


March 2023

## Perceptions of leadership styles in international special and general education schools in the United Arab Emirates

Kaitlin M. Jackson

University of Kentucky, kaitlin.mccahan@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jger>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [International and Comparative Education Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

This Refereed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the M3 Center at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Global Education and Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Jackson, K. M. (2023). Perceptions of leadership styles in international special and general education schools in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Global Education and Research*, 7(1), 34-49. <https://www.doi.org/10.5038/2577-509X.7.1.1211>

### Corresponding Author

Kaitlin M. Jackson, 8816 Cochran Court, Wake Forest, NC 27587

### Revisions

Submission date: Nov. 16, 2020; 1st Revision: Mar. 22, 2021; 2nd Revision: May 19, 2021; 3rd Revision: Oct. 22, 2021; Acceptance: Dec. 2, 2021

# Perceptions of Leadership Styles in International Special and General Education Schools in the United Arab Emirates

Kaitlin M. Jackson

The College of Education  
University of Kentucky, United States  
kaitlin.mccahan@gmail.com

## Abstract

Given that school leadership styles are linked to educational outcomes, this study attempted to identify perceived leadership styles of school leaders in two types of schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE): (a) international special education schools, which serve exclusively students with disabilities and (b) international general education schools, which serve primarily typically developing students. By utilizing primarily quantitative methods with supplementary qualitative analysis, this study also explored the influence of teacher demographic variables on perceptions of leadership styles. Results indicated a difference in perceptions of transformational and transactional leadership by school type based on teacher education level, as well as a difference in perceptions of passive-avoidant leadership by school type based on total years of experience with the school leader. Results also indicated a difference in leadership perceptions based on teacher nationality (consistent with the notions of collectivist and individualist cultures), total years of experience, and total years of experience in the current position. This study contributes to the knowledge base regarding the influence of teacher demographic variables on leadership perceptions while providing practical recommendations for school leaders and researchers, including professional development, school policy development, and conceptualizing culture as an expanded demographic variable of interest.

**Keywords:** international schools, special education schools, educational leadership, transformational leadership, Middle East, United Arab Emirates

## Introduction

Over the past decades, countries around the world have made great progress in creating more inclusive educational environments for children with disabilities. Despite periods of conflict, special education stakeholders around the world have been largely successful in positively influencing both social and political forces to support more inclusive environments for individuals with disabilities (Mithout, 2016; Powell, 2009; U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2018). The study of international special education may be closely linked to a study of leadership within special education settings, as school leaders are ultimately held responsible for student achievement and overall school success (Lashley, 2007). Recent growth in the population of children with disabilities—and subsequent demand for educational services for this group of children—heightens awareness of the need to study the nature and direction of leadership in both

general and special education settings. This study was an investigation into perceptions of leadership styles in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the population of children with disabilities and the availability of international schools have seen tremendous growth in recent decades. Using primarily quantitative methods with supplementary qualitative data, the study explored teacher perceptions of leadership styles in two school types: (a) international special education schools, which serve exclusively students with disabilities, and (b) international general education schools, which are traditional international schools largely serving typically developing children with a smaller population of special education students.

### ***Purpose of Study***

This study attempted to identify perceptions of leadership styles within international general and special education schools in order to provide practitioners and scholars with the tools to prepare future international school leaders. The purpose of this study was threefold:

- To identify perceived leadership styles across top-level leaders of international special education schools in the UAE,
- To identify perceived leadership styles across top-level leaders of international general education schools in the UAE, and
- To identify differences in perceived leadership styles based on teacher demographic variables (e.g., gender, years of experience, nationality, and the highest level of completed education).

### ***Background and Context***

Educational growth in the Middle East materialized first with the region's religious growth, then through the economic surge, and finally through relationships with more developed Western nations. Despite the geographic diversity of the Middle East, the widespread growth and prevalence of Islam has remained constant throughout the region's history, and the current education systems remain heavily tied to religious teaching.

#### ***Education in the Middle East***

Prior to European colonization during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, education in the Middle East was primarily rooted in Qur'anic instruction (Akkari, 2015). During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the discovery of fossil fuels helped to establish the Middle East as a functioning economy independent of foreign influence and control (Jackson & Jackson, 2020). As realization grew that an economy based on non-renewable fossil fuels is detrimental to the long-term prosperity and well-being of its people, formal education systems began to emerge (Jackson & Jackson, 2020). Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, education was increasingly viewed as an essential investment in human development (Chapman & Miric, 2009). Consequently, a knowledge-based economy, developed through continuous investment in education, has helped the region become globally competitive regardless of its oil production status (Ahmed, 2011). Special education in the Middle East has a short history but has quickly developed into a formalized system to serve individuals with disabilities across the region. Although no unifying formal laws regulating special education currently exist, many countries have recently developed initiatives that either address the need for legislation or declare policies related to education and ethics (Gaad, 2001). Some countries have passed legislation surrounding

the protection of this population, and others have mandated the equal access and enrollment in education (Gaad, 2001). Research on special education in the Middle East has recently heavily focused on inclusion, access to educational resources, and changing societal views toward individuals with disabilities (Alghazo & Gaad, 2004; Bataineh & Alsagheer, 2012; Bradshaw, 2009).

