

# Listening to and Supporting Teachers in the United Arab Emirates: Promoting Educational Success for the Nation

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## RESEARCH REPORT

# Listening to and Supporting Teachers in the United Arab Emirates: Promoting Educational Success for the Nation

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In this study, we provide insights into the experiences of teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in order to identify concerns and develop strategies to support teachers' development and retention in the profession. Researchers interviewed 94 teachers from public and private schools across the UAE in four focus groups. Interviews focused on six constructs related to their work as teachers, including teachers' motivation to join the profession, teaching practices, challenges encountered, professional development, job satisfaction, and suggestions for change. The study team analyzed and coded these responses to develop a consensus interpretation. We present our findings with the goal of encouraging further consideration about how best to support teachers through better understanding their needs.

**Keywords** UAE teachers; professional development; teacher expectations; teacher satisfaction; teacher retention

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In recent years, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has prioritized education, as evidenced by the creation of a school inspection framework, which serves as the basis for a school evaluation system that is intended to foster and support positive school reform and performance (Ministry of Education, 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). A recent study found a positive and moderately strong association between school quality assurance and the framework used to measure quality; results also indicated that the framework positively affects student learning skills, understanding Islamic values, and child safeguarding (Hussein El Saadi, 2017). Ultimately, the purpose of measuring school quality is to help ensure that all students attending schools in the UAE have the opportunity to achieve at high levels and become productive contributors to their society and beyond to the world community. The OECD (2019) created the document, *Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World: The OECD PISA Global Competence Framework*, with the goal of providing guidance to education agencies and schools so they can teach the framework. As part of that assurance, it is important to consider the impact of teachers on educational success. Their value to the process of preparing the next generation of citizens cannot be understated, as evidenced by numerous research studies (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Keller et al., 2017; Petty et al., 2016).

If school leaders are to support teacher success and the retention of qualified teachers in the profession, it is critical that they understand their needs and concerns and address them to the extent possible. To that end, we have conducted focus groups with teachers in both public and private schools in the UAE and recorded their comments to a set of key questions. The comments were then sorted, coded, and analyzed to reveal the joys and struggles of teaching, including areas where teachers (and therefore their students) would benefit from additional support. The information from these focus groups may be useful for conversations about a variety of topics of importance to teachers as well as decision makers whose goal is to maximize the impact of excellent teaching on society.

## Literature Review

We briefly highlight recent research studies that inspired and shaped the questions that were asked during the focus groups. These studies may also provide insights into strategies for providing teachers with opportunities and experiences intended not only to support their professional engagement and growth, but also to improve their students' learning and

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development. Because school leaders play a critical role in the success of these efforts, their responsibilities and contributions are also noted in the review.

### Importance of Finding and Retaining Qualified Teachers

Globally, there is continued concern about whether there will be enough qualified teachers to ensure opportunities to learn for all children (Teachers Task Force, 2015). In the UAE, a 2014 survey of expatriates teaching in UAE public schools focused on the effects of teacher characteristics, school environment, and district level human resource management policies and practices on teachers' commitment (Yang *et al.*, 2018). The study revealed that teacher level attributes (especially nationality and age) were strong predictors of their school commitment; however, school environment also contributed significantly to the commitment of the teachers.

Students in most countries are not expecting to have careers in teaching, as evidenced by PISA results. Students (age 15) were asked whether they expected to be teaching when they were 30 years old. In the most recent PISA study, only 10% aspired to a career in the teaching profession (Han *et al.*, 2018). Another recent OECD report documented that most students taking the PISA indicated that they were more interested in becoming "professionals" than pursuing teaching careers (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Moreover, in some countries attracting teachers to the profession and retaining them are serious concerns (Aragon, 2016; Weiss, 2019). Dee and Goldhaber (2017) responded to concerns about staffing classrooms with qualified teachers by offering a number of proposals, such as targeted financial incentives for high-needs areas or subjects and modified license requirements. In the United States, it has been estimated that roughly 50% of new teachers will leave the profession within 5 years (Ingersoll, 2003), although a more recent study indicates that the figure may be closer to 17% (Gray *et al.*, 2015). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) noted that based on 2012–2013 survey data the most frequently cited reasons for leaving the teaching profession were dissatisfaction with testing and accountability pressures; lack of administrative support; dissatisfaction with the teaching career, including lack of opportunities for advancement; and dissatisfaction with working conditions.

In states where teacher recruitment and retention have been concerns, multiple approaches are being tried, including offering bonuses for teachers who teach in perennial shortage areas; creating new career pathways, which include opportunities for teacher leadership roles and higher pay; and providing additional funding and incentives for teacher professional development (Aragon, 2016). Understanding the reasons teachers choose teaching as a career as well as what factors might make them either leave or stay in the profession are topics of great interest to those charged with ensuring a stable supply of qualified, committed teachers. Concerns for teachers' satisfaction with the profession, as well as a need to find out about their concerns, motivated the survey given to UAE teachers, which will be presented below.

