should take into account five core principles: prepare to lead change process; design change strategies in order to meet pacing requirements; identify the particular nature of change; realize the tacit rules that guide attitudes toward change; and be attentive to the external and internal powers on change process.

Likewise, McDaniel and Di Bella-McCarthy (2012) tried to provide practitioners with handy strategies to improve their leadership self-efficacy, a critical parameter to leader performance and a key causal factor in managing change. A leader's self-efficacy is actually deemed to rely on the requisition of a set of leadership knowledge, skills, and competences, and on conscious engagement in self-monitoring strategies.

To this end, according to Calabrese (2002), effective leaders need to reflect on a set of critical questions, in order to delve into the nuances of the change nature: Can change be controlled or managed? Is change inevitable? How do you manage people who resist change? How do you create and sustain an environment in which organizational members embrace change? How do you assist organizational members in coping with the uncertainty associated with change? Furthermore, he has argued that change must be examined both from a personal, as every member brings his/her own personal construct about change nature, and from a collective perspective, as organizational change relies on collective actions and beliefs.

As far as barriers in change implementation are concerned, Tang, Lu and Hallinger (2014),

explored through qualitative interviews how a sample of five successful Chinese principals responded to educational reforms. Their findings have identified eight significant barriers to change in schools, listed by order of frequency: negative teachers; lack of knowledge and skills in the field of change; impatience to see quick results; limited teacher experience to serve as models; lack of teacher understanding and interest in change; limited resources to support implementation; and, lack of parental understanding and support of the change.

They have further indicated a set of supportive strategies used by principals to launch and sustain innovations in their schools: concentrate on training some key teachers as models; encourage teachers to attend training on the new methods; provide learning opportunities for staff; establish incentive systems; build a team of middle-level leaders; regularly invite experts for guidance and support; reflect on collective experiences and support creativity suggestions; introduce the new teaching methods through multiple channels; create a safe environment for innovation; provide teachers with successful models of new methods; as well as, provide opportunities for successful experience sharing (Tang, Lu & Hallinger, 2014).

In the same vein, Erwin and Garman (2010) conducted a meta-analysis, examining published research involving resistance to organizational change, so as to present a comprehensive framework of constructs and variables, as well as to identify emerging trends and themes in recent resistance to change research. Their results have also drawn on specific change practitioner recommendations, providing change agents with practical guidance in dealing with resistance to change within the context of the organizational change process.

As mentioned above, the role of the school principal has emerged as the most critical among variables that affect school effectiveness and change management in a large body of research. Yet, there is a mandate for gaining further insights as to 'how' principals go about enhancing effectiveness in their schools. As Leithwood & Montgomery (1982, p.309) have posited, 'surprisingly few studies have asked that question directly'. Taking into consideration that the UAE education sector has undergone an ambitious overhaul through the last decades, aiming to facilitate the transition of the country to a knowledge-based, sustainable and diversified economy (National Qualifications Authority, 2013, p.13), it is of immense interest to listen to school Principals themselves, as to how they managed the large scale reforms imposed, the barriers encountered and the strategies mobilized.

Purpose of the Study

Hence, the purpose of the present study was to record the views of Principals in Al Ain schools, as regards the barriers to educational change. Precisely, it sought to gain insight into Principals' perspectives about the barriers and individual resistance to change within their organizations, aiming at a) identifying the barriers usually encountered whenever change is ahead; b) investigating how they can be overcome. Though gaining a better understanding of the barriers and the internal resistance encountered in organizations undergoing change in the UAE context, as well as of the personal strategies employed to prevent and handle resistance, it is expected that critical implications will emerge, both for policy makers and for change agents, in facilitating the implementation of educational reforms.

In this regard, the research questions guiding our study drew on:

Q1: What types of barriers are discernable when changes are implemented in schools?

Q2: How do school principals respond to the barriers and resistance encountered?

Q3: How is resistance prevented and/or handled?

Q4: What kind of support do school principals provide their teachers for introducing, implementing and consolidating changes?

Methods and Tools

In an attempt to gain meaningful insights into the situation, the qualitative approach was followed, allowing greater flexibility and enabling the researcher to obtain explicit information (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Mason, 2002; Verma & Mallick, 1999). Qualitative data were retrieved through 5 semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted with a purposive sample of school-principals in the Al Ain, upon their consent, while official clearance to conduct the study was granted by the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC).