### *Education in the UAE*

Education in the UAE developed through four phases that closely mirror the history of education in the Middle East region but in a more condensed timespan (Jackson & Jackson, 2020). Moving from small, community-like circles of Qur'anic instruction to semi-organized, informal classrooms to a formal, gender-segregated education system, the current UAE education system and curriculum were modeled after those in other countries including America and Finland as a way to establish international recognition of their education system (Ahmed, 2011). Special education in the UAE is a recent phenomenon that followed the passage of legislation that outlined certain protections for individuals with disabilities, who are referred to as *People of Determination*. Although children are being increasingly served in the general education environment (in government, private, and international schools), a large percentage of students with disabilities continue to be served in separate schools or clinical centers depending on the depth of their needs. Given the increasing number of students with disabilities, schools in the UAE are tasked with providing educational services in settings of relative restrictiveness based on the children's developmental level. Nonetheless, several challenges remain that limit access to special education services, including a lack of financial resources, a persisting social stigma, a lack of prevalence data, a lack of qualified teachers, and a clash between the individualized nature of special education with the collectivist culture of the UAE. Although the UAE has made significant strides in providing an opportunity for all children with disabilities to receive an education, especially through the passage of formal legislation and outlined educational protections and provisions (UAE Government, 2021), further reform is needed to ensure access to inclusion settings in all school environments (e.g., government, private, and international schools).

### *Special Education Service Delivery*

Historically in the Middle East, students with disabilities were excluded from general education settings. However, changes in legislation and shifts in the social mindset of the nation have changed the predominant, separate service-delivery model for exceptional students to inclusion with the general education population (UAE Government, 2021). Notwithstanding, there are students whose needs exceed what general education settings can provide and instead attend a school that serves only students with disabilities (Kauffman et al., 2018). The fundamental difference between these two setting types is the student population, which drives the differences in service delivery models and methods.

The first type of school exclusively serves special education students, who are taught in smaller classes using individualized curriculum and close leader supervision. The second type of school primarily serves typically developing students with a small percentage of special education students, which is typically referred to as a traditional school but is referred to as a general education school for clearer delineation and comparison to special education for the purposes of the present study. These differences in school types result in differences in staffing patterns,

leadership structures, curriculum, pedagogical techniques, behavior management, and classroom organization. In the UAE, these two school types are offered by private, international, and government (public or local) schools. Government schools are only available to Emirati national students and are funded by the government. Private schools are available to any student (national or expatriate), are funded by student tuition, and are largely separated by educational focus or nationality. International schools are also available to any student (national or expatriate), are funded by student tuition, and often utilize English-centered curriculum. These schools often serve a multinational student population by a multinational staff and are operated by an independent governance organization.

In the present study, the research sites were international schools in nature based on the international, English-focused curriculum, multinational student population, and independent governance (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). Although the schools were overseen by local educational agencies, they operated outside of the realm of a traditional government (public) school by following their own curriculum under independent governing structures (e.g., executive leadership team or board of trustees), as is common with international schools (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). The international special education schools served only students with disabilities using individualized small group instruction, while the international general education schools served primarily typically developing students with a smaller percentage of atypically developing students.

## **Literature Review**

The post-industrial view of leadership (Rost, 1991) reflects changes that are a culmination of the efforts of leadership scholars, including Bass (1999), Burns (1978), and Foster (1989); and focuses on including all individuals in a collaborative, respectful manner; and places imminent value on relationships. Transformational leadership has emerged over recent decades as an embodiment of relational leadership that incorporates notions of coaching, supporting individuals, and exemplifying the accomplishment of organizational goals (Bass, 1999; Foster, 1989).

### ***Transformational Leadership***

Bass (1985) described transformational leadership by attaching measurable terms and concepts based on how leadership influences followers' motivation and performance. Transformational leaders often attempt to connect followers' sense of identity and individual goals to the mission and values of the organization, while also using their knowledge of followers' strengths and weaknesses to assign appropriate tasks and duties (Foster, 1989). Although Bass (1985) also asserted that a leader could display traits of both transformational and transactional leadership simultaneously, he described the differences between both styles in considerable detail.

Bass (1985) described four elements of transformational leaders to better understand specific behaviors and traits that align with this leadership style:

- **Individualized consideration:** Transformational leaders utilize individualized consideration, listen to followers' concerns, and provide empathy to build trusting relationships. They maintain open lines of communication and celebrate individual growth and successes.

- Intellectual stimulation: Transformational leaders employ intellectual stimulation by encouraging new ideas, challenging followers' assumptions, inspiring intellectual risk-taking, and fostering independence among their followers.
- Inspirational motivation: To develop employee skills, transformational leaders develop inspirational motivation by supporting and engaging with their staff, focusing on future goals, and providing meaning for current tasks.
- Idealized influence: Transformational leaders serve as an idealized influence and act as a role model of ethical behavior to gain respect and trust. Transformational leaders are seen to earn respect by exemplifying high moral values as organizational challenges and struggles arise.

### ***Transactional Leadership***

Transactional leaders are often thought to resemble the industrial view of managers since they are focused on completing tasks, emphasizing staff obedience, increasing organizational efficiency, and maximizing profit (Foster, 1989). They are also inclined to utilize extrinsic motivation techniques, especially rewards and punishments, to motivate employees to achieve organizational objectives and goals (Bass, 1999). As task-oriented and directive individuals, transactional leaders tend to exchange tangible rewards for employees' work and loyalty, rather than appealing to higher-level, intrinsic, intellectual needs. Transactional leaders may view employees as incompetent and self-centered (Kowalski, 2013). Transactional leaders are also likely to engage in management by exception, a concept that describes individual propensity to maintain the status quo and intervene via corrective action when subordinates do not achieve expected performance levels (Bass, 1999).

