

THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS ON SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the impact of leadership characteristics on school performance in four American schools in Sharjah, UAE. Recognising that effective school leadership is essential for educational success, the study investigates how specific leadership traits and practices influence student engagement, teacher support, and overall school culture. Utilising a mixed-method approach that includes controlled observations and surveys, the research identifies key attributes such as goal-setting, resource provision, positive culture creation, and stakeholder responsiveness as critical to successful school leadership. Findings indicate that effective leaders foster collaboration, adapt strategies to diverse student needs, and implement professional development initiatives, all of which correlate strongly with improved school performance. This study underscores the need for ongoing leadership development and provides recommendations to enhance leadership efficacy in the UAE's education sector, emphasising the importance of empathy, strategic vision, and adaptability in educational leadership.

Keywords: school leadership, educational leadership, leadership characteristics, school performance, leadership impact, teacher support, student engagement, school culture, educational outcomes, leadership traits.

INTRODUCTION

Background of Research

In the contemporary Arab world, challenges in education are less about the availability of resources and more about issues in leadership, management, and the influence of personal agendas. His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum has articulated this view, noting that “Today’s Arab crisis is not one of money, men, morale, land, or resources... The real crisis is rather one of leadership, management, and perennial egotism.” In response to this, the UAE has increasingly emphasised the importance of effective school leadership, viewing it as essential to the nation’s educational success. UAE leaders have implemented various initiatives, including workshops, structured orientations, and other development programs, to cultivate skilled, forward-thinking leaders who can support and inspire educators and students alike.

Education leadership differs from mere management in that it requires a proactive, people-centered approach rather than simply overseeing processes. This view is echoed by Hopper (2007), who states, “You cannot manage men into battle. You manage things; you lead people.” School leaders play a pivotal role in the success of educational institutions, acting as the driving force behind the growth of educators, students, and the broader school environment. However, there remains a shortage of qualified leaders who possess the vision and skill to guide schools effectively, highlighting a pressing need for leaders who can not only manage but also inspire.

Effective educational leaders must be strategic and forward-thinking, much like skilled drivers who navigate complex roads while remaining attentive to their surroundings and goals. Educational leaders need to align long-term objectives with Ministry of Education guidelines, establishing school policies, facilities, and relationships that contribute to a productive learning environment. This proactive leadership approach shapes not only immediate school outcomes but also the entire educational community, including students, teachers, and parents.

This study seeks to explore the key traits, characteristics and approaches that define effective school leadership. By examining leadership practices and their impact on teacher, student, and parent relationships in four schools in Sharjah, UAE, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes successful school leadership. This analysis offers insights into the influence of leadership on the broader educational process and seeks to identify qualities critical for school leaders to enhance school performance in the UAE context.

Problem Statement

Despite significant investments in the UAE’s educational sector, achieving consistent improvements in school performance remains challenging, often due to issues in leadership rather than resource constraints. Effective school leadership is essential for fostering positive school cultures, enhancing student engagement, and supporting teacher development, yet there is a shortage of leaders who can meet these needs. Many school leaders in the UAE lack the strategic vision, adaptability, and interpersonal skills necessary to create an inclusive, productive educational environment. Additionally, the influence of personal agendas and inadequate leadership practices often disrupt school management and hinder educational outcomes.

This research seeks to address this gap by examining the specific characteristics, behaviours and approaches that define effective school leadership in the UAE. By exploring how leadership impacts teacher motivation, student performance, and school culture, this study aims to provide actionable insights into the qualities and practices that can improve school outcomes. Through an in-depth analysis of leadership across four schools in Sharjah, this research will contribute to a better understanding of what is needed to develop successful educational leaders and, ultimately, enhance the UAE's educational landscape.

Research Objective:

To identify the essential characteristics and traits of effective school leaders that contribute to improved school performance in UAE.

Research Questions:

1. How do specific leadership characteristics influence student engagement in schools in Sharjah, UAE?
2. In what ways can leadership effectiveness be enhanced to improve educational outcomes in the UAE's education sector?