The interviews were carried out using a research tool constructed to reflect the context, aims and limitations of the specific study, grounded on relevant literature (Erwin & Garman, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2014; Macri, Tagliaventi & Bertolotti, 2000; Tang, Lu & Hallinger, 2014). The interview guide included open ended questions requiring descriptive answers, to encourage conversation which may prompt spontaneous information. The length of the interviews ranged from thirty to sixty minutes, and they were all conducted in person.

It should be noted however that there have been certain limitations to the study, such as subjectivity of responses, a limited sample and restriction to the UAE context, impeding generalization of results, while calling for further research.

Data Analysis

The data retrieved underwent qualitative analysis, using Nvivo software, a powerful program for analyzing qualitative data.

Initially, the five interviews were transcribed and imported to Nvivo 10. Then, the main nodes and child nodes were developed. A node is a collection of references about a specific theme identified through coding the data. A child node is a sub-node used to divide a theme into more specific topics.

In detail, three main nodes were created which were barriers, resistance and practices. The barriers node was used to classify all the responses related to principals' perceptions on barriers, whereas a child node was created to codify all the examples provided. The resistance node was used to aggregate the reasons for individual resistance, while three child nodes were created to further classify parents', teachers' and principals' reasons for resistance. In addition, an examples node was created to aggregate examples of resistance as presented by principals. Finally, practices node was the node developed to classify principals' practices in dealing with barriers to change, which was also subdivided to three child nodes: parents, teachers and examples.

It should be noted that the interviews were conducted in English, which is not the native language of respondents. Quotes from the interviews have been presented as expressed (without syntactical and/or grammatical correction).

Results

Sample Profile

Out of the five interviewees, two were male and three were female. Two of the principals worked

for government schools and three worked for private schools in Al Ain. To ensure their anonymity the interviewees were assigned symbolic code-names, starting with an M for men and with an F for women (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Code names	Age	School type	School level	Highest qualification
M1	31-40	Private	K-12	Master
M2	41-50	Government	Three cycles	Master
F1	Above 51	Private	K-12	PhD
F2	31-40	Private	K-12	Master
F3	41-50	Government	Cycle 2	Master

The first interviewee (M1) was an expatriate Principal in a K-12 private mixed school that follows the UAE Ministry of Education curriculum. He is under 40 years old. He has worked as a teacher for 7 years and he has been working as a principal for 7 years, as well. He attended two short courses in change management and his highest qualification is a Master degree in education leadership.

The second interviewee (M2) was a highly experienced Principal in a public, male, three cycle school. He is Emirati and his age range are between 41-50. The highest qualification he has received is his Master degree, while he has been working as a school principal for over 10 years.

The third interviewee (F1) was also an experienced Principal in a K-12, private and mixed school that follows the British curriculum. She is over 50 years old and she has a wide experience in the education field, as a teacher and principal, while she is a PhD holder.

The fourth interviewee (F2) was a Principal in a K-12, private and mixed school that follows the American curriculum. She is an expatriate and her age range are 30-40 years old, while she has over 10 years of experience as a teacher and principal. Her highest certificate is a Master degree.

The fifth interviewee (F3) was a cycle two school female principal. She is Emirati and her age range are between 41-50. The highest qualification she has received is her master degree. She has been working as a school principal for over 16 years. She has attended intensive training sessions as part of the preparation for leading the New School Model, launched by ADEC.

Principals' Views about Barriers to Change

While, in general, interviewees' views regarding the barriers to reforms at school level coincided, each one put emphasis on different types of obstacles.

F3 reported that barriers are "issues and situations that hinder the application and implementation of a plan or an approach in the educational system or the school". M1 focused on the financial barriers, imposing tremendous constrains in hiring highly qualified teachers and motivating the existing personnel so as to put more effort into implementing innovations. This is however interrelated to the highly centralized education system, which he indicated as a major barrier to change at school level. As he pointed out: "I cannot do anything without taking the permission of ADEC which consumes time.... Daily three or four emails are received from ADEC

and some of these emails and circulations ask for a lot of things that may need two to three days just to prepare their requirements.... ADEC fluctuates and tries to implement a lot of changes in the same time that many schools cannot cope with this". To further clarify his point, he added "sometimes ADEC starts a project, schools try to implement it, in the second year ADEC cancels that project and starts another one... sometimes there are contradictions between projects". F1 agreed that the centralized system is a barrier of major importance. As she posited "barriers are not coming from our system, it is from outside..., from the government authority... Barriers arise when we are asked to do something that cannot be done in our system".