### Professional Growth

Ultimately, a school's provision of opportunities for teacher development for both experienced and novice teachers should advance teachers' knowledge and skills as well as contribute to greater collaboration and cooperation among the teacher staff. Opportunities for professional growth are very important to teachers, but research literature has suggested that teachers feel they have limited opportunities for engaging in activities that will promote their growth and enhance their teaching ability. Research has suggested that novice teachers and student teachers are more likely to have access to mentoring compared to experienced teachers who also desire to grow professionally. A study of mentorship in Scotland determined that mentorship practices "highlight the need for student teachers to understand school culture and norms in order to be integrated into the school community" (Aderibigbe *et al.*, 2016, p. 21). Aderibigbe *et al.* (2016) also noted that mentor relationships included joint decision making and mentors often focused on being prepared, being open to learning, and other basics of good teaching practice. However, experienced teachers also need professional growth opportunities to improve their practice in the classroom and expand their knowledge of subject matter and teaching methods. A survey of National Teachers of the Year in the United States found that even these highly skilled, experienced teachers wanted opportunities for professional growth (Goe *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the surveyed teachers wanted school leaders to

- provide time and resources for informal peer observation and discussion;
- provide opportunities for formative observations and feedback from exemplary educators or support specialists with recent classroom experience in their grade level or content area;

- ensure that a formal, structured system is in place to provide support and opportunities for professional growth to all teachers — not just novice or struggling teachers;
- do away with one-size-fits-all professional development in favor of a system focused on differentiated and individualized professional development opportunities, taking advantage of online self-paced study opportunities, watching and discussing videos of excellent teaching with colleagues, and collaborating with teachers who have similar interests and needs for professional growth; and
- prioritize time for teachers to work together to improve their craft through professional learning communities, opportunities to observe and be observed, and time to discuss and reflect on practice with teachers from the same content or grade level.

Another study compared collaborative teacher professional development in England and Shanghai with an emphasis on teachers' perceptions of the professional development in the context of national reform agendas (Zeng & Day, 2019). The researchers used a questionnaire based on the TALIS 2013 teacher questionnaire with some additional questions about the "nature, purposes, forms, frequency, and perceived experiences and effectiveness of teacher collaboration" (Zeng & Day, 2019, p. 382). The questionnaire revealed more similarities than differences in how professional development was perceived among teachers in the two countries, which suggests that teachers' desire for personalized professional development transcends country and culture. The authors also found that "all Shanghai principals and 90% of English principals advocated or strongly advocated the provision of collaborative, practice-based inquiries" (Zeng & Day, 2019, p. 388). A key difference between types of professional development was noted, with Shanghai principals being primarily in charge of determining the focus and agenda for professional development; however, in England, there was a greater mix of mandated professional development and guided opportunities for teachers to choose based on their individual needs. The ability to select one's own professional development was seen by the teachers as empowering. Similarly, Wylie *et al.* (2009) noted that it is not only the focus of professional development that is important, but also the act of affording teachers the time and opportunity to share new learning with colleagues and exchange ideas about new initiatives that are crucial for effective professional development.

### Teacher Leaders

Experienced teachers often seek leadership roles that will allow them to remain in the classroom as teachers but provide them with opportunities for their own growth as they mentor and guide new or struggling teachers. A recent study conducted in the UAE provided insight into how such leadership roles were created, as well as how certain roadblocks made establishing leadership roles challenging (Al-Taneiji & Ibrahim, 2017). The authors collected survey responses from 937 teachers and found that both male and female teachers described helping colleagues plan for lessons and prepare for classroom activities, orient new teachers to school policies and rules, and communicate with caregivers. "Female teachers practiced more leadership roles in preparing extracurricular activities with other teachers while male teachers practiced more leadership roles in advising the beginning teachers to accomplish their work" (Al-Taneiji & Ibrahim, 2017, p. 91).

### Teacher-Family Communication

Home-school communication is not only a concern for teachers and parents but may also contribute to or hinder student engagement in the classroom. A randomized field experiment by Kraft and Dougherty (2012) determined that regular communication with parents or guardians increases student engagement. They sorted 14 classrooms into treatment or control conditions. Parents of students in the treatment group ( $n = 69$ ) received one phone call home each day from their English teacher which focused on (a) evaluating the student's academic progress and behavior, (b) describing upcoming homework assignments and tests, and (c) suggesting something that the student could continue to do well or something to improve. The authors noted that regular communication with parents also supported academic achievement by giving teachers the opportunity to provide specific advice about ways the parents could support the student's learning. In addition, the authors stated that teachers participating in the study believed that student engagement increased. In a later study by Kraft and Rogers (2015) involving students in an academic credit recovery program, the authors found that while the frequency of conversations between parents and students about school did not increase, the content of the conversations changed, with the teacher-parent conversation informing the student-parent conversation.

