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Abstract: This research paper explores in depth the real causes behind underachievement among students at UAE Model Schools. The researcher suggests practical solutions to turn Model Schools into high-performance schools.

Low level Educational Achievement among Students in UAE Model Schools:

ADEC Change Strategies to enhance Student Achievement and Improve English

"Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better." **King Whitney Jr.**

Introduction

Leading a change in the field of education is one of the most complex tasks for educators. For any change to be effective, change leaders need to develop a fertile understanding of the change process. They also have to overcome difficulties and be ready to cope with chaos which is a part of the change process (Fullan 1993). What's more, they need to have a clear vision and a well-defined institutional mission in order for any change to yield positive outcomes. Senge and colleagues maintain that "without better maps, it is extremely unlikely that organizational change efforts will ever sustain themselves" (Senge et al, 1995:82). There is no doubt that change is inevitable in this ever changing world. If we do not try to make changes, we risk not adhering to the principle of innovation, which is a key ingredient of our modern society, and consequently falling into the abyss of stagnation. Change which yields fruitful results is welcomed in many

cases. It is welcomed because its tangible positive effects can be felt at both the societal and individual levels.

The problem that all UAE Model Schools face nowadays is low-educational achievement among local students – students who are indigenous to the UAE, as opposed to expatriate students – based on the final results of the academic year 2006 – 2007. In an attempt to turn these schools into high-performing schools, Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC) – the new educational authority in charge of Model Schools – has called in Australian educational experts to initiate some effective changes in the educational policy of Model Schools so that local students would meet higher educational standards.

In this research paper, I will talk about a fundamental change recently undertaken in the educational policy of all UAE Model Schools in view of the poor results achieved by local

students during the academic year 2006 – 2007. I will also discuss the impact of change initiation on teachers, parents, and students, cast light on the processes used to implement it, and suggest practical ways to successfully put it into operation.

1. *Characteristics of Model Schools*

Model Schools in Abu Dhabi were established in 1994 on the premise that they would provide local students with quality education and enhance their academic achievement. Only local students could join these schools. They had to pay some tuition fees which varied according to the education cycle they were in. Placement tests were not a prerequisite for admission. The staff working in Models Schools was carefully selected through job interviews conducted by a committee consisting of some school principals and pedagogical and administrative supervisors from Abu Dhabi Educational Zone (ADEZ).

Model Schools differ from state schools in a number of ways. In the first place, they are advantaged schools equipped with the latest technologies, where students can have easy access to ICTs. Pursuing this further, the staff working in the Model Schools is highly qualified. Most of the teachers acquire and maintain excellent teaching skills. In addition, all students are nationals, which means that all of them belong to the same cultural background. Finally, the school day is two hours longer than that of state schools. It runs from 7:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

2. *Tackling the issue of low achievement in Model Schools*

It has been 13 years now since the creation of Model Schools, but it seems that the objective behind which these schools were set up was not achieved. Model schools were doomed to low-performing schools. In 2007, students whose results were below 70 percent were asked to leave Model Schools for state schools. The table below shows the number of students who did not get a pass and those who were transferred to other schools.

Grade	No of students	No of students who passed		No of students who failed
		more than 70%	less than 70%	
10	151	90 (59.6%)	48 (31.7%)	13 (8.7%)
11 A&Sc	85	56 (65.9%)	28(32.9)	1 (1.2%)
12 Arts	29	11(37.9%)	14 (48.2%)	4(13.9%)
12 Science	53	28 (52.8%)	23 (43.4%)	2 (3.8%)

Figure I: (Adapted) Al Ittihad Model School (2006 – 2007)

The table above shows that managing the status quo is not enough for Model Schools to survive and that educational leaders should play a key role in creating necessary changes to deal with the critical situation. ADEC issued a decree in June 2007 in response to low achievement in Model schools. It stipulated that students whose results were below 70% leave Model Schools for state schools. The table illustrates the final results achieved during the academic year 2006-2007. In grade 10, for instance, only 90 students out of 151 could remain at Al Ittihad Model School while the remaining 61 students had to leave the school.

In view of the poor results achieved by Model school students, ADEC initiated an action plan to help students maximize their academic achievement and improve their language skills by setting 70% as a minimum score to remain in Model Schools and changing the medium of instruction of scientific subjects from Arabic into English.