### ***Passive-Avoidant Leadership***

Passive-avoidant leadership style is characterized by the active avoidance of decision making and involvement in a leadership role, so these individuals tend to complete organizational tasks and work without interacting with employees or responding to concerns (Bass, 1999). Leaders who exhibit passive-avoidant leadership tend to shy away from making decisions and responding to urgent matters, and ultimately refrain from maintaining an active presence in the organization. These individuals often engage in a very hands-off approach and choose to have relatively little interaction with staff in favor of completing tasks instead (Bass, 1999). Leaders who engage in passive-avoidant leadership will not seek or create professional development opportunities for staff or provide rewards when they achieve organizational goals but will instead avoid confrontation and interaction with staff.

### ***Leadership in the UAE***

Many elements of transformational leadership, such as inspiring a shared vision, are relevant and consistent with the collectivist nature of Emirati culture. However, other factors appear to be more in line with transactional leadership (Litz & Scott, 2016). Litz and Scott's (2016) findings suggest that while transformational leadership is a promising model of leadership, transactional leadership style is more prevalent among Emirati principals. However, these findings shed light on the influence of the vast number of expatriate teachers which may contribute to cultural differences in perceptions of behavior (Litz & Scott, 2016). Consequently, these findings may not be fully

reflective of leadership perceptions in international schools due to the cultural discrepancies between Emirati government and expatriate international school leaders. Further research findings have identified discrepancies between teacher perceptions and principal self-perceptions in relational elements of leadership, including demand reconciliation and role assumption, as well as transactional elements, including production emphasis (Al-Shaibani, 2000). Further, these findings exposed differences in teacher perceptions of leadership based on the education and training level of principals. In particular, UAE principals with higher levels of training were perceived as being more tolerant of uncertainty, which suggests differences in relational elements of leadership based on school leader education level (Al-Shaibani, 2000). Although this body of literature does not focus exclusively on prevalent leadership styles, the findings regarding the disparities between teacher perceptions and self-perceptions provide valuable context for leadership in UAE schools.

Other studies suggest that attempts to incorporate relevant values into leadership curriculum at the university level in the UAE, including Middle Eastern cultural values and Islamic teachings, have been largely unsuccessful (El-Kaleh, 2019). As a result, many leadership programs in the fields of management and education continue to be heavily influenced by Western models of leadership (El-Kaleh, 2019). With UAE leaders being trained in university programs based largely on Western ideals, leadership within UAE organizations in management and education may consequently resemble Western philosophies. Given the diversity of the UAE's population and Western influence in the country's origins, other studies have explored the role of cultural intelligence in leadership styles of UAE school leaders. These findings suggest that cultural intelligence, which purportedly improves an individual's ability to interact with people in other cultures, influences the school leaders' abilities to adapt their leadership styles to diverse school settings (Aldhaheri, 2017). In schools as diverse as UAE international schools, school leaders' abilities to adapt and lead a multicultural staff prove to be beneficial.

## **Methods**

A causal-comparative research design using survey methods was used since the primary goal of the study centered on identifying the cause of differences that may exist in leadership behaviors between two groups of individuals (Fraenkel et al., 2015). The variables of interest included the independent variable, or differing factor (i.e., international general education school or international special education school) with the dependent variable being leadership style (i.e., transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant). The teacher demographic variables in the current study included the following: (a) highest level of completed education; (b) total years of experience in the education field; (b) total years of experience in current position; (d) total years of experience working with designated leader; (e) nationality; and (f) gender.

## ***Sampling***

Purposive sampling was used to identify research sites based on criteria for both research sites (schools) and participants (teachers). The research site criteria were set based on location, school type, governance, leadership structure, student population, and staff population. The participant criteria were set based on placement at one of the research sites and role within the school. The broader population included any teacher employed at an international general or international special education school in the UAE in the Middle East, and the study's sample included the teachers of four international special education schools and four international general education

schools in four UAE cities (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Fujairah, and Al Ain). All eight schools were recruited utilizing the same recruitment methods, by contacting top-level school leaders directly or the front office staff.

### ***Instrument and Data Collection***

Avolio and Bass (2004) developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to identify and measure behaviors aligned with transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership. The most recent iteration, the 5X-Short Rater Form containing 45 items addressing nine subscales on a Likert scale (Likert, 1932), was used in the current study (Avolio & Bass, 2004) paired with additional demographic items. Of the nine subscales, five align with transformational leadership: inspirational motivation, idealized influence (attribute), idealized influence (behavior), intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Two subscales align with transactional leadership: contingent reward and management by exception (active). Two subscales align with passive-avoidant leadership: management by exception (passive) and laissez-faire. The instrument was administered in both English and Arabic upon completion of back-translation procedures to ensure consistency of meaning. The Arabic translation was provided by Alsayed et al. (2012), who translated, administered, and validated the instrument in Palestine. The instrument also contained two open-ended questions concerning school leaders' perceived strengths and areas of improvement. The instrument was disseminated via top-level school leaders to protect teacher anonymity. Participants received three emails over a four-week period to complete the online survey.