## Coaching, Mentoring, and Peer Networking

While some studies have shown the efficacy of expert coaching, teachers also want opportunities to learn from their peer classroom teachers, not just from identified expert teachers. Desimone and Pak (2017) posited five features that need to be in place for successful coaching:

(a) content focus: activities that are focused on subject matter content and how students learn that content; (b) active learning: opportunities for teachers to observe, receive feedback, analyze student work, or make presentations, as opposed to passively listening to lectures; (c) coherence: content, goals, and activities that are consistent with the school curriculum and goals, teacher knowledge and beliefs, the needs of students, and school, district, and state reforms and policies; (d) sustained duration: PD [professional development] activities that are ongoing throughout the school year and include 20 hours or more of contact time; and (e) collective participation: groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school participate in PD activities together to build an interactive learning community. (pp. 4–5)

The authors developed this set of features through examining cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, as well as literature reviews of quasi-experimental and experimental studies. The authors concluded by noting that “when PD is aligned with key elements such as content standards, curriculum, and daily lessons, it is more likely to be well implemented. Such alignment provides teachers with clearer directions, rather than leaving it up to the teacher to integrate new ideas and strategies into their teaching” (Desimone & Pak, 2017, p. 8).

In Great Britain, a national strategy for continuing professional development focuses on “teachers learning with and from other teachers” (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002, p. 299). The authors noted the importance of school support in improving teacher practices through the provision of professional development and the encouragement of schools to become professional learning communities. The authors cautioned that there are challenges to developing such systems, including the overall management of professional development and the selection of coaches and mentors, as well as conducting a needs analysis to determine teachers’ professional growth needs (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002, p. 302). Staff time constraints must also be considered. Stosich and Bristol (2018) synthesized a large body of research focused on factors that contribute to teacher quality. They found that teachers’ ability to grow in the profession is enhanced by positive school working conditions, including “... meaningful professional development; opportunities to collaborate with peers; and strong principal leadership” (Stosich & Bristol, 2018, p. 11). They noted that teaching quality is influenced not just by the teacher but by the “collective teacher community” (Stosich & Bristol, 2018, p. 15). Further evidence of the importance of peers in teacher professional learning is found in a study of teachers participating in professional development for writing instruction (Sun et al., 2013). A key focus of the study was the diffusion of teaching knowledge, and they determined that while teachers can learn through participation in professional development, they can learn almost as well through working with and learning from a peer who has participated in the professional development. This has important implications for the dissemination of teacher knowledge.

## Classroom Management

Teachers, especially novice teachers, often struggle with classroom management, which may impact students’ success as well as teachers’ satisfaction with their career choice. A recent study examined the intersection of classroom management skills, student motivation, and student achievement (van Dijk et al., 2019). The authors used a research-based teacher observation tool (CLASS) to determine teachers’ performance in three domains relative to their interactions with students: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. They also examined student academic motivation using the Tripod student perception survey, and they looked at mathematics achievement using the National Center for Teacher Effectiveness Main Study. The authors reported a significant relationship between classroom management and students’ academic motivation, and a significant (indirect) relationship between classroom management and mathematics achievement. They concluded that improving teachers’ classroom management skills could improve students’ motivation, which, in turn, could result in a positive impact on mathematics achievement. In the context of our study, supporting efforts to improve classroom management (including managing student behavior and motivation) could contribute to improved student outcomes for UAE schools.

### **Teacher Caring/Relationships with Students**

A study based on student and parent surveys looked at classroom and school environment effects on student engagement in the UAE and noted the role of schools' social and organizational environments as contributors to student engagement (Yang et al., 2017). They also found that "close bonds with teachers are associated with higher levels of interest in school-work, but not with the perception of benefits of school, time spent on homework and participation in extracurricular activities" (Yang et al., 2017, p. 235). Thus, having teachers who genuinely care for their students has educational benefits, but caring alone will not ensure optimal outcomes for students. Furthermore, a study that looked at school effectiveness in Sweden through the use of student ratings of teacher caring found a significant relationship: those schools that were rated by teachers as higher in effectiveness were also rated by students as higher in teacher caring (Ramberg et al., 2019). The literature supports the idea that caring teachers are important not only for the benefit of students but also for the benefit of the educational process.

### **Teachers' Work with People of Determination (Students with Special Needs)**

An important consideration for the UAE is to promote the success of all students, including those with special needs. A study from the *International Journal of Special Education* by Hamaidi et al. (2012) is of particular interest since it is a comparison of views of inclusive education across three countries: Jordan, the UAE, and the United States. The study was published in 2012 so it is possible that some policies have changed since that time; however, it provides an important view of teachers' attitudes about inclusion practices as well as the social and emotional aspects of inclusion practices. The authors pointed out that the UAE Constitution speaks to the importance of rehabilitating and caring for persons with disabilities (Section 16) as well as affirming that all individuals are equal (Section 25). Both of these sections of the Constitution are assumed to apply to education. Using an attitudinal demographic survey, the authors randomly distributed 300 questionnaires to collect data from early childhood teachers in the three participating countries. The number of teachers responding was 225, mostly women with bachelor's degrees. Forty-six percent of the respondents had not taken any special education courses in college. The data showed that UAE and USA early childhood educators "were committed to implementing inclusion practices and were prepared to alter services for students as students' needs changed" (Hamaidi et al., 2012, p. 99). Teachers from Jordan and the UAE noted that teachers of general educators and special need educators "do not collaborate enough to provide services to students in schools" (Hamaidi et al., 2012, p. 99). Among recommendations from the participating teachers were key issues that needed to be addressed: adequate training for general early childhood teachers, families, and principals, as well as class load, support, time, and collaboration. Thus, while the UAE teachers seemed at least as well prepared as their counterparts, it is clear from their comments that there is more work to be done to ensure optimal learning outcomes for people of determination (students with special needs).