In the following section, I will describe how educational leaders in ADEC used change in an attempt to turn Model Schools into high-performing schools. However, I have some reservations about the new change implementation in ADEC's pursuit of its declared educational objectives – raising students' performance and enhancing their level of English.

3. *Faulty maps of change*

Fullan and Miles (1992) hold that change leaders' 'maps of change' are in many occasions inappropriate for what they are trying to do. Fullan affirms that "it is hard to get to a destination when your map does not accurately represent the territory you are to traverse" (Fullan

& Miles, 1992:747). I strongly believe that ADEC's new change initiation will produce results that are both ineffective and misleading because the real causes of low-educational achievement in Model Schools have never been appropriately investigated. It is solid investigation but never false assumption that helps create the most convenient action plan in order for educational leaders in ADEC to achieve their ultimate goals.

3.1.Teachers as the weakest link in the educational process

Change leaders in ADEC hardly touch upon the real causes of low achievement in Model Schools. They strongly believe that teachers are the direct cause behind students' academic underachievement. Instead of building teachers' sense of worth, they lay all the blame on them. It is no wonder, then, that the sweeping majority of teachers in the UAE are presumed guilty

until proven innocent. All Model School teachers have sat for a variety of tests conducted by foreign educational agencies. We were asked to sit for the TOEFL test in 2003. Two years later, we sat for two tests conducted by the British Council. One of the tests was the BULLATS, which tests the candidate's ability in business English. In 2007, we sat for the IELTS exam. Ironically, none of the tests administered assesses the teacher's teaching skills. They are proficiency tests that test the candidate's linguistic competence. The TKT test, which is appropriate in this case, was never administered though. Worth noting is the fact that no measures were taken in view of the results achieved by teachers. Results were kept secret and any attempt to know about them was doomed to failure. The declared intention has always been to conduct professional development sessions in order to upgrade teachers' knowledge and academic skills. However, no PD sessions were delivered as a result of the tests administered. On the contrary, ADEC terminated the contract of 48 English teachers whose score was below band 6.

The fact of testing only English teachers and excluding teachers of other subject matters should be understood as a way of commodifying English. This commodification of English in the UAE needs to be understood vis-à-vis the commodification of native speaker teachers in the country. It seems that language experts hired by ADEC are more into business than educational reform. They want to prove that nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are the real cause behind students' poor achievement in English. If this is the case, how would they account for students' underachievement in the other subjects?

3.2.Using English as the medium of instruction

ADEC stipulates that scientific subjects such as math, chemistry and physics be taught in English. The objective behind this change initiation is to allow students to get more exposure to English. This program is similar to the immersion program that was implemented in Canada in the late 1960s. I would like to make it clear that I am not an anti-English zealot because claiming so would be silly since I am an English teacher. English is not the mother tongue of students in the UAE. It is not their second language either. It is simply a foreign language. Therefore, it should be treated as a foreign language in an EFL context such as the UAE's.

There is a big difference between treating English as a foreign language and having it as a medium of instruction in Model Schools. If we are teaching our students math and physics which most of the students find them difficult (figs. 1 & 2), it would be better to teach them in their

mother tongue Arabic rather than English. Why? The answer is simple. When teaching scientific subjects in Arabic, students will understand better because there will be no language barriers that might hinder their comprehension. Moreover, the Japanese, learn in their language, so do the German and Chinese. So why not the Arabs?
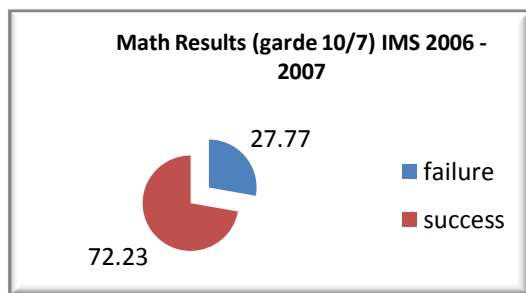

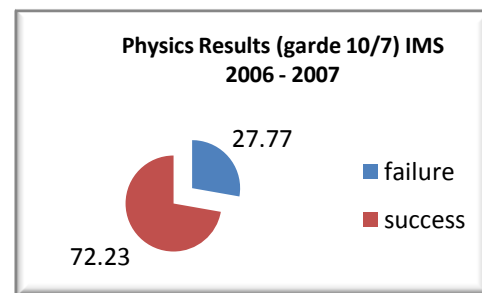Fig. 2 (Adapted)   Fig. 3 (Adapted)