### ***Data Analysis***

Utilizing the scoring procedures set forth in the MLQ manual, the author produced the means for each subscale and then compared them to the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile benchmark norm provided by Avolio & Bass (2004). Data preparation included visual inspection of the data, coding, and collapsing of variables into sufficient subgroups and eliminating blank or excessively incomplete responses. Two Little's Missing Completely at Random tests were performed on the initial and usable samples, both of which confirmed the missing data were missing completely at random (Field, 2017). Data analysis also included assumptions testing, frequencies of demographic characteristics of the sample, descriptive statistics, and hierarchical linear modeling. Hierarchical linear modeling was used to determine if statistically significant differences existed between the eight school sites for each leadership style score while controlling for teacher variables and taking school type into account (Field, 2017). The open-ended data were reviewed deductively, organized by the nine categories (represented by the nine MLQ subscales), and sorted by school. The sorted data was then reviewed by individual category across each of the four schools within the two school types, and finally reviewed by individual category across the two school types to better understand overall consistencies and inconsistencies in school type. A total of 218 usable responses were collected (101 respondents at the international special education schools and 117 respondents at the international general education schools), providing an overall response rate of 42%. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample, disaggregated by school type.



**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Variable	Special Education Schools		General Education Schools		Overall	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Male	26	26	36	31	62	28
Female	75	74	81	69	156	72
Highest level of completed education						
Bachelor's degree	31	31	58	50	89	41
Some graduate coursework/currently enrolled in program	24	24	13	11	37	17
Graduate degree	46	46	46	39	92	42
Total years of experience in education						
0-3 years	20	20	11	9	31	14
4-5 years	16	16	12	10	28	13
6-7 years	27	27	15	13	42	19
8 or more years	38	38	79	68	117	54
Total years of experience in current position						
0-2 years	41	41	50	43	91	42
3-4 years	29	29	18	15	47	22
5 or more years	21	21	48	41	79	36
Total years working with the designated school leader						
0-2 years	42	42	82	70	124	57
3-4 years	31	31	29	25	60	28
5 or more years	28	28	6	5	34	16
Nationality						
UK (England, Ireland)	7	7	8	7	15	7
Europe (Spain, Greece, Romania)	3	3	6	5	9	4
South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan)	15	15	11	9	26	12
Philippines	8	8	15	13	23	11
Middle East and Africa	32	32	54	37	86	39
North America (USA, Canada)	36	36	21	18	57	26
Central and South America (Honduras, Mexico)	0	0	2	2	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>		<b>117</b>		<b>218</b>	

### Open-Ended Question Analysis

To analyze data obtained from the two open-ended questions, categorizing strategies were used, including coding and thematic analysis. A deductive coding frame aligned to the MLQ survey items was used (Avolio & Bass, 2004), based on the three leadership styles included as dependent variables. The nine categories included the nine MLQ subscales of the quantitative survey items. Categorical coding matrices were used to sort the open-ended qualitative data according to leadership style and corresponding traits based on the study's theoretical framework, which included the pre-existing MLQ subscale categories (Maxwell, 2013). Open-ended data from the first question regarding leader strengths contributed to the enhanced understanding of quantitative data to support the notion of prevalent leadership styles, while open-ended data from the second question regarding leader areas of improvement contributed by comparing the descriptive data with instrument responses for consistency of ratings. The coding and categorizing strategies were used to generate common themes and discrepancies to better understand teacher perceptions of leadership across two school types.

### Results

The following sections present the study results, aggregated by school type.

#### *International Special Education Schools*

Based on teacher perceptions, three of the four international *special* education school leaders aligned with transformational leadership style, based the highest score from the teacher surveys,

with a mean of 3.02 out of a possible 4. The same three school leaders received the second highest ranking in transactional leadership with a mean score of 2.86. The fourth school leader mainly aligned with transactional leadership style (3.09) and received the second highest score in transformational leadership (2.92). All four school leaders received the lowest ranking in passive-avoidant leadership with a mean score of .79. Three school leaders received the highest scores for the inspirational motivation subscale under transformational leadership, and the fourth school leader received the highest score for the contingent reward subscale under transactional leadership. All four special education school leaders received the lowest scores for the laissez-faire subscale under passive-avoidant leadership.

### *Open-Ended Data*

Based on both the qualitative and quantitative data, the results indicate that the special education teachers perceive their school leaders as both transformational and transactional to varying degrees. Of the 101 special education schoolteachers, 35 (35%) provided responses to the open-ended questions. It is worth noting, however, that the special education teacher sample did not provide descriptive data related to individualized consideration or intellectual stimulation. Paired with the low scores for these subscales, these data collectively may indicate the related traits are areas of improvement for the special education school leaders. School leaders were frequently perceived as being approachable, kind, goal-driven, and inspiring. School leaders were praised for motivating teachers to achieve school goals and focusing on student needs. Approximately half of the responses that aligned to transformational leadership included a description of the school leaders being enthusiastic and motivating, and one respondent described their school leader as being “dedicated to the mission of the establishment.” Both the high scores of the quantitative data and the descriptive data indicate these traits and behaviors may be areas of strength of the special education school leaders. Further, school leaders were perceived in ways that aligned with transactional leadership to varying degrees. Specifically, some respondents felt school leaders provided recognition and rewards for their achievements, while others felt this was an area of improvement. School leaders were also perceived in ways that aligned with low levels of passive-avoidant leadership, including quick and responsive decision-making as well as attending to issues when they arose rather than avoiding problems.