### **Teacher Impact**

The UAE has set goals for student performance on the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) to focus on the importance of these subjects. School leaders, parents, and teachers all play an important role in preparing students for the assessment. Badri (2018) used UAE TIMMS data collected from school principals to analyze how these three groups played a role in supporting and encouraging students' success on TIMMS. TIMMS asked school leaders questions about parents, including their views of parental support for student achievement and parental pressure for the school to maintain high academic standards. School leaders were also asked about students, including students' motivation to do well in school, their ability to reach schools' academic goals, and their respect for classmates who excel in school. Schools leaders also answered questions about teachers, including questions about teachers' understanding of the school's curricular goals, degree of success in implementing the school's curriculum, expectations for student achievement, focus on working together to improve student achievement, and ability to inspire students. Using school leaders' responses to the parent, teacher, and student data from 558 UAE schools, Badri analyzed the data with the goal of better understanding the possible role of parents, students, and teachers in the TIMMS outcomes. Badri found that parents' degree of involvement in school activities, commitment to ensuring that their children are ready to learn, holding high expectations for students' achievement, and exerting pressure on schools to maintain high academic standards were positively related to TIMMS

outcomes. In addition, teachers had a direct influence on students, as the author noted: “[Teachers] have the momentous role of inspiring [students] and have high expectations for their achievement” (Badri, 2018, p. 185). These findings suggest that while parents provide the expectations and students provide a desire and motivation to learn, teachers, in particular, are the ones who inspire students to respond at high levels. It also implies that parents, in close partnership with teachers and school leaders, could play a key role in promoting students’ success.

### **Focus Group Research in the UAE**

To better understand how to support teachers in the UAE, the researchers conducted four focus groups with a total of 94 teachers (from both public schools,  $n = 43$  and private schools,  $n = 51$ ) from eight cities across the UAE. The focus groups took place in April and May of 2019. Separate sessions were held for the public school teachers and the private school teachers. A research-based protocol (set of questions) was developed by the authors to provide stimulus for the focus group conversations. Most of the teachers participating in the focus groups were female, and the majority had 5–12 years of teaching experience. The majority of the public school teachers were Emirati, whereas all the private school teachers were expatriates from multiple countries, focusing on various curriculums including British, American, Indian, UAE Minister of Education (MOE), and French. The teachers worked in single-gender and mixed-gender schools, from kindergarten through Grade 12.

### **Research Protocol and Procedure**

Participants in the focus groups sessions were recruited by the MOE, Abu Dhabi Education and Knowledge Authority and Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) and were advised that their names and other identifying information would not be included in the report. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. The focus group sessions were recorded and later transcribed for analyses. The protocol for data collection was developed by the authors and focused on six constructs, each with a set of probes to be used as needed by the interviewer. The interviewer had the latitude to add probes during the course of the interviews based on the direction of the conversations. The constructs are as follows:

1. Why they became teachers
2. How teachers teach
3. Challenges teachers encounter in their work
4. How teachers learn
5. Satisfaction/dissatisfaction with teaching as a career
6. Things the teacher would like to change

The teachers’ responses to the probes under each of the constructs were further organized into topics, grouping related responses together in preparation for qualitative coding. The first author then coded the data in Excel and shared it with other authors for comments and verification.

The researcher’s questions and prompts as well as the responses from the participating teachers were transcribed into an appropriate format for coding and organized by constructs. Categories were then developed within each construct to further code responses in Excel, following qualitative research methods documented in the literature (Meyer & Avery, 2009; Ose, 2016).

### **Focus Group Constructs**

The questions asked during the focus groups gave teachers opportunities to share their views about many issues related to their work as teachers in either public or private schools. Focus groups are often used in research studies where the interaction among participants may yield valuable insights (Cavey, 1998; Flick, 2010; Smithson, 2000). Participants not only share their own thoughts but may respond to each other’s comments, thereby enriching the discussion. Constructs were used to organize questions related to particular topics that the authors wanted to explore.

### **Teacher Focus Group Responses**

For each protocol question, the authors first sorted the responses into discrete categories, which provided an initial organizational structure. Each response was sorted into only one category. Then the categories (inclusive of the defining



responses) were clustered to form a smaller, more interpretable set of higher level categories. The higher level categories and representative (sample) responses are presented next. The sample responses may reflect multiple similar responses, as teachers agreed with or added to another teacher's statement during the conversation. Few differences were noted between public and private school teachers' responses. The comments from Emirati teachers in the public schools were similar to those expressed by expatriates in the private schools, including their passion for teaching and desire to grow in the profession, alongside a need for support from their schools and communities.