Most importantly though, all interviewees identified teachers’ and parents’ resistance as the most critical barrier to any reform. In fact, they referred to a well established ‘culture’ of resistance to any change effort. For instance, M2 stressed that "parents are not coming easily ... and this happens because of the culture". In the same vein, F2 reported that the culture of the staff and parents are outstanding examples of the barriers she encountered in her school.

Principals' Views about Resistance to Change

Running a word frequency count in Nvivo 10, we identified that the word ‘resistance’ was the more frequent than the word ‘barriers’ in the five interviews as depicted in Figure 1.



Teachers

Likewise, the frequency of the word ‘teachers’ was indicated to be higher than ‘parents’ and ‘students’. In effect, all respondents assumed that teachers resist change more than parents, whereas students are not actually considered as resisters to change. Teachers resist change for many reasons according to interviewees', the responses of which have been classified as shown in Figure 2.

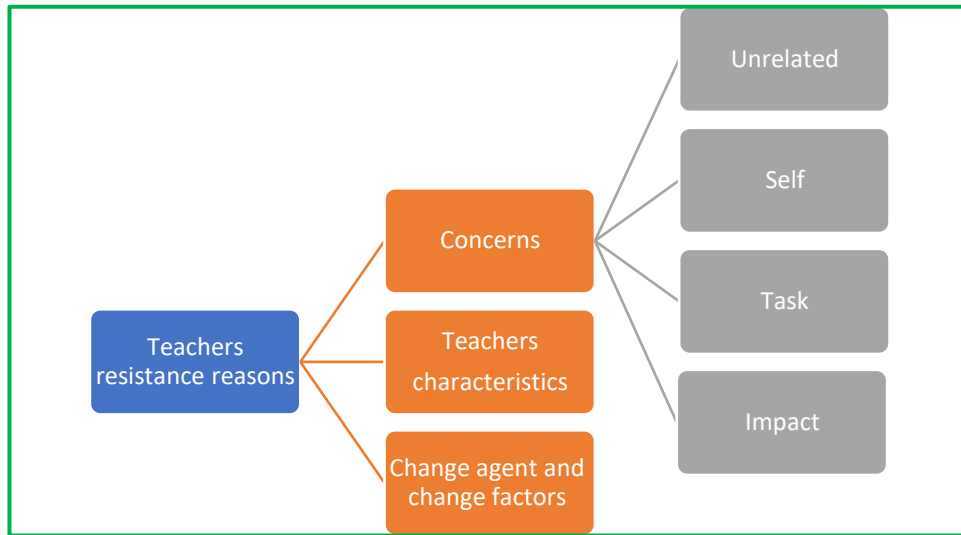


Figure 2. Causes of teachers' resistance

Teacher's concerns, as depicted by the interviewees, were divided into four categories following Hall and Hord's (2014) categorization of concerns: unrelated concerns, self-concerns, task concerns and impact concerns.

As far as unrelated concerns are concerned, M1 posited that teachers who work for private schools get low salaries which actually make them 'unconcerned' for the reforms implemented in their schools. On the contrary, he stressed, they are more concerned with finding other income sources to cover their family's expenses.

However, most of the causes of resistance identified by respondents fall under self-concerns. Teachers are believed to resist change simply because they do not want any change to affect their 'comfort zone'. Hence, they resist because "they think that change will bring more work". Actually, "any change is considered by teachers as extra work", regarding it as "tiresome and an overload responsibility". Moreover, M1 pointed out that teachers resist change when it affects their parallel roles, such as motherhood. For example, he clarified, female teachers pretty often say "I can go to other schools with little difference in salary, but with less or at least a quarter of work, because as a female I have children at home and other responsibilities". Most importantly though, teachers do not favor any change in the ways they are used to teach. F2 provided an example of a teacher who refused to apply more innovative teaching methods. As she mentioned "she likes to teach using the old traditional way, she will stand and lecture and students should listen". Additionally, F3 resumed that change might affect the comfort zone of the teachers just because "it will not leave them enough time to meet with their colleagues".

Additionally, the concerns of teachers about their 'status' were prominent in principals' responses. According to M2 "teachers think that the new ideas could be a problem for their position", explaining that they think that the failure to implement an innovation may lead to their replacement by new employees. Furthermore, it appears that when the introduction of an innovation is linked to some advancement for those who implement it, they end up receiving the 'jealousy' of their peers. M1 and F2 faced this kind of concerns when they were assigned the role of the Head of the Department (HoD) undertaking to improve the work in their schools. As F2

stated, their fellow teachers started to object, going around saying "what is this HoD better than me on?", or "I know more than she does".