### *International General Education Schools*

Based on teacher perceptions, the four international *general* education school leaders aligned with transformational leadership style, based the highest score from the teacher surveys, with a mean of 3.26 out of a possible 4. The school leaders received the second highest ranking in transactional leadership with a mean of 2.83 and the lowest ranking in passive-avoidant leadership with a mean of .67. The school leaders received the highest scores for the inspirational motivation subscale under transformational leadership. All four general education school leaders received the lowest scores for the laissez-faire subscale under passive-avoidant leadership.

### *Open-Ended Data*

Of the 117 general education schoolteachers, 83 (71%) of them provided responses to the open-ended questions. The researcher discovered that general education teachers perceived strengths in similar ways as special education teachers and in ways that aligned with transformational

leadership largely surrounding personality traits. School leaders were frequently perceived as being approachable, kind, goal-focused, and motivating and were praised for providing opportunities for professional growth and treating teachers as individuals. One respondent described their school leader as *working relentlessly for the good of the students* and referred to them as *a visionary*. Another respondent described their school leader as, “the type of leader that makes you want to work hard and go the extra mile.” School leaders were praised for giving feedback in a constructive manner, and one respondent stated their school leader “gives [their] talent and passion a chance to be utilized.” Further, school leaders were perceived in ways that aligned with transactional leadership. Specifically, some respondents felt school leaders celebrated their achievements. School leaders were also perceived in ways that aligned with low levels of passive-avoidant leadership, including quick and fair decision-making.

### ***Both School Types***

Across all eight schools (and both school types), teachers perceived consistent strengths in both the quantitative and qualitative data. Under transformational leadership, inspirational motivation, idealized influence (attribute), and idealized influence (behavior) produced the highest means among the transformational subscales, while individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation produced the lowest. Under transactional leadership, contingent reward produced the highest score, and management by exception (active) produced the lowest score. Under passive-avoidant leadership, management by exception (passive) produced the highest score, and laissez-faire produced the lowest score. The open-ended data related to idealized influence (attribute), idealized influence (behavior), and inspirational motivation were highly similar across both school types. Given that these three subscales produced the highest scores across both school types (and all eight schools), these supplementary data paired with the quantitative data suggest these are areas of strength for the school leaders. Further, the open-ended data related to intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration were only relevant to the general education teacher sample, despite the fact that these two subscales produced the lowest scores across both school types. However, the qualitative data may suggest areas of improvement for the special education schools in particular. Statistical significance was found between school type (i.e., international special or general education school) and transformational leadership style. Regardless of education level, special education schoolteachers perceived their school leaders as slightly less transformational than general education teachers. However, general education schoolteachers’ perceptions of transformational leadership were influenced by their education level. General education schoolteachers with some graduate coursework perceived their school leaders as more transformational than those with a bachelor’s degree, and general education schoolteachers with a graduate degree perceived their school leaders as less transformational than those with some graduate coursework ( $p = .013$ ).

Statistical significance was also found between school type and transactional leadership style. Teachers at general education schools with a bachelor’s degree or some graduate coursework perceived their school leaders as more transactional than teachers at general education schools with a graduate degree as well as teachers at special education schools, regardless of their degree status. Thus, school type influenced perceptions of higher transactional leadership in the general education schools for those with a non-graduate degree or coursework. However, school type did not have an influence for special education schoolteachers. Last, statistical significance was found in perceptions of passive-avoidant leadership and school type between teachers with two years of

experience with the school leader. Specifically, general education schoolteachers who had two years or five or more years of experience with the school leader perceived their school leaders as more passive-avoidant than special education schoolteachers with the same amount of experience with the school leader. In sum, general education schoolteachers perceived their school leaders as exhibiting more passive-avoidant leadership as the years of experience with the school leader increased, while special education schoolteachers perceived their school leaders as exhibiting less passive-avoidant leadership as the years of experience with the school leader increased. Table 2 presents the results of the hierarchical linear modeling.

**Table 2.** Hierarchical Linear Model Results

Effect	Transformational	Transactional	Passive-Avoidant
<b>Fixed effects</b>			
<i>Intercept</i>	3.09 (.06)	2.79 (.09)	.81 (.11)
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	-.14 (.09)	-.11 (.09)	.02 (.10)
<i>Nationality</i>			
Middle East/Africa	.35 (.10)	.32 (.12) **	.00 (.12)
Europe	.20 (.11) *	.47 (.15) **	.16 (.16)
Asia	.30 (.14) **	.65 (.14) ***	-.00 (.15)
<i>Education Level</i>			
Some graduate	-.09 (.12)	-.07 (.12)	.06 (.13)
Grad degree	-.06 (.10)	-.12 (.10)	.09 (.11)
<i>Years in Education</i>			
6-10 years	.22 (.11) *	.28 (.11) **	-.06 (.13)
11 or more years	.14 (.12)	.05 (.12)	-.09 (.14)
<i>Years in Position</i>			
2-3 years	.05 (.14)	-.17 (.14)	.23 (.16)
4-5 years	-.10 (.14)	-.31 (.15) *	.30 (.17)
6 or more years	-.02 (.13)	-9.94e-4 (.14)	.27 (.15)
<i>Years With Leader</i>			
2 years	-.14 (.13)	-.11 (.14)	-.19 (.16)
3-4 years	-.12 (.13)	-.07 (.14)	-.21 (.15)
5 or more years	-.12 (.15)	-.08 (.15)	.12 (.19)
<i>Education Level * School Type</i>			
Some grads work * Gen. Ed.	.28 (.24)	.27 (.24)	
Grad degree * Gen. Ed.	-.31 (.17)	-.32 (.18) *	
<i>Years With Leader * School Type</i>			
2 years * Gen. Ed.			.53 (.25) *
3-4 years * Gen. Ed.			.16 (.25)
5 or more years * Gen. Ed.			1.13 (.35) ***
<b>Random effects</b>			
Variance Components	.00	.03	.06
Level 1 (School)	.30	.30	.37
<b>Goodness of fit</b>			
R squared – marginal	.20	.25	.09
R squared – conditional	.20	.31	.21