### **Construct 1: Why they Became Teachers**

Five higher level categories were constructed from analysis of the data. For each category, sample responses are provided.

#### Passion for the Work of Teaching

- “(I love) dealing with children every day. They have a beautiful energy.”
- “I have a passion for teaching and joy in interacting with the students, though I wish I had more time to spend with them.”
- “I feel inspired by the children.”
- “(I enjoy) dealing with human brains, not machines.”
- “Being a teacher allows you to have ongoing change, meeting new people, dealing with different characters and situations.”
- “I believe that teachers play very important roles in preparing future citizens for productive lives in the UAE.”

#### Positive View of Teaching/Teachers

- “It was 18 years ago when I decided to be a teacher, all of my family were so proud! At that time, it was a high status that not many have . . . Today the situation is not the same!”
- “I loved teaching since I was a kid! I used to teach all of my toys once I came am back from school and do that for hours!”

#### Altruistic/Focus on Future Citizens

- “I wanted to be a teacher to give back to our beautiful country and have an influence on the future generations, inspire them and motivate them to continue building what our fathers created.”
- “Influence future generations; teachers have high responsibility towards raising a good citizen.”

#### Unplanned/Change of Plans

- “I didn't chose teaching when I went to college, I studied sciences and when I graduated I got a job opportunity in teaching, so I said why not!”
- “I was recommended by one of my college professors to be a teacher and went along with it.”

#### Focus on Own Family

- “Being able to have a break with my children once they are off, although daily this takes a lot of our time, even at home (teacher & mother).”

### **Construct 1 Discussion**

The most common response category was passion for the work of teaching, followed by positive view of teaching/teachers, altruistic/focus on future citizens, and finally, unplanned/change of plans. The responses suggested that many teachers went into the profession because they believed they would enjoy the process of teaching and working with students. They also enjoyed the stimulation of teaching, working with “human brains, not machines,” as well as the variety of people, activities, and situations that teachers experience in their professional work.

## Construct 2: How Teachers Teach

Six higher-order categories were constructed from analyses of the data.

### *Understanding and Relationship Building*

- Understanding students and building trust.
- Understanding and accepting students' different personalities and capabilities and finding ways to engage them.
- Using stories and games to engage students.
- "I feel concern for students' well-being. My students work hard but have 'test anxiety' and worry about their performance and grades." (private school teacher)

### *Learning Modes*

- Whole group learning, think-pair-and-share.
- Individual work.
- Conversation circles and small groups.
- Peer learning.
- Experiential learning—hands on activities (some have learning spaces for cycle one and others mentioned labs and experiments).
- "I use technology, 'active learning,' experiments, and small and large group discussion activities." (private school teacher)

### *Assessment of Learning*

- Formative assessment
- Summative assessment
- Student self-assessment of their own learning

### *Technology in Support of Student Learning*

- Using computers to support learning—this depends on the school facilities; some schools offer iPads for all class students while others do not.
- Using LMS (learning management system) where students, parents, teachers, and school leadership have access. This supports learning as many of the content goes online as well as homework and projects. Moreover, it has been used for blended learning, teachers flipped classrooms to increase students' engagement.
- (Accessing the Internet) "Wi-Fi is available but not very strong in most schools, the limitations on websites make it difficult to access many resources. Sometimes we use our mobile data hub spot to have that access."
- "We use computers to keep the lesson interesting, so students don't get bored. We see videos, we do activities online, and we do research."

### *Project-Based Learning*

- Students work in small groups to collaborate on projects over days, weeks, or months—not very common.
- Experiential learning and hands-on activities (labs, experiments).

### *Interdisciplinary Learning*

- Students work on assignments or projects that involve multiple subjects, such as mathematics and language, or science and art. This happened after the initiative STREAM took place.

STREAM is a recent project for MOE. It aims to create an educational environment conducive to the development of integrated education in schools to ensure that students have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to learn science, math, engineering, and technology as well as language skills in an integrated manner so they are prepared to participate in the knowledge economy society (Ministry of Education, 2018).

## **Construct 2 Discussion**

As noted above, the most frequent responses in this construct focused on the use of technology in classrooms. Teachers have described myriad uses for technology, including the following:

- keeping lessons interesting
- doing activities online
- conducting research

In addition, technology was used to keep parents and school leaders informed through the learning management system used by some schools. Another use of technology was for “flipped classrooms” where teachers focus on providing students with lessons that are to be done outside the classroom (using iPads, computers, and other Internet-ready technology). The goal is to have students take charge of their own learning and bring questions about what they are studying to the classroom and to the teacher. This enables teachers to create more focused lessons and students to move more quickly to advanced learning in the classroom.

A small number of teachers also described using project-based learning, which gives students greater opportunities for exploring a topic in depth, creating projects that reflect their learning on one or multiple topics, and improving their collaboration skills through working in teams or pairs with other students.