As related to task concerns, M1 reported that teachers mostly resist when they do not understand how to implement the innovation, needing thus support and training to tackle the issue. Also, according to F2, "people have phobia of technology, and they think that I am gonna lose my job because the new graduates know more", so they just say "no, I don't wanna use it", essentially fearing of potential failure and the consequent embarrassment, which are in turn interrelated with self-concerns.

At impact concerns level, M2 pointed out that "people refuse to change because they think they are alright". For instance, according to F2, teachers usually claim that they have used traditional teaching methods for many years and yet they are good teachers. As she highlighted, they tend to argue "well, I have been teaching for 20 years, so why do I have to move into this new thing? However, this could also be interpreted as resistance to change to protect their comfort zone and save face. Yet, senior teachers do have impact concerns. They might resist an innovation because they are truly concerned about its impact based on their experience of the local culture, of the context and of the students. Respondents acknowledged that in the case of impact concerns, they bring to discussion resisters' points. Indeed, M1 stated that "he should be fair" and hence he always accepts justified resistance.

Interestingly, the responses of some private school principals drew on issues related to formal reform as a major cause of teacher resistance. Precisely, they referred to a lack of trust to the reforms introduced by ADEC, and its often contradictory policies. For example, F1 referred to a case when they were asked by ADEC to establish a Board of Governors with increased authority in their school, which they refused to do, as they are a private school and cannot function under a rigid framework. As she reported, "we are already having the best quality of students who graduated from our schools... ADEC should leave the market to decide". In fact, the respondents who work in private schools put more emphasis on the resistance raised to formal innovations introduced by ADEC, a fact that bears implications as to the distinction between government and private schools and the varied factors that influence resistance to change.

Furthermore, the interviewees disclosed that more resisters share some common characteristics. F3 stated that resistance usually comes from the "less dedicated staff and teachers who are older in age and experienced, whereas younger and novice teachers are more willing and accepting to implement change". M2 further emphasized that old teachers tend to claim that "old is better than new and they refuse to change anything".

Finally, it was noted that the degree of resistance may be related to factors associated with the change agent himself. For example, F2 pointed out that if a change agent attempts to mandate teachers to implement an innovation by telling them "that you just have to do it, and this is how it is", he/she will definitely fail. In the same vein, M1 noted several times that change agents should be patient when introducing changes in their schools. Actually, according to F3, "resistance occurs at the beginning of the implementation and it decreases by time and experience."

Parents

Delving into principals' responses, it was made evident that parents resist changes in the education field due to their previous assumptions about education, along with their desire for

the wellbeing of their children. As M1 highlighted, "you will face some parents with tradition mentality who want their children to be educated as they studied".

Furthermore, parents' resistance to educational reforms may arise from their suspicion that this may entail hidden costs which they will be not able to handle. Also, quite often resistance emanates from parental concern for their children's grades and performance, which they think are highly interconnected with the curriculum followed. As reported, "parents are resisting change and they continue to complain when a new curriculum is applied". Actually, both M1 and M2 who work for a private and a government school respectively, mentioned exactly the same example of parent resistance to the implementation of the new English curriculum. As M1 reported, they started to work on drafting their own English Curriculum in line with ADEC's mandate, but this raised several complaints among parents. Likewise, M2 agreed that the parents keep complaining for the absence of a single book for English, "they don't understand that there is a big change with the new skills and the book becomes the last resource in teaching English".

Supporting change Implementation and Dealing with Resistance

This section describes the practices in hand to support change implementation and to deal with resisters, as reported by interviewees. It was divided into two sub sections: dealing with teachers and dealing with parents.

Dealing with Teachers

Interviewees suggested various strategies and techniques to support change implementation and deal with resistance, such as discussing, convincing, training, holding meetings or providing incentives. Figure 3 summarizes the practices that were drawn from principals' responses.