Figures 1 & 2 illustrate the percentage of grade 10 (7) students who failed in math and physics during the academic year 2006 – 2007. I am of the opinion that introducing English as the medium of instruction in the intermediate and secondary cycles would be really ineffective for a number of reasons. First, students in prep and high schools have always been taught in Arabic. Such a dramatic change will be more of a hindrance than a help and will not improve students' academic achievement neither in English nor in the other scientific subjects. The new medium of instruction, which most of the students are struggling with, will hinder their comprehension. Second, the shift into English necessitates bilingual teachers who are skillful in communicating in scientific English. The majority of the teachers teaching scientific subjects are

monolinguals whose knowledge of English is modest. Finally, the change will call for a new curriculum that neither the teachers nor the students will feel comfortable with.

4. Resistance to change

"It is human nature to resist change, unless implementers are involved in its creation" (Starr, 2007). Practitioners oppose change initiatives and become change resistors instead of change managers. However, we should not look at change resistors as enemies. On the contrary, we should realize that they are caught in a paradigm they did not create. Change resistors in the UAE think that the paradigm created lacks a clear vision, has a vague institutional mission, and imposes change without getting them involved. These leadership inadequacies result in change initiatives being rejected.

4.1. Teachers

Teachers are resilient to the change undertaken by ADEC for many reasons. First, anglicizing the curriculum requires bilingual teachers who are not only proficient in the subject matter to be taught but also in English, the medium through which it is conveyed. I have mentioned earlier that most of the teachers are monolinguals who have no experience in teaching their subjects in English. They have been educated in Arabic and feel comfortable with teaching in their mother tongue. Now they have to deliver all their lessons in a foreign language, which will inevitably hinder their performance in the classroom and consequently leave them with a sense of loss. The new situation is really absurd: neither the teacher will be at ease while conducting his lessons in English nor will the students be exposed to a 'comprehensible input' that belongs to level 'i+1'advocated by Krashen in his natural approach to second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Second, teaching scientific subjects in English entails extra workload for teachers. They have to attend English classes held in the afternoons, delivered by Australian advisors. Most teachers attend them unwillingly because they are imposed on them. Finally, teachers as change implementers are not well-remunerated. They are demotivated not only because their wages do not meet their basic needs but also because the top-down and external leadership approach employed by ADEC totally excludes them from any change creation and deprives them of a sense of ownership. Teachers prefer change scenarios where they

are involved in change creation, where they can understand its rationale, and where they are supportive and not intrusive (Glassford, 1997).

4.2.Parents

While teachers' resistance stems mainly from using English as the medium of instruction for scientific subjects, parents' resistance emanates from both anglicizing the curriculum and setting 70% as a minimum score for their children to remain in Model Schools. They maintain that they are not responsible for their children's low achievement. They think that their children are the product of Model Schools and that it is not fair to transfer them to other schools. According to parents, Model Schools, and not their children, are to blame because they failed to promote greater educational opportunities for their children as their initial claims were. Besides, parents have negative attitudes towards English. They are people who take pride in their cultural

heritage and Arabic language. They feel that the new curriculum represents a real threat to their cultural identity. One of the parents came to me one day and said: "I really wonder if the Holy Quran will be recited in English in your school morning program!" He made it clear to me that the change was not aligned with their cultural identity and that the school mission should have been one that reinforced, not deteriorated it.

In addition to that, poor communication about the new change in Model schools has compounded parents' feelings of worry and fear. They are aware of the fact that their children have always been subjects to educational random experiments, just like lab rats. Therefore, they do not believe the current change is worthwhile and throw the probability that it will be beneficial for their children into oblivion.

5. *How to implement and manage a successful change*

It is a known fact that Model Schools are lagging behind when compared to high-performing private schools in Abu Dhabi. I am of the opinion that achieving a score of 70% as a minimum requirement for students to remain at Model Schools is a good step towards improving their learning outcomes. I also believe that English is very important in this global era and working towards raising the student's level of English has become more of a necessity than a luxury if we want our students to function properly in today's global world. However, I do not

approve of the strategy implemented by ADEC's change leaders who think that it will lead to a permanent improvement in Model Schools.