## **Construct 3: Challenges Teachers Encounter in their Work**

### *Career Progression and Assessment of Teaching*

- “There is no clear path for teachers where they can get promoted or get more financial benefits.”
- “We want to have our salary and benefits packages reflect our years of experience.”
- “Teacher assessment is not fair sometimes: I am judged on students’ attendance and grades. Why should I be judged on high student absenteeism?”
- “There must be a better way to provide feedback on my teaching. The current way is outdated. We need advisors and mentors who provide sufficient, practical feedback that would help us improve, not some vague comments that won’t support out progression.”
- “The lack of school leadership support and work stress affects my motivation to continue teaching.”
- “We need more structured professional development and more opportunities to apply knowledge from trainings to the classroom.”

### *Teaching People of Determination/Students with Special Needs*

- “Schools are not ready for the merger of people of determination in schools; we need plenty of support and training.”
- “These students need special attention from all: their peers need to be aware and understand how to deal with them, their teachers need to be trained and ready, the school leadership needs to understand how to create a supportive community for them and their parents.”
- “Having a psychologist, language specialists, etc. are needed as support to all students and special education teachers.”
- “There is no proper curriculum with set learning objectives for people of determination.”
- “Need more teacher assistants working with special education teachers.”

### *Dissatisfaction with Teaching*

- “We are not engaged! We want to take part in developing the curriculum and final tests!”
- “Too much paperwork!”
- “Not enough teachers, making large classes and leaving teachers feeling overwhelmed.”
- “Long working hours and having to take work home.”
- “I don’t feel appreciated by the community, parents, students and even other educators for my hard work.”
- “Teachers do not feel supported and there is no clear process to settle disagreements with students or their parents.”
- “We should measure teachers’ happiness in schools; happy teachers give more, and happiness expands to students and the school community.”
- “Low status of the teaching profession.”

*Teacher Support*

- “Teachers need more school leadership support.”
- “Work stress levels affect our motivation to continue teaching.”
- “We need more structured professional development, more opportunities to apply knowledge from trainings to the classroom, and better access to mentors offering guidance and ‘real’ inspiring teachers.”
- “When I face a challenge, who can I talk to? I am supposed to talk to the school principal only which does not make any sense. As teachers we need mental support, academic support, learning support, and other types of support.”
- “Having an online page or a hotline for teachers would be ideal! Sometimes students come to us with their problems and we want to help, but who should we talk to—of course it depends on their situation. Sometimes we face challenges in speaking about a specific topic and need guidance or feedback. Who is the expert who will provide us with that guidance?”

*Curriculum*

- “Students are not interested in or have difficulty focusing on required curriculum and textbooks. There is a high load on students which makes them lose focus—so many tests, assessments, and projects.”
- “Content can be theoretical and there is a need for practical learning which will increase students’ engagement and interest.”
- “When we see the exams, we are surprised! There is not a proper link between the curriculum department and the assessment department.”

*Student Behaviors and Attitudes*

- “Some schools have large numbers of students in the classroom (32–35). This makes me less focused as a teacher and I can’t differentiate learning.”
- “Some students may disrupt learning because they have learning difficulties—the system is still not clear about how we define learning difficulties and identify students who have them.”
- “I suffer from student absenteeism and get little support from parents.”
- “The pressure on students to succeed impacts the student-teacher relationship.”

*Parental Support*

- “Some parents do not provide sufficient support and encouragement for children’s learning time at home. Some parents want to, but don’t know how!”
- “There is a need for a ‘parents’ awareness campaign.’ They need to know that we are partners in this journey and are not against their children’s’ success!”
- “Communication with parents needs improvement! Many parents do not check their email or do not have one, making it difficult to communicate.”

*School Leadership*

- “Some school leaders seldom take time to support and encourage teachers.”
- “Some school leaders put an extra burden on teachers by requiring teachers to do administrative tasks that the leaders should be doing.”

*Online Platforms*

- “Teachers are assessed on the time spent on the learning platform which is a burden and unfair! I might spend fewer hours but have high focus in the classroom.”

**Construct 3 Discussion**

The comments from teachers in Construct 3 were the most varied, suggesting that teachers find different things challenging. From career progression to motivation to managing technology, teachers encounter challenges in their daily work and throughout their careers. The most frequent responses focused on satisfaction with various relationships that are part

of teaching, from absent students to parents who are not supportive to school leaders who fail to provide encouragement to teachers. Although many teachers responded with reasons that they were not fully satisfied with teaching as a career, one teacher acknowledged that there were problems but had a positive response overall: “Yes, the community does not show appreciation, nor do we have good status. For me, I see the appreciation in my students. We play a role in forming our status as a teacher. We should be proud to be teachers and others will sense it.”

#### **Construct 4: How Teachers Learn**

##### *Professional Development*

- “MOE is providing plenty of training opportunities for teachers. We saw a big improvement in these offerings. The challenge is in customizing trainings according to different teachers’ needs. ‘One size fits all does’ not work!”
- “MOE recently launched learning communities (more than 193 across the country) where a small group of teachers from similar schools close to each other have professional development sessions. It’s a platform for teachers to both learn and share their knowledge.”
- “Teachers want to have the opportunity to learn from each other through observation and feedback with their teacher colleagues.”
- “We want mentoring and professional development led by good trainers.”
- “We like meeting together and receiving peer reviews of their teaching practice.”