LITERATURE REVIEW

“There is a world of difference between a leadership that is based on love and respect, and one that is based on fear” (Maktoum, 2006). Effective school leadership, especially in today’s diverse and dynamic educational landscape, hinges on qualities that foster a positive and supportive learning environment (Fullan, 2001). The selection of school leaders by institution owners and principals must prioritise attributes, traits, and approaches that inspire and empower others, as the quality of leadership is consistently linked to improved school performance (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Research demonstrates that school leaders play a pivotal role in influencing both the efficiency and the effectiveness of their institutions, underscoring the need for proactive, well-prepared leaders who can cultivate environments conducive to academic success and social development (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

Defining leadership is inherently complex, with interpretations varying based on context and evolving research. Yukl (2013) notes that effective leaders typically embody a combination of interpersonal and task-oriented skills that allow them to adapt their approach as needed. Arnold Glasow’s perspective that “A good leader takes a little more than his share of the blame, a little less than his share of the credit” highlights humility and accountability as core values, qualities echoed in research on servant leadership, where leaders prioritise the needs and growth of their communities (Greenleaf, 1977). Martin Luther King Jr. characterised true leadership as “the ultimate measure of a man... where he stands at times of challenge and controversy” (King, 1963), emphasising resilience and moral fortitude. Goethe’s view that “A great person attracts great people and knows how to hold them together” aligns with the principle that strong leaders build inclusive, loyal communities, a point that Sergiovanni (2001) argues is essential for school leaders aiming to foster cohesive and motivated teams.

The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) has also gained prominence in educational leadership, with Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013) suggesting that effective leaders combine empathy and social awareness to create emotionally supportive environments. This perspective aligns with Bill George’s assertion that leaders should act “with the heart, not just the head,” underscoring empathy, compassion, and courage as essential qualities (Daskal, 2019). Emotional intelligence in school leaders is particularly valuable in guiding their institutions through challenging times, where a balanced approach of compassion and authority is necessary to maintain stability and morale (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

There is a growing body of evidence linking school leadership and school outcomes. Studies by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that leadership quality is directly associated with higher student achievement and overall school performance, particularly when leaders emphasise instructional quality and staff collaboration. Leithwood and Riehl (2005)

further argue that high-quality leadership positively impacts school climate and student engagement by promoting a vision-centered, collaborative culture. “Leadership characteristics of a school are important factors in promoting systems and structures that enable the school to operate as a learning organisation” (Silins & Mulford, 2015). Effective leaders are instrumental in developing these structures by translating theoretical ideas into practical strategies, ensuring that teamwork and a shared vision of success are central to the school’s operation (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

In the context of UAE public schools, specific leadership qualities such as integrity, impartiality, and expressiveness are critical, reflecting cultural and institutional values (Nasr, 2017). Leaders in these schools are expected to avoid favouritism and nepotism, promoting fairness and discipline to create a stable and productive environment. This emphasis on impartiality resonates with UAE’s educational goals, which prioritise high standards of equality and student achievement across the educational system (Al Taneiji, 2019). As the UAE moves towards globally competitive educational standards, fostering these qualities in school leaders has become essential for nurturing productive, resilient, and inclusive learning environments (Thorne, 2020).

Leadership theories, including transformational and instructional leadership, further illustrate the importance of vision, empathy, and accountability in school settings. Transformational leadership theory, as discussed by Burns (1978), suggests that effective leaders inspire followers through a compelling vision, encouraging personal and collective growth. This theory has been widely applied in educational contexts, where transformational leaders seek to motivate teachers and students by fostering a shared sense of purpose (Bass, 1990; Hallinger, 2003). Instructional leadership, on the other hand, focuses on improving teaching quality and learning outcomes directly, with leaders actively engaged in the instructional process (Blase & Blase, 1999). This model has been shown to significantly enhance student performance, particularly in schools where leaders set clear academic goals and provide consistent feedback to educators (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