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Reference groups are Gender (Male), Nationality (North and Central America), Education Level (Bachelor's Degree), Years in Education (0-5 Years), Years in Position (0-1 Year), Years With Leader (0-1 Year), and School Type (Special Education School).

### Teacher Variables

Gender was found to have no statistically significant effect on teacher perceptions of leadership style, so no differences were found between male and female perceptions of leadership styles. Scholars concur that literature on gender and leadership perception is somewhat inconsistent, in that some previous research found no difference in perceived leadership style by males and females (Hardman, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2004) while other research have found a difference by males and females (Maher, 1997; Jantzi & Leithwood, 1996; Luthar, 1996).

Nationality was found to influence teacher perceptions of transformational and transactional leadership style. Teachers with a North or Central American nationality perceived their school leaders as less transactional than those with a Middle Eastern, African, European, or Asian nationality. Further, teachers with an Asian nationality perceived their school leaders as more transactional than those with a Middle Eastern nationality. These findings align with previous research which found that Middle Eastern respondents perceive leaders as more transactional than American respondents (Hakimi, 2005) as well as research that found differences between American and European employee perceptions of leadership (Navarro, 2005). In addition, teachers with a North or Central American nationality perceived their school leaders as less transformational than those with a European or Asian nationality. These findings regarding perceptions of transformational leadership are inconsistent with collectivist cultures and the associated preference for hierarchical structures aligned with transactional leadership (Baumeister, 2004; Makai, 2006). Collectivist cultures tend to respect hierarchical structures of power and authority through preference for power distance (Makai, 2006), which often aligns with managerial methods or transactional forms of leadership. Conversely, individualistic cultures tend to show preference for independence and individual growth over community development, which aligns more with transformational leadership.

Total years of experience in the education field was found to influence perceptions of transactional and transformational leadership across both school types. Teachers with 6-10 years of experience perceived their school leaders as more transactional and more transformational than teachers with 0-5 years of experience. Previous research has shown inconsistent findings regarding the influence of teacher years of experience on perceptions of leadership behaviors (Eddins, 2012; Hardman, 2011).

In addition, total years of experience in the current position was found to influence perceptions of transactional leadership across both school types. Teachers with 4-5 years of experience in their current position perceived their school leaders as less transactional than those with 0-1 years in their current position. This slightly contradicts previous findings that suggest more years of experience in the current position is related to more favorable perceptions of leadership. Specifically, previous research found that teachers with more years of experience in their current position perceive leaders more favorably or more aligned with transformational leadership style than teachers with fewer years in their current role (Eddins, 2012; Hardman, 2011).

Among the remaining teacher demographic variables, education level had no statistically significant effect on perceived leadership style after removing school type. This is inconsistent with previous research that found education level of followers/employees to serve as a predictor of perceived leadership styles (Barbuto et al., 2007; Ojode et al., 1999).

### ***Limitations and Delimitations***

Delimitations based on the research design include lack of randomization, lack of manipulation of the independent variable, and reverse causation. Delimitations based on the data collection method include differences in school sizes, dissemination via school leaders, potential for biased responses, and dialectical differences in the Arabic translation. Limitations arose from data collection procedures and included timing with a global pandemic which may have influenced responses and response rates, including the discrepancies in response rates to the open-ended

questions by school type. Limitations arose from data analysis constrictions and included statistical constraints that influenced the nationality coding, which may not be reflective of cultural nuances within the geographic regions. Finally, limitations arose due to lower reliability scores in the context than Avolio & Bass (2004) reported, which may expose dialectical differences between the Arabic translation provided and the Emirati dialect of Arabic.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Utilizing the Full-Range Leadership Model (Bass, 1985), the leadership styles of managers and leaders closely align with transactional and transformational styles, respectively, due to the nature of both task completion and employee development. Transformational and transactional leadership practices are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. However, teachers may not be able to clearly distinguish between the two practices. The results of the present study align with the findings of Hayden and Thompson (2008) and suggest that international school leaders' responsibilities span both managerial and leadership tasks and thus display behaviors that align with both transactional and transformational leadership. The results also align with previous research findings that suggest UAE school leaders engage in both transformational and transactional leadership to varying degrees as needed to fulfill the different roles leading a diverse teaching staff (Litz & Scott, 2016; Yaghi, 2017).