##### *Independent Study*

- “We use TED talks, look at inspiring teachers on social media, and read books to learn.”
- Teachers report that they use the Internet to find new or supplemental instructional and/or assessment materials. Many teachers depend on each other and share documents through Telegram (social media platform commonly used by UAE educators).
- “I spend hours online searching for different ways to engage my students or finding a suitable video that would simplify a science lesson.”

#### **Construct 4 Discussion**

In the UAE, as well as most other countries, teachers have two main modes of professional learning: professional development (usually provided by the school or district/city) and independent study, which often takes the form of searching the Internet for information or identifying reading and materials on a process or subject and working through it on one’s own. In some countries, teachers form study groups with teachers in their local area or with teachers they connect with on the Internet. The responses indicated that most teachers are working independently to further their knowledge, though the advent of more than 193 learning communities for teachers across the UAE may provide increased support for professional learning, whether school based or independent.

#### **Construct 5: Satisfaction with Teaching as a Career**

Teachers were asked, “What would make you more likely to stay in teaching? To leave teaching?” As educated professionals, teachers may choose to pursue other careers if they determine that teaching is not meeting their needs, whether personal, financial, or family related. In the following responses, teachers discuss what makes teaching worthwhile (their motivation to stay in the profession), as well as what makes teaching frustrating (their motivation to leave the profession). Six higher order categories were constructed.

##### *Best Days as a Teacher—Selected Responses*

- “My best day is when students have an ‘Aha!’ moment, especially if it was a challenging concept for the student.”
- “When one of my students reaches their potential and goals in life and contacts me to share this.”
- “My students who are now in university call me from time to time to thank me and tell me about their successes and say that I inspired them.”

*Worst Days as a Teacher*

- “When I give so much time focusing on a specific concept and then see students’ low performance on the exam, it breaks my heart!”
- “When I have a discussion with a parent who is difficult and not supportive of my efforts.”

*Changing Careers*

- “We stay because we believe that we play very important roles in preparing future citizens for productive lives in the UAE.” (public school teacher)
- “Some teachers said they want to stay in education but not as a teacher; they like the idea of administrative staff at the Ministry.”
- “I love teaching; it’s my passion and I would never change it for the world! Seeing students every day is a blessing. I love dealing with them and they keep me motivated!”
- “I love teaching but hate the burden; this makes me worried and stressed which is not healthy.”
- “There are limited advancement opportunities because of the expectation that my tenure in the school will be short.” (private school teacher)

*Satisfaction with Teaching Salary*

- “The salary is good, but the extra benefits are not as great as those in other careers.” (public school teacher)
- “Better salaries should be given to teachers based on their competencies and performance.”
- “I work the same hours or maybe more than teachers in other schools do but there is a huge difference in salaries.” (private school teacher)

*What Would Make You More Likely to Leave Teaching?*

- “Burden of tasks, long working hours, no appreciation.”

*What Would Make You More Likely to Stay in Teaching?*

- “My students!”

**Construct 5 Discussion**

The best outcomes for teachers appear to be when their students contact them to share their successes, such as when they achieve “life successes” like acceptance into college or starting out in the career they worked for. In addition, contributing to students’ knowledge and understanding of the subject being taught also stands out, such as a student’s “aha!” moment mentioned by a teacher. It is the desire to see their students succeed that makes some teachers stay in their career. However, there are also low points, particularly the realities of teacher responsibilities: long hours spent in burdensome tasks such as preparation and grading, the stressful nature of their work, and little appreciation for their efforts. Fortunately, for many teachers the benefits of teaching—the joy of seeing students learn and succeed—outweigh the negative aspects.

**Construct 6: Things Teachers Would Like to Change**

Teachers were asked about things they would like to change. Their responses focus on assessments—both assessments of students and assessments of their teaching, as well as responsibilities as a teacher and the types of professional development that they would like to see.

*Student Assessments*

- “There are a lot of student assessments! We want to see students happy and enjoying school, but they can’t enjoy learning because of the large number of assessments they are required to take.”
- “I think we should measure students’ growth, creativity, and mental health—the whole personality of a child. The well-being of students is as important as academic success.”
- “We saw a KHDA report on students’ wellbeing. It was eye-opening for us and we thank them for it!”

*Teacher Assessments*

- “I don’t like the current way of assessing teachers (observations by school leaders). I want to be comfortable teaching the class as I usually do, but I can’t when they are observing.”

*Teacher Responsibilities*

- “Reduce teacher responsibilities so that we can give more to the students.”
- “The academic requirements for students are heavy and the curriculum coverage is broad, meaning considerable preparation time is expected from us, in addition to regular classroom hours, reviewing homework and tests, meeting with parents, etc.”

*Professional Development*

- “Professional development needs to be different. The current programs and sessions are not preparing teachers for the topics of today. Students face different challenges and are living in a different era. Teachers need the tools to be ready to work with today’s students.”
- “Why not focus professional development on positive psychology which focuses on happiness, well-being, and flourishing? This will give us a better understanding of the children and they will enjoy class more.”