In summary, the literature emphasises that effective schools are built upon strong leadership that combines empathy, vision, and decisiveness. Leaders who value teamwork, uphold integrity and demonstrate accountability play a pivotal role in creating school environments where students and staff can thrive. These leaders shape inspiring educational institutions that are both academically successful and supportive of the well-being of their communities (Robinson et al., 2008). By embodying qualities such as humility, resilience, and emotional intelligence, effective school leaders not only influence academic outcomes but also contribute to a positive school culture that supports lifelong learning and development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gather data for this analysis, a mixed-method approach was employed, utilising both controlled observation and survey methods across four American schools in Sharjah. This design aimed to capture a holistic view of leadership traits, characteristics, and styles and to assess their impact on the overall performance and outcomes of these institutions. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data ensured a more nuanced understanding of school leadership practices and provided a robust foundation for analysing leadership effectiveness in this context.

Controlled Observation

The controlled observation method involved systematic, structured observation sessions across each school, focusing on leader-staff interactions to capture the behaviours, communication styles, and decision-making processes of school leaders. Observers conducted their sessions over several weeks to provide a comprehensive picture of leadership dynamics. Specific instances were documented, such as leaders' approaches to conflict resolution, their responsiveness to staff concerns, and their behaviour during strategic planning meetings. This allowed observers to examine both the consistency of leadership behaviours and the variations across different situational contexts, such as faculty meetings, one-on-one discussions with teachers, and community events. Each observer utilised a detailed observation checklist to ensure that data collection remained objective and consistent across sessions and schools. Field notes and qualitative summaries were also produced to highlight recurring patterns and unique instances in leadership behaviour.

Surveys

Surveys were distributed to a broad range of stakeholders, including teachers, administrative staff, parents, and, where appropriate, senior students. This inclusive approach provided insights from multiple perspectives within the school community. The survey instrument was carefully designed to assess stakeholder perceptions of leadership effectiveness, encompassing areas such as communication, approachability, decision-making, support for staff development, and commitment to the school's vision and values. Survey questions included Likert-scale items to quantify responses, as well as open-ended questions to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions.

The quantitative data collected were statistically analysed to identify trends, such as correlations between leadership styles and perceived institutional outcomes, while qualitative responses provided contextual depth, revealing specific examples of how leadership practices influenced school culture and stakeholder satisfaction.

Data Analysis

Data from both methods were analysed independently and then triangulated to identify patterns, validate findings, and enhance reliability. Observational data were coded thematically to identify key behaviours and leadership traits, while survey data were subjected to both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to quantify stakeholders' perceptions and identify significant trends. Qualitative survey responses were also coded to extract common themes, which were compared with the observational data to assess alignment or discrepancies in perceptions of leadership behaviours versus observed practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Survey

The survey findings offer a detailed view of stakeholder perceptions regarding leadership effectiveness within the selected American schools in Sharjah. The survey assessed multiple dimensions of leadership, including goal-setting, support for teachers, school culture, responsiveness to feedback, and professional development opportunities. Each question reflects distinct facets of leadership impact on the educational environment and student outcomes, providing insights into the perceived strengths and areas for improvement within these schools.

Table 1: Survey Results Summary

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The leadership sets clear goals that contribute to improving student performance.	5%	10%	15%	35%	35%
Leaders provide adequate support and resources for teachers to enhance student learning.	4%	8%	12%	40%	36%
The leadership fosters a positive school culture that encourages student engagement.	3%	5%	10%	37%	45%
Leaders effectively implement strategies for addressing diverse student needs.	6%	12%	20%	30%	32%
The professional development opportunities provided by the leadership positively impact teaching quality.	2%	7%	15%	40%	36%
Leaders actively promote collaboration among staff, which contributes to improved educational outcomes.	3%	6%	18%	42%	31%
The leadership is responsive to feedback from stakeholders, leading to improvements in school practices.	4%	5%	20%	36%	35%
Overall, I believe that effective leadership directly correlates with improved school performance.	1%	2%	8%	34%	55%

Goal Setting and Student Performance

70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the leadership sets clear goals that contribute to improving student performance, while only 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 15% remained neutral.