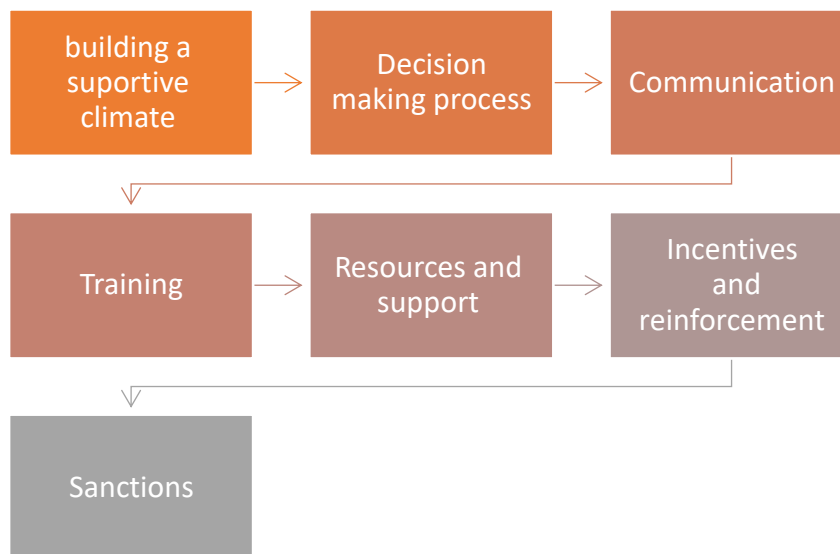


Figure 3. Suggested practices to support change implementation and reduce resistance

First of all, respondents referred to the role of the overall climate in school in supporting change implementation. F1 highlighted that "maintaining a spirit of respect, honesty, and transparency" can motivate teachers to implement change. Likewise, F3 agreed that "respect is

the main part in dealing with all stakeholders". Moreover, M1 stressed that being patient is also a crucial parameter in supporting change implementation. He provided several examples from his experience, indicating that implementing and sustaining change requires from one to five years. As he reported, "when I wanted to change students' assessment policies and tried to convert it to ongoing assessment I struggled for one semester just to apply it in low quality. I needed one extra year just to raise the quality. Now, after less than five years I can say that the students' assessment policy is well and smoothly implemented in the school."

Secondly, interviewees reported that a major influence to change implementation is also exerted by the decision making process. As F2 stated "I really care about consistency in school and we don't implement change until we are all assured that we brainstorm together and, after the consensus, we reach an agreement". Similarly, F3 strongly believed that involving teachers in school decisions leads to smooth implementation, while it also helps to identify factors helpful in overcoming resistance. In the same vein, M1 reported that "sharing with teachers in taking decisions reduces resistance". Actually, he presumed that if all teachers contributed to the decisions made concerning necessary reforms, he would "face zero resistance".

Respondents unanimously agreed that communicating with teachers is one of the core practices they use to support change and deal with resisters. As F1 stressed, "we listen to their concerns", while F2 indicated that her first step is to "make them understand what is cooperative learning, how it will help them". In effect, conversation, listening attentively and thoroughly explaining different approaches, are among the strategies used by interviewees to tackle resistance. Additionally, the need to surface resistance was also reported. As M1 put it, an open dialogue is "better than letting them resist overly or in hidden".

Hence, the next step after surfacing concerns through discussion is to support teachers with training. As F1 highlighted, "we try to work on their weaknesses through mentoring and in service staff development", while additionally F2 reported that she was concerned about "how can the school management help them master the skill and develop confidence". Furthermore, M2 added that an action plan is usually designed to improve the performance of individual teachers who face problems with the innovations to be implemented.

In addition, principals stressed that providing teachers with adequate resources is also of critical importance. Precisely, all interviewees strongly believed that to implement an innovation, catering for budgetary support, training, materials and tools, is indeed part of their role as school leaders. Also reinforcement and incentives were also considered to be of foremost importance. To this end, F3 explained that she regularly reinforces and motivates her staff, rewards them for their good performance, and encourages them whenever required. In addition, M2 provided examples of incentives in use to award high performing teachers, including giving them less work load, or granting them more flexible work schedules.

Finally, respondents outlined that when repertoires are exhausted, they may be obliged to use mandates with the less committed or not responding teachers, or in extreme cases it may even lead to dismissal, but according to M2 "this would be the last option". As F1 posited, "I give many chances and try different ways... if it does not work, then I follow the written rules".

Dealing with Parents

Most of the respondents' statements depicted that they highly value the role of parents and they consider of critical importance their involvement when introducing reforms. Their repertoires to

involve parents in implementing innovations, may comprise "orientation sessions", "workshops", "surveys" to record their views, or even "whatsapp groups" to inform them on critical issues. As a result, F2 noted that many parents have been involved in the innovations implemented, adding that "parents are now open to the idea of change because they have developed trust in us".