**Construct 6 Discussion**

Teachers have many things they would like to change, such as professional development that provides teachers with “the tools to be ready to work with today’s students.” Teachers also have concerns about assessments for students as well as how teacher performance is assessed. Also, some teachers feel that other school responsibilities detract from their primary role of teaching their students.

**Conclusions**

Overall, views from UAE teachers were very similar to those expressed by teachers from other advanced countries, as represented in the research literature. They expressed the same desires to grow and learn in the teaching profession, to collaborate with other teachers (Ma et al., 2018), and to be supported in those efforts by their schools. Research supports this view of teachers as learners—longing for and appreciating opportunities to increase their effectiveness. A recent study of expatriate teachers’ organizational commitment explored “how expatriate teachers’ organizational commitment is affected by school social environment including leadership, workplace support, and interpersonal relationships, controlling for a wide range of individual, organizational and district factors” (Yang et al., 2018, p. 34). The authors concluded that the expatriate teachers’ motivations are shaped by social mechanisms such as interpersonal support and supportive work climates. Another study that focused on science teachers found that collaborating with colleagues and participating in professional development activities leads to greater teacher satisfaction compared with teachers who lack those opportunities (Mostafa, 2018). In the present study, we found that teachers are eager to grow and learn and are deeply committed to their students’ learning. Moreover, participants in our study truly cared for their students’ growth, happiness, and well-being. The teachers wanted to be appreciated and acknowledged for their hard work and commitment, and the majority had no plans to leave the profession. In summary, participating focus group teachers in both public and private schools were eager to improve and to learn and wished for additional opportunities to interact with and learn from other teachers, as well as receiving support from mentors or lead teachers.

**Next Steps**

In developing possible strategies to support teachers in the UAE, it may be important to consider a division of responsibility between the school system and policy makers. School systems might devote resources to providing regular professional development opportunities, school leadership training, classroom observation and feedback from fellow teachers, as well as opportunities for collaboration between parents and teachers and within the teaching community. Policy makers may best focus on teacher recruitment and hiring practices to support teachers who are trained to work with student populations identified as underserved; teacher assessment protocols and practices; and policy changes regarding the profession

as a whole. For example, teachers are seeking more opportunities to update their knowledge of their subject, learn new teaching methods, improve their use of technology in the classroom, and enhance their teaching practice. Paid release time or semesters off might allow teachers to pursue college-level coursework as long as they committed to acting as a resource to other teachers in the school who wanted to improve their knowledge. In general, teachers were in favor of reduced teacher loads, which would allow them to finish their work at school rather than at home, or to meet with other teachers for collaboration and professional development activities. Increasing opportunities for teachers' collaboration and professional growth would help to provide needed support to teachers in the UAE as they work to promote optimal educational outcomes for students.

## Moving Forward

It may be useful to focus on two separate levels of the school system in developing possible strategies to support teachers in the UAE so that they will be most effective in their important roles of preparing students for their futures as productive and valued citizens in the UAE. It is also important to determine which level of the education system is best positioned to address teachers' concerns, as noted below.

- Teachers' concerns that are within the purview of the school system
  - School leadership training (to better support teachers)
  - Professional development opportunities to improve content knowledge or learn new teaching strategies
  - Opportunities for teachers to observe and provide feedback to each other
  - Schoolwide behavioral guidelines for students jointly determined by school leaders, teachers, and parents
  - Support and training for teachers in managing challenging student behavior
  - Support and training for teachers in working with parents and the community to enhance student learning opportunities both in and out of the classroom
- Teachers' concerns that may be addressed at the level of regulators/policy makers
  - Need to hire and/or train additional special education teachers to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met
  - Develop teacher assessment protocols (such as the Danielson Framework for Teaching) that provide teachers and those who assess them with a better understanding of what good teaching is. Note that the Danielson Framework is widely used in the United States and many other countries and is freely available on the internet. The framework can be adapted with care to ensure that the measure is valid for use in UAE schools, though appropriate training should be provided for observers and calibration of observers should be done to ensure consistency in scoring. In addition, differences in expectations of teachers in the UAE may need to be taken into account in ensuring that the framework is fair and provides useful information to both teachers and schools leaders that will guide decisions about professional development and other types of support that may be needed.

The expectation of the authors of this paper is that the information reported herein will serve as a catalyst for future conversations about how to better assure that UAE teachers are treated as professionals and perform as such and that they have access to professional growth and development opportunities to support them in enhancing their knowledge and teaching practices, so that they and their students achieve success. The findings from this study may generate and foster discussions and related actions around the following:

- Supporting teachers' professional development: sharing findings with school leaders and teachers so that they can discuss strategies for identifying and implementing professional growth opportunities
- Providing school leaders with improved understanding of how teachers perceive their work and creating opportunities for leaders and teachers to codevelop ways to address areas of concern
- Developing professional development materials that could be used by teachers, facilitators and school leaders to address some of the most frequently mentioned and most pressing concerns expressed by teachers in the focus groups
- Creating opportunities for collaboration between parents and teachers



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