Unless ADEC makes reliable educational diagnoses to find out the real causes behind students' low achievement, any effort aimed at improving the ailing situation in Model Schools will be doomed to failure. No study that I know of pertaining to the causes of students' low achievement in UAE Model School has been conducted. However, students' failure to meet high standards in education has always been ascribed to teachers, who are considered to be the weakest link in the educational process.

5.1.Empowering teachers to become change leaders

I strongly believe that any educational change should emanate from teachers who are working closely with students and not from those at the top who are less knowledgeable as to the needs of the students. It is crucial that ADEC create an environment conducive to teacher

empowerment and involvement in the whole leadership process. It should also restore teachers' instructional efficacy and sense of self-worth. ADEC change leaders should empower teachers to be effective leaders and allow them more freedom to take risks not only in the curriculum to meet the needs of their students but also in other areas of their jobs. It is not sensible to labor under the illusion that students will best learn English if they are taught by native speakers of English. Braine (1999) and Rampton (1996) point out that native English speakers, although without teaching qualifications, stand a better chance of being hired than qualified and experienced non-native English speaking teachers. This reality seems to be true in the UAE educational setting. In 2004, ADEZ hired Canadian native speakers to teach in some Model Schools but the project was declared a failure while still in its embryonic stage because most of the staff employed were not certified as English teachers. This clearly shows that the tenet created at the 1961 Commonwealth Conference on the teaching of English as a Second Language and which states that native speakers are the best teachers of English is flawed. Phillipson (1996) has coined the phrase 'the native speaker fallacy' as a reaction to the unfair treatment of non-native English-speaking teachers. He maintains that NNESTs are potentially the ideal ESL teachers because they have gone through the process of learning English as a second language and have a better understanding of their students' linguistic problems and cultural background. In addition to that, the survey carried out by Medgyes in 1996 points out to the fact that NNESTs

are as competent as native speakers of English. It states that there is no discernible difference between language learners taught by native speaker teachers and those taught by NNESTs in as far as learning outcomes are concerned. Medgyes affirms that NNESTs have an advantage over native speakers in the sense that they have gone through the learning process of an additional language and thus serve a better learner model for their students. Given the facts mentioned above, ADEC educational leaders should restore NNESTs' sense of self-worth and empower them by involving them in the change process. They should also consider ways of remunerating their staff. It is unfair to give salaries according to nationalities. It is high time that the emphasis from *who* the teachers are to *what* they are shifted. Lippi-Green (1997) regards throwing teachers' competence and credibility into question because of their accents as a kind of linguistic discrimination. Therefore, I strongly believe that giving teachers tests which are neither valid nor reliable does not make any sense. Teachers can only be assessed inside their classrooms.

Advisors from ADEC should step into classrooms, observe lessons, and hold discussions with the observed teachers. Only then can advisors judge whether a teacher is competent enough to deliver successful lessons or not. In addition, ELT teachers should be remunerated according to their credentials and not according to the unjust native / non-native classification.

ADEC educational leaders have to realize that change is only possible through involving all stakeholders. The top-down management they are practising is not helpful because it is authoritarian by nature. It excludes teachers and parents alike. A better understanding of the effects of change on teachers should be reconsidered and thinking of new ways to involve all stakeholders would be much more fruitful if ADEC is to turn change resistors into change managers.

5.2.Enhancing student motivation

It is known for a fact that parents always blame teachers for their children's underachievement and teachers blame students for not taking responsibility for their own learning. The results achieved by the majority of students in Model schools indicate that there is something wrong going on there. We have students that are not doing well almost in all subjects. Students' learning outcomes are supposed to be fairly good given the fact that Model Schools are advantaged schools the institutional mission of which is to provide local students with quality

education. The present situation indeed requires educational leaders to map out new strategies to turn Model Schools into high-performing schools in order to improve student learning. This is easy to say but difficult to implement.

Central to the improvement of students' learning are good teaching practices, parental involvement, and student motivation. Unfortunately, local students bring low levels of motivation into the classroom. A careful investigation into the real causes of lack of motivation among students in model Schools would reveal students who never take responsibility for their own learning. They are too dependent on their teachers just the way they are over dependent on housemaids serving them in their homes. Worth noting is the fact that students do absolutely nothing to assist to their personal needs. The housemaid wakes them up, prepares their breakfast, and even decides on what they should wear to school. The driver carries their bags to the car and off again when they reach school. When it comes to home assignments, it is the private tutor who

does them. It is not surprising that most of the students have neither interest in the subject matter nor a perception of its usefulness.