These results suggest that the majority of stakeholders perceive the leadership's goal-setting as effective and aligned with enhancing student performance. Clear goal-setting is a foundational element of effective leadership, as it provides direction and motivation for staff and students. The strong agreement indicates that the leadership's vision is well-communicated and likely involves measurable targets, which may contribute to a focused approach toward academic excellence.

Support and Resources for Teachers

76% of respondents felt that leadership provides adequate support and resources to teachers to enhance student learning, with only 12% disagreeing and 12% neutral.

This high level of agreement suggests that the school leadership prioritises equipping teachers with necessary resources, which can have a direct impact on classroom effectiveness and student outcomes. Providing resources for instruction is a crucial aspect of leadership, as it allows teachers to implement varied teaching methods, potentially improving student engagement and learning. These results indicate strong support for teachers, contributing to a positive and well-prepared educational environment.

Positive School Culture and Student Engagement

82% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that leadership fosters a positive school culture that encourages student engagement, with only 8% disagreeing.

This strong positive response highlights the leadership's success in creating an inclusive, supportive school environment that actively engages students. Effective school cultures often promote values such as respect, inclusivity, and academic motivation, which are crucial for student engagement and overall school satisfaction. The high agreement here suggests that leadership efforts in building a cohesive school culture are resonating well with stakeholders.

Addressing Diverse Student Needs

62% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that leaders implement effective strategies for addressing diverse student needs, while 18% disagreed and 20% remained neutral.

Although the majority view the leadership's efforts in meeting diverse needs positively, the higher rate of neutrality and disagreement suggests that there may be room for improvement. Addressing diverse needs is increasingly important in today's multicultural and varied classrooms, where students may require differentiated instruction and support. These

results indicate that while there is general satisfaction, there may be a need for more tailored or inclusive approaches to address diverse learning profiles.

Professional Development and Teaching Quality

76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that professional development opportunities provided by the leadership positively impact teaching quality, with minimal disagreement (9%) and 15% neutral.

Professional development is vital for teacher growth and the continuous improvement of teaching practices. High agreement here indicates that the leadership invests in meaningful development opportunities, which likely contribute to enhancing instructional quality and effectiveness. Given the minimal disagreement, it can be inferred that these professional development programs are perceived as relevant, impactful, and accessible.

Promoting Collaboration Among Staff

73% of respondents felt that the leadership actively promotes staff collaboration, contributing to improved educational outcomes, with only 9% disagreement and 18% neutral.

Collaboration among staff is essential for fostering a team-oriented environment and for sharing best practices and resources. The high rate of agreement indicates that the leadership values and actively encourages teamwork, which is beneficial for both teacher morale and student outcomes. This collaborative approach aligns with distributed leadership models, where responsibility and expertise are shared to improve school performance.

Responsiveness to Stakeholder Feedback

71% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the leadership is responsive to feedback from stakeholders, leading to improvements in school practices. Only 9% disagreed, while 20% were neutral.

Responsiveness to feedback is a key aspect of adaptive leadership, allowing leaders to refine practices based on stakeholder input. The high level of agreement reflects positively on the school leadership's willingness to engage with and act on community feedback, fostering trust and alignment with stakeholder expectations. However, the 20% neutral response suggests that some stakeholders may feel their feedback is not always effectively acted upon, indicating room for improved communication or feedback mechanisms.

Correlation Between Leadership and School Performance

89% of respondents believe that effective leadership directly correlates with improved school performance, with only 3% in disagreement and 8% neutral.

This overwhelming agreement underscores the perceived critical role that leadership plays in school success. Stakeholders widely recognise the influence of leadership on academic and operational outcomes, affirming that effective leaders can significantly elevate school performance. This perception aligns with existing research, which consistently links strong leadership with high-quality educational environments.

Summary of Survey Findings

The survey results highlight several areas of strength within the leadership practices of these schools, including goal-setting, support for teachers, positive culture building, and responsiveness to feedback. Stakeholders generally perceive leadership as playing a significant role in improving both school operations and student outcomes. However, areas such as addressing diverse student needs and fully utilising stakeholder feedback show potential for further enhancement. Overall, the data indicate that the leadership in these schools is highly regarded, particularly in its ability to set clear goals, support teaching staff, and foster a collaborative and engaging school culture.