As F3 reported, 'it's the school's duty to hold meetings and orientation sessions for parents to let them be informed about updated issues and take them on board together with the school family'. She went on to stress the importance of involving parents in decision making, and provided an example of a case when they relied on parents' suggestions to introduce a new system of punishment and rewards in their school, which encountered no resistance as parents themselves provided the input for its formulation.

Furthermore, M1 noted that "most of parents ask to improve education so I involve them in different committees..., I benefit from their ideas, advice, feedback, reflections and support for teachers". He also provided an example of altering school's policies relying on parents' suggestions. As he stated, "if the parents have suggestions that make sense,... for example, I changed the quantity of English papers because of parents' fair request". Conversely, M2 doubted that parents fully understand the innovations initiated, while he claimed that most of them do not usually attend the meetings held. Yet, he believes that they easily accept changes that focus on enhancing their children's learning.

It should be noted though that one of the respondents was quite negative to involving parents in implementing changes. She justified her point by making reference to the uniquely multinational context in the UAE, reporting that in their school they "have 52 different nationalities with different languages and background. Everyone has a different opinion".

It is thus evident that principals' repertoires for dealing with parents in introducing reforms mainly rely on holding meetings and providing detailed information on the rationale and expediency of the innovations. Yet, the tactics largely vary between principals in private and government schools, as private schools in the UAE usually address a population of numerous nationalities and cultures.

Discussion

The qualitative analysis of our research data identified five critical barriers to implementing reforms in UAE schools. A significant barrier has been indicated to be of financial nature, which is also largely interrelated with the highly centralized structure of the UAE education system. In effect, money matters when it comes to hiring highly qualified teachers and motivating the current personnel to put more effort in implementing an innovation. This comes in line with relevant findings indicating that financial constraints could be an immense hurdle for any organization to move forward towards achieving its goals and introducing innovations (Airasian, 1989), which actually applies to all kinds of organizations, educational or not. For instance, in a study in the hotels sector, results depicted that the lack of resources and the cost of change were the most important constraints to change (Okumus & Hemmington, 1998).

As far as the highly centralized educational system in the UAE is concerned, contemporary literature emphasizes that centralization does not fit the current trends of participatory management, empowerment and shared decision-making (Brennen, 2002), parameters which are of paramount importance in effective change implementation. Actually, decentralization is explicitly sought after by the majority of interviewees, which they consider that would enable

themselves and school personnel to have a “say” and get involved in the process of decision making. According to Flaggert (2000), this could indeed foster a positive organizational culture for change.

Also, there has been made wide reference by respondents to cultural and social barriers, such as parents’ cultural and socioeconomic background exerting influence in their active involvement in their children’s education and supporting of reforms. In effect, most respondents in our study highly valued the role of parents and the importance of involving them in implementing innovations. According to Fullan (2007: 190), all relevant research has indicated parents’ support and cooperation with the school as a crucial factor in effective change implementation and the progression of schools, as they have a vested and committed interest in their children’s success. Yet, parents’ involvement is an ambivalent issue, as it has also been indicated to be highly conditioned by cultural values and beliefs. Hence, change agents should also possess increased awareness of the beliefs and values of the community where changes are meant for (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). However, according to Beglane (2001), parents’ non supportive culture may be subjected to change in cases they witness substantial improvement in their children’s performance and attitudes.

Age is another parameter that has been identified by some respondents to account for hindering reforms in schools. Does age really matter when it comes to acquiring new ideas? Do elder teachers really have less motivation to accept and implement change? According to Sikes (1992), when change is imposed on veteran teachers, the implicit message is often not just that the new idea will be better, but also that what the teacher has been doing for years is ineffective or even harmful. Yet, it needs to be borne in mind that resistance to change does not solely come from elder personnel. Leaders need to expect that for every change there is resistance (Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2014). Indeed, our findings indicated that resistance in schools mainly arises from the teaching personnel, which is actually considered to be a natural and expected reaction. According to Gravenhorst (2003, p.3) resistance is an “almost inevitable psychological and organizational response that seems to apply to any kind of change, ranging from rather modest improvements to far-reaching change and organization transformation”.