Since "a strongly motivated student is in a far better position as a learner than a student who is not motivated" (Harmer, 1994), ADEC educational leaders should focus on designing courses that would maximize student motivation. Hiring experts to deliver PD sessions on how to enhance student motivation would be an ideal solution. These PD sessions will lead teachers to change their everyday teaching practices and add more spice to their lessons. Unfortunately, the training courses most teachers are attending never address the issue of motivation. The last workshop I attended was about how to replace a burnt out lamp of an overhead projector. Undoubtedly, such a course will add nothing to my experience as an EFL teacher. It will never help me motivate the unmotivated. Besides, an instructor who himself is not motivated can never motivate others. Increasing teachers' salaries would be a key factor in leading teachers towards optimal performance.

5.3.Involving parents in the educational process

Undoubtedly, parental involvement in their children's literacy activities during the primary and secondary years of schooling is of paramount importance. Research has shown that when parents are adequately involved in their children's learning, the child's academic achievement is

affected positively (Feinstein & Symons, 1999). During the parents' meetings, which are hosted twice a year, only the parents whose children are really doing well at school attend. The sweeping majority of parents do not attend those meetings on the pretext that they are too busy. In fact, many of them do not feel comfortable going to school or talking to their children's teachers. They think that those meetings are a waste of time so they never put in an appearance. It is not surprising, then, that most of the students' report cards are collected by the family drivers. The vast majority of parents are not aware of the key role they can play in enhancing their child's academic performance. They think that the private tutor they hire is the only one who can make a significant contribution to their child's learning.

It is necessary that ADEC's educational leaders propagate a culture in which parents take responsibility for their children's learning. This can be achieved by launching educational campaigns emphasizing the value of parental involvement in their children's education. Moreover, in order to increase interest in parents' meetings, a fixed agenda should be created and

distributed to parents at least one week before the date of the meeting. What's more, contacting parents should be via their cell phones and not by 'letters to the parents' given to students on the same day of the meeting, most of which are thrown on their way home.

5.4.Teaching English through literature

Teaching English through literature has always been stressed by language experts. It is important for students to be exposed to authentic material, be it oral or written. Such material represents a good source of input for the students.

Collie and Slater (1990) identify four reasons why an English teacher should preferably implement literature in the classroom. They stress the fact that literary texts, such as short stories and novels, include valuable authentic material, expose students to the target culture, enrich their language, and ensure their personal involvement in the learning task. Reading literature has also the potential of enhancing students' motivation as they enthusiastically delve into the story to "find out what happens as events unfold via the climax" (Hismanoglu, 2005:55). By incorporating literature into the English language program, teachers will help their students develop the habit of reading for pleasure. Reading is one way of maximizing students' exposure to a great variety of language input, which is of paramount importance for language acquisition to take place. I personally encourage my students to choose their own stories, stories that suit

their current language level and are interesting enough for them to read at their leisure. I also ask them to make a short power point presentation on the story they have read. I dare say that such a practice of using literature in the classroom has helped my students acquire not only reading skills but also reading habits. These reading habits are very important if we are to grant the students a chance to attain a considerable degree of autonomy.

ADEC's educational leaders should realize that integrating literature into their language program is a powerful tool for improving students' language abilities. Accordingly, they should conduct PD sessions pertaining to incorporating literature into the language classroom to provide English teachers with the necessary training in that field.

Conclusion

Implementing and handling educational change successfully is by no means an easy task. For any change to produce positive results, educational leaders should first gain a full understanding of the issue before deciding on the remedies. Once the problems have been identified, they should suggest practical solutions and map out effective strategies to implement them. They should also take into consideration the impact of the change on all stakeholders and think of ways of involving them in the change process in order to avoid resistance and ensure a successful implementation of the change.

Unless ADEC's educational leaders apply sociological imagination to gain a better understanding of the real causes behind low achievement in UAE Model Schools, the problem will still persist. Since most of change leaders are from Australia, which means that they have little knowledge about the UAE society, they should first develop a fertile understanding of the UAE social and educational context in order for them to implement a solution-based approach that can be tailored to meet the needs of students and teachers alike. Pursuing this further, they should orchestrate change by empowering teachers and involving parents and students in its process. To put it in a nutshell, we are not after change for change's sake. We are after a change which yields positive outcomes.

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