Observation

The observational findings provide a comprehensive view of leadership practices within the observed American schools in Sharjah, highlighting systematic processes for leader selection, adaptive leadership approaches, and the strategic focus of leadership teams. Each component observed contributes to a well-rounded understanding of the leaders' roles, behaviours, and commitment to institutional goals.

Systematic Selection Process

The observation of a structured selection process for school leaders underscores the schools' commitment to recruiting individuals who are not only highly qualified but also aligned with both the school's and the UAE's educational priorities. This process includes reviewing CVs, conducting interviews, and implementing a three-month trial period for new leaders, allowing time for a practical assessment of candidates' compatibility with the school culture, adaptability to its expectations, and alignment with UAE's vision for education. This trial period is particularly notable, as it provides leaders with a real-world platform to demonstrate their skills, leadership style, and potential impact on the school environment. Such a process is likely to yield leaders who are capable and adaptable, ensuring that they are both professionally equipped and culturally aligned with the school's mission.

Dynamic and Informed Leadership

The observed leaders were consistently well-informed about the operational, academic, and social aspects of their schools. This in-depth knowledge allows leaders to make informed decisions and respond proactively to various challenges. The leaders' understanding of school dynamics points to a commitment to self-leadership, where leaders actively engage in their personal growth and self-awareness to better serve their institutions. Leaders provided counsel

to their principals, supported subordinates, and engaged laterally with their peers, demonstrating a collaborative and multi-directional approach to leadership. This interaction with different levels of the school structure suggests a distributed leadership style, where decision-making and support are shared across a network, creating a more resilient leadership structure that can respond to a range of institutional needs effectively.

Regular Collaborative Meetings

Leadership teams held regular meetings involving principals, vice principals, assistant principals, and various departments. These meetings were observed as strategic sessions for reviewing achievements, addressing challenges, assessing needs, and offering recommendations to ensure that institutional targets were met. Such collaborative efforts are critical in building a cohesive leadership team and reinforcing the school's vision across departments. These meetings also foster transparency and accountability, enabling leaders at various levels to align on goals and contribute insights toward shared objectives. This practice highlights the schools' commitment to continuous improvement and collective problem-solving, which are vital for maintaining a high-functioning educational environment.

Situational Leadership and Tailored Decision-Making

A strong commitment to situational leadership was observed, indicating that leaders adapted their approach based on the unique needs of each situation. Situational leadership allows leaders to adjust their style according to the task at hand, the team's abilities, and institutional priorities. This flexible approach to decision-making reflects a deep understanding of the varying demands of an educational institution, particularly one in a multicultural context such as Sharjah. Observations showed that leaders did not apply a one-size-fits-all approach; rather, they tailored their decisions and actions to address specific challenges, recognising that the school's success depends on adaptive, context-sensitive leadership.

Alignment of Change and Growth

Leaders viewed change as a pathway to growth, suggesting a forward-thinking attitude where change initiatives were seen not as disruptions but as opportunities for improvement and innovation. This proactive stance demonstrates that the leaders value progress and are committed to enhancing the school's educational offerings, infrastructure, and culture. By aligning change with growth, leaders likely mitigate resistance to new policies or practices, as stakeholders recognise that such changes aim to advance the school's mission.

Essential Leadership Characteristics

The observation identified key characteristics among successful leaders, including maturity, conviction, stability, vision, and strategic planning. Maturity and stability allow leaders to handle challenges with composure and resilience, maintaining morale and trust within the school community. Conviction and vision enable leaders to stay committed to long-term goals, providing a clear direction for the school. Strategic planning, observed as a consistent practice,

equip leaders to address both immediate needs and future growth opportunities systematically, aligning resources and actions with institutional objectives. These characteristics were likely observed as strengths that contributed to the schools' positive culture and operational efficiency.