Our findings interestingly depicted that school principals have a wide ‘repertoire’ of strategies and techniques to support the implementation of innovations and deal with resisting teachers. On top of their practices is holding meetings to explicate and fuel information about the innovation, while provide a forum for teachers to express their concerns, listening attentively and using conversation and persuasion to bend resistance. This comes in line with relevant literature, outlining the critical role of communication in change management. According to Boonchouy (2014, p. 110), such “principal-facilitated discussions” are “intended to collectively define and address problems and encourage collective staff attention to these problems”. Additionally, Loebe (2005) posits that principals have to listen objectively, carefully and considerately to all teachers’ remarks and concerns. Furthermore, Delucia (2011) emphasizes that adhering to clear and regular communication may help in building trust between teachers and principals, which is essential for developing a professional learning culture which in turn leads to successful change.

Building trust is also closely interrelated with fostering a spirit of respect, honesty, transparency and collaboration, which were also indicated to be highly valued by interviewees in the present study. In effect, keeping a good, constructive and respectful relationship with the

teaching staff is vital to move school forward (Scott, 2002). Furthermore, including staff in decision making and encouraging collaboration between staff members may strengthen school's professional learning culture and further reinforce trust among its members, in benefit of students' learning. (Boonchouy, 2014; Delucia, 2011)

To this end, teacher training and professional development go alongside with change implementation. Actually, all respondents in our study acknowledged in-service training as a vital parameter for successful change, while they also outlined the role of mentoring. Indeed, professional development schemes that comprise individual conversations, mentoring, and coaching, so as to support teachers who face difficulties with the change process, have been indicated in relevant studies to facilitate the implementation of reforms (Hall & Hord, 2001; Loebe, 2005; Tang, Lu & Hallinger, 2014).

Yet, all the above may not work unless the change process is supported with adequate resources. In effect, research has highlighted that the availability of resources is as essential to successful change as skills and knowledge (Beglane, 2001). Moreover, adequacy of resources is closely interrelated with providing for rewards, which in turn has also been indicated as an effective motivator that may encourage teachers to go with change (Beglane, 2001; Ormrod, 2008). In our study, financial rewards were not indicated to be widely in use as a mode of teacher motivation, mainly due to the highly centralized structure of the UAE education system which does not allow such kind of budgetary flexibility. Yet there were several references to rewarding practices that may enhance motivation, inspiring teachers to improve and abide with change, such as less work-loads or more flexible work schedules.

Finally, our findings indicated that when the principals' repertoires to tackle resistance are exhausted, they may need to use mandates with the less committed or not responding teachers. This is consistent with Hall & Hord (2014), arguing that mandates could be used when resisters are not willing to change. Still the importance of ongoing support and interventions for the effectiveness of the mandate is stressed at all times. And this takes us perhaps to the most critical aspect of educational reform. Change cannot happen all of a sudden. Rather, it will take an extended period of persistent and progressive work to be implemented, integrated and sustained within an organization (Hall & Hord, 2001; Scott, 2002), which was essentially a principle recognized by most interviewees in the current study.

Concluding Remarks

As educational change has been spurring globally to pace with the new socioeconomic mandates emanating from the exponential rate of techno-scientific advancement and globalization, the role of school principals as change agents has become more pertinent than ever before in the history of education. The UAE, since its founding in 1971, has developed at a rate that is almost without parallel, with the education sector following an ambitious agenda of education reform, related to building educational capacity, encouraging technical knowledge and innovation in the curriculum, and introducing international quality assurance frameworks to raise standards (National Qualifications Authority, 2013).

Hence, it was deemed important to get insight into UAE school principals' individual stories, as to how they managed the large-scale reforms imposed, the barriers encountered and the strategies mobilized. The results of the qualitative study conducted are largely congruent with relevant research findings. Yet, they entail several weighty implications for education policy

formulation in the UAE, as the highly centralized structure of the UAE education system was indicated as a major barrier to educational reform, interrelated actually with all the other barriers identified in the study, while additionally clashing with the flexibility demanded in order schools to keep pace with the exigencies of the knowledge economy. To this end, there was depicted a clear mandate by respondents for gradual decentralization and more professional development for teachers to deal with change.

It should be noted however that there were certain limitations to the study, such as subjectivity of responses, a limited sample and restriction to the UAE context. Additionally, the study was limited to the schools operating in Al-Ain city. A direction for future research could be replication of the study with larger samples, while delving deeper into the peculiarities of the UAE context, such as the highly multi-national/multi-cultural environment, as well as the different operational frameworks for government, private and charter schools.

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