## ***Recommendations for Research***

To address nationality as a teacher variable of interest, the researcher grouped nationality by geographic region and subsequently analyzed the findings in terms of nationality. A promising line of future inquiry may include grouping by culture rather than nationality to better understand the influence of both culture and nationality on perceptions of leadership behaviors. Dimensions of culture (Hofstede, 2011) may provide insight into the complexities of teacher perceptions based on culture rather than nationality alone. This may also help researchers better understand leadership in Arabic culture, which is a noted gap in the current literature.

Additionally, considering the potential for reverse causality, future research may utilize further qualitative research methods to explore the dynamics more deeply between teacher demographics and their perceptions of leadership. Specifically, future research may explore teacher perceptions of leadership based on their demographic factors, as it was not possible in the current study to dissect whether teachers perceive leadership differently based on their demographic variables, or if leaders treat teachers differently based on teacher variables.

Finally, in light of the limitations that potentially arose due to instrumentation, a promising line of inquiry may include the expansion of demographic variable options in the gender item to include an option not to disclose gender or options that include gender-fluid or non-binary. Other demographic variable options may include special education training level, religion, involvement in professional organizations, and total years working in the UAE or country of interest.

## ***Recommendations for Practice***

Findings suggest that practitioners may consider administering the MLQ (Avolio & Bass, 2004) to teachers on an annual or semi-annual basis as a way to enhance their effectiveness by determining teachers' perceptions of their leadership. By utilizing the last nine items of the MLQ

(Avolio & Bass, 2004) that focus on leadership outcomes, school leaders would be able to ascertain teacher satisfaction with perceived leadership, which may help administrators assess, measure, and engage accordingly. School leaders with more knowledge and awareness of their perceived leadership may be more successful in improving or sustaining a positive, productive school community (Gamble, 2009; Sayadi, 2016).

Findings also suggest inconsistencies in how teachers perceive school leaders' expectations and policies, as noted by ratings related to enforcement of school-wide policies as well as open-ended descriptions related to lack of clarity and enforcement of policies. It was also evident in the survey respondents' inconsistent descriptions and ratings regarding school leader expectations that there is disparity between school leader enforcement of policies and teacher enactment into practice. To address this inconsistency, practitioners may benefit from clearer school-wide policies resulting from school leader expectations or official legislation. Practitioners may also consider practicing more transparency in the expectations of the policy enactment to provide additional clarity for teachers responsible for implementing the policies in practice.

Finally, reflection on findings suggests that practitioners may benefit from increased professional development opportunities. Several survey respondents described inconsistent levels of professional development opportunities (both quality and quantity) in the open-ended questions of the survey instrument. Based on the discrepancy between the intellectual stimulation subscale means and open-ended responses that revealed varying levels of perceived professional learning opportunities, practitioners may consider holding professional development on a biweekly or monthly basis to ensure teachers are given sufficient opportunities for professional growth.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the differences of teacher perceptions of leadership styles across international special and general education schools in the UAE and further explored the relative effects of teacher demographics variables on leadership perceptions. The results indicated a difference in transformational and transactional leadership style by school type based on teacher education level, and a difference in passive-avoidant leadership based on teacher years of experience with the school leader and school type. Further, the results indicated a difference in perceptions of leadership based on certain teacher demographic variables, including nationality, total years of experience in education, and total years of experience in the current position. Recommendations for practice and future research were provided to expand this study and continue to add to the knowledge base in the field, including opportunities for professional development, school policy development, and expansion of survey demographic items. This study addressed a significant gap in the literature related to leadership in special education in the UAE while also expanding on literature related to teacher demographic variables and leadership perceptions. The results provide valuable insight for practitioners and scholars alike. School leaders will continue to have an important role in developing teachers while focusing on the mutual goal of improving outcomes for all students across all school types.

### **References**

- Ahmed, A. (2011, November 8). *The UAE's history lesson*. The National.  
<https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/the-uae-s-history-lesson-1.460608>