Strategic Focus on Physical Spaces and Facilities

Leadership teams placed a high priority on physical spaces and facilities, recognising the critical role that the environment plays in shaping learning outcomes. This focus on the school's infrastructure shows a holistic approach to education, where leaders see the value in creating spaces that foster engagement, comfort, and productivity. By strategically planning improvements and adjustments to the school's facilities, leaders demonstrate a commitment to both present needs and future demands, ensuring that the physical environment aligns with educational goals and enhances the student and staff experience.

Observation Summary

Overall, the observational findings reveal a leadership approach that is both systematic and adaptive, marked by a deep commitment to collaboration, strategic vision, and responsiveness to the needs of the school community. By employing a dynamic, situational leadership style and fostering an environment of continuous growth and improvement, the leaders observed are well-positioned to create positive, high-performing educational environments. The consistent focus on strategic planning, personal leadership development, and physical space management underscores a holistic approach to school leadership, one that is integral to sustaining and advancing institutional success. These practices collectively indicate a leadership framework that could serve as a model for educational institutions striving for excellence in similar contexts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the leadership observed in the selected schools in Sharjah exemplifies the qualities necessary for effective educational leadership. Through their proactive and empathetic approach, these leaders foster positive relationships among teachers, students, and parents, creating a sense of trust and openness that directly enhances educational outcomes. Their commitment to clear communication, collaboration, and strategic planning ensures that each school functions as a cohesive learning community, where individual needs are respected, and collective goals are prioritised. By tailoring their leadership styles to the situational needs of the school and its community, they model an adaptive and responsive approach that is well-suited to the diverse educational landscape in the UAE.

The UAE's emphasis on educational excellence, coupled with its rapidly evolving educational landscape, underscores the importance of cultivating and supporting strong leaders in every school. This research reinforces the necessity of providing school leaders with ongoing professional development opportunities, mentorship, and resources that enable them to stay current with best practices and to continue enhancing their skills. Investment in leadership development programs that focus on both technical skills, such as strategic planning and resource management, and interpersonal skills, such as empathy, collaboration, and cultural

awareness, is essential for developing leaders who can navigate complex challenges and drive meaningful improvements in educational quality.

Moreover, as schools increasingly recognise the value of inclusive and equitable learning environments, leadership development initiatives must also emphasise diversity and inclusivity. Preparing leaders who are equipped to embrace diverse perspectives and to create supportive spaces for all students, regardless of background, aligns with the UAE's commitment to an inclusive educational experience for every learner.

In conclusion, the findings from this study highlight the critical role that effective leadership plays in shaping high-quality educational environments. By prioritising a holistic, growth-oriented approach to leadership, the observed schools set a positive example for other institutions within and beyond the UAE. Continued support for leadership development will not only strengthen individual leaders but will also contribute to the broader goal of establishing schools that inspire, motivate, and prepare students to thrive in an increasingly complex world. As the UAE moves forward in its educational journey, the development of forward-thinking, compassionate, and skilled leaders will be central to achieving and sustaining educational excellence across the nation.

To enhance the effectiveness of school leadership in the UAE, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Establish ongoing professional development initiatives focused on leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and effective communication strategies for current and aspiring leaders.
2. Implement mentorship programs pairing experienced leaders with emerging leaders to promote knowledge transfer and skill development.
3. Increase stakeholder engagement in leadership selection processes, ensuring that the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students are considered.
4. Encourage further research on effective leadership practices within UAE schools, facilitating continuous improvement and innovation in educational leadership.
5. Foster partnerships with community organisations to enhance leadership training and provide diverse perspectives on educational challenges.

By implementing these recommendations, the UAE can continue to cultivate a generation of effective school leaders who are not only capable of navigating the complexities of modern education but also skilled in adapting to the diverse needs of their school communities. These leaders will be better equipped to drive positive change, foster inclusive environments, and inspire both teachers and students to achieve their full potential. Through a sustained focus on professional development, strategic planning, and fostering a culture of empathy and collaboration, the UAE can build a robust foundation for educational excellence, ensuring that its schools are well-prepared to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global landscape and inspire long-term success within their institutions.

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