- Akkari, A. (2015). Education in the Middle East and North Africa. In J. Wright. (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of social and behavioral sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 210-214). Elsevier.
- Aldhaferi, A. (2017). Cultural intelligence and leadership style in the education sector. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 31(6), 718-735. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-05-2016-0093>
- Alghazo, E. M., & Gaad, E. N. (2004). General education teachers in the United Arab Emirates and their acceptance of the inclusion of students with disabilities. *British Journal of Special Education*, 31(2), 94-99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0952-3383.2004.00335.x>
- Alsayed, A. K., Motaghi, M. H., & Osman, I. B. (2012). The use of the multifactor leadership questionnaire and communication satisfaction questionnaire in Palestine: A research note. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 2(11), 1-19.
- Al-Shaibani, H. (2000). *Leadership behavior of public primary school principals in selected schools in the UAE* (Publication No. U118941) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Avolio, B. J., & Bass, B. M. (2004). *Multifactor leadership questionnaire (form 5x short)*. Mind Garden <https://www.mindgarden.com/16-multifactor-leadership-questionnaire>
- Barbuto, J. E., Fritz, S. M., Matkin, G. S., & Marx, D. B. (2007). Effects of gender, education, and age upon leaders' use of influence tactics and full range leadership behaviors. *Sex Roles*, 56(1), 71-83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9152-6>
- Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free.
- Bass, B. M. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1), 9-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135943299398410>
- Bataineh, O., & Alsagheer, A. (2012). An investigation of social support and burnout among special education teachers in the United Arab Emirates. *International Journal of Special Education*, 27(2), 5-13.
- Baumeister, P. (2004). *Implicit leadership theory in the US: A comparative study of Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and non-Hispanic Americans*. (Publication No. 3188219) [Doctoral dissertation, Regent University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Bradshaw, K. (2009). Teachers' attitudes and concerns toward integrating students with special needs in regular classrooms: A United Arab Emirates perspective. *Journal of the International Association of Special Education*, 10(1), 49-55.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row
- Chapman, D. W., & Miric, S. L. (2009). Education quality in the Middle East. *International Review of Education*, 55(1), 311-344.
- Eddins, G. M. (2012). *The influence of principal gender, teachers' years of experience, and retention on teacher perceptions of principal leadership style, qualities, and job satisfaction* (Publication No. ED550930) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri - Columbia]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- El-Kaleh, E. (2019). Leadership curricula in UAE business and education management programs. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 33(6), 1118-1147.
- Field, A. (2017). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Foster, W. (1989). Toward a critical practice of leadership. In J. Smyth (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on educational leadership* (pp. 27-42). Routledge Falmer.
- Fraenkel, J. R., Wallen, N. E., & Hyun, H. H. (2015). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (9th ed.). McGraw Hill.
- Gaad, E. N. (2001). Educating children with Down's syndrome in the United Arab Emirates. *British Journal of Special Education*, 28(4), 195-203. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8527.t01-1-00225>
- Gamble, P. (2009). *The relationship between principals' leadership styles and student achievement that meet adequate yearly progress goals* (Publication No. 3370939) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Hakimi, M. (2005). *The role of culture on bases of power and leadership perceptions among American and Iranian employees*. (Publication No. 3182127) [Doctoral dissertation, Alliant International University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Hardman, B. K. (2011). *Teacher's perception of their principal's leadership style and the effects on student achievement in improving and non-improving schools* (Publication No. 3482829) [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Hayden, M., & Thompson, J. (2008). *International schools: Growth and influence*. UNESCO. <http://wattanakorn.edu.la/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/180396e.pdf>



- Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>
- Jackson, M. J., & Jackson, K. M. (2020). Factors that influence Emirati male achievement in higher education. *Journal of Research Initiatives*, 5(2), 1-11.
- Jantzi, D., & Leithwood, K. (1996). Toward an explanation of variation in teachers' perceptions of transformational school leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(4), 512-538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X9603200404>
- Kauffman, J. M., Felder, M., Ahrbeck, B., Badar, J., & Schneiders, K. (2018). Inclusion of all students in general education? International appeal for a more temperate approach to inclusion. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 21(2), 1-10.
- Kowalski, T. (2013). *The school superintendent: Theory, practice, and cases*. (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Lashley, C. (2007). Principal leadership for special education: An ethical framework. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal*, 15(3), 177-187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362830701503511>
- Likert, R. (1932). A technique for the measurement of attitudes. *Archives of Psychology*, 22(140), 1-55. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1933-01885-001>
- Litz, D., & Scott, S. (2016). Transformational leadership in the educational system of the United Arab Emirates. *Educational Management, Administration, and Leadership*, 45(4), 566-587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216636112>
- Luthar, H. K. (1996). Gender differences in evaluation of performance and leadership ability: Autocratic vs. democratic managers. *Sex Roles*, 35(5), 337-361. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01664773>
- Maher, K. J. (1997). Gender-related stereotypes of transformational and transactional leadership. *Sex Roles*, 37(3), 209-225. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025647811219>
- Makai, K. S. (2006). *Culture and leadership: A comparison of cultural orientation and leadership preference among college students in Zambia and the United States*. (Publication No. 3270498) [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Maxwell, J. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Mithout, A. (2016). Children with disabilities in the Japanese school system: A path toward social integration? *Contemporary Japan*, 28(2), 165-184. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cj-2016-0009>
- Navarro, D. (2005). *The influence of national culture on charismatic leadership perceptions: An exploratory study of Mexico, Poland, and the United States of America*. (Publication No. 3161594) [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Ojode, L. A., Walumbwa, O., & Kuchinke, P. (1999, April 16-17). *Developing human capital for the evolving work environment: Transactional and transformational leadership within an instructional setting*. [Paper presentation] Midwest Academy of Management, Lincoln, NE, United States.
- Powell, J. (2009). To segregate or to separate? Special education expansion and divergence in the United States and Germany. *Comparative Education Review*, 53(2), 161-187.
- Rost, J. (1991). *Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Praeger.
- Sayadi, Y. (2016). The effect of dimensions of transformational, transactional, and non-leadership on the job satisfaction and organizational commitment of teachers in Iran. *Management in Education*, 30(2), 57-65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020615625363>
- UAE Government. (2021). *Education for people of determination*. <https://government.ae/en/information-and-services/education/education-for-people-with-special-needs>
- U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. (2018). *History: Twenty-five years of progress in educating children with disabilities through IDEA* (ED556111). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556111.pdf>
- Walumbwa, F.O., Wu, C., & Ojode, L. (2004). Gender and instructional outcomes: The mediating role of leadership styles. *Journal of Management Development*, 23(2), 124-140. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710410517229>
- Yaghi, A. (2017). Adaptive leadership style: Contextualizing transformational leadership in a non-Western country. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 13(4), 243-259. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-01-2017-0001>