



Mohammed Bin Rashid School Of Government

POLICY BRIEF

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Summary

The UAE education sector is on a journey to becoming a “first rate education system” through a number of far reaching reforms to the curriculum which were implemented in 2015. Central to any reform or restructuring agenda is the role of the teacher. Education policy makers in the UAE are required to revise the existing paradigm of teacher training and professional development to ensure a move away from traditional models of training to a more situated and constructive one. They must go further to increase the professionalization of the teaching profession by increasing the level of teacher empowerment. By reviewing the approach to teacher capacity building, the attainment of the reform goals become more accessible. This policy brief draws on research papers and ideas presented during panel discussions at the UAE Public Policy forum hosted by the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government to make recommendations about a new model of teacher training and professional development. Papers written for the forum and the proceedings are public available at:

<http://mbrsg.ae/home/publications.aspx>

Education Policy Reform in the UAE: Building Teacher Capacity

Dr. Racquel Warner

Introduction

The education reforms announced by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in order to meet the UAE National Agenda goals 2021 have been met with ambivalence in the industry. Most stakeholders will agree that a systemic change in public sector k12- provision is required. However, the approach that is to be taken remains elusive. The MOE has taken a more top down approach through curriculum reforms, national exams for students and requiring an exclusive stream for gifted children. New subjects such as health, science & technology, career guidance, innovation, design, general skills and business management are on offer in the new curriculum. Bilingualism is to be gradually incorporated in order to reinforce national identity, build critical thinking and innovation, and develop teamwork and problem solving. An additional focus of the MOE reforms is reading, moral and ethical studies which are to be integrated into the syllabus for all grades. Through an agreement with McGraw-Hill, new textbooks for subjects such as Mathematics, History, Geography, Social Studies and Economics have been distributed to schools.

While cognizant of the MOE reform agenda, since 2012 Dubai schools have focused on positive education through Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) led initiatives. The first such program was What Works, is a knowledge and skills sharing platform led by teachers for their colleagues in other schools. Later, the KHDA facilitated Lighthouse, an annual initiative that brings school leaders together to exchange ideas and learn from each other. The Abundance Group initiative aims to reduce competition and promotes long-term collaboration between different schools and 100 Days of Positivity is a mindfulness campaign to promote existing positive education practices and help schools to integrate wellbeing as a central tenet of their curricula.



In Abu Dhabi, another approach has been taken. The New School Model (NSM), which was introduced in 2010 has now been expanded to include up to grade 10. It is a child-centered approach to education that encourages learner autonomy and critical thinking. The NSM embeds continued professional development for teachers and school leaders as an essential factor for educational development. In 2015, Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) also announced that students would no longer be given the option of choosing between a science or humanities stream. Instead, they will study the same unified curriculum up to grade 11 with more hours being spent on Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. The reform, in keeping with the National Agenda a goal to remove the foundation year from Federal Universities, aims to equip youngsters with the skills and knowledge to satisfy the entrance requirements for universities when they graduate from secondary school.

Evidently, these varying approaches are both aimed at attaining the same National Agenda objective, which is to create a world class education system by 2021. To empirically measure progress toward this goal, both regulatory bodies, KHDA and ADEC, have unwittingly increased focus on data collection from standardized test in order to benchmark knowledge of UAE students against international standards such as TIMMS, PIRILS and PISA. According to the 2016

PISA results for Dubai, most private schools were meeting the targets but public schools were falling short. This begs the question what are private school doing at an institutional level that public schools are not doing. During the recently convened UAE Public Policy Forum, many of the panelist seemed to think that teacher professional development is at the centre of the challenges. The Head of the Adu Dhabi Education Council echoed this opinion at the BETT Middle East Conference in Abu Dhabi in April, 2017:

“Our aim is to ensure our students feel excited about learning and seeking career opportunities, while providing our teachers with the professional development necessary in order to embrace new and stimulating approaches as per 21st century learning and teaching skills”. (Al Nuami, 2017).

The statement reflects what the delegates at the UAE Public Policy Forum expressed in a public poll taken during the live voting session on effectiveness of education reforms. Figure 1 below shows that %38 of respondents felt that teacher training and a positive learning environment were the most important elements for advancing reforms in the education sector.

In an increasingly multicultural and technology enabled classroom, the role of teachers and the expectations from stakeholders are changing. In this milieu, teachers can no longer settle for what is

Which reforms are most important for advancing educational quality in the UAE?

1. Teacher training
2. Contextual School Inspection Framework
3. Student testing and evaluation
4. Vocabonal and educabonal training work based and apprenticeship schemes
5. Positive learning environments

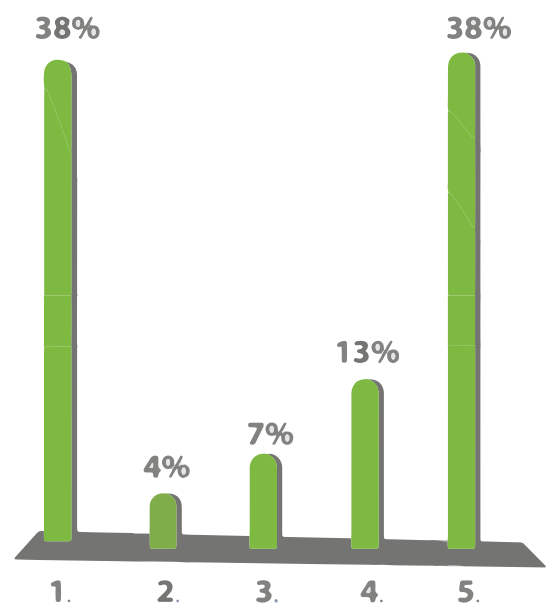


Figure 1 Factors that will advance education reform

easiest or most convenient. They now have to impart ways of thinking (creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making and learning); ways of working (communication and collaboration); tools for working (including information and communications technologies); and skills around citizenship, life and career and personal and social responsibility for success in modern democracies” (OECD, 2011). Many teachers are being asked to teach in a manner that they were never exposed to themselves. The teacher training programs do not develop critical thinking but instead develop content specialists. Teacher training programs do not encourage unbridled creativity and innovation but lead candidates to meet specific grading criteria in a very utilitarian manner. Teachers have long been trained to keep students occupied from one bell to the other and to be able to show some output at the end of a predetermined interval. This cycle is currently being perpetuated across many school systems, despite glossy brochures that advertise engagement, creativity and innovation. This gap needs to be filled through teacher development courses that enhance competences in innovation, adaptability, critical thinking, evidence-based attitudes, responding effectively to student outcomes, designing interventions, participating in professional dialogue and collaborating with others in their community of practice to hone their skills.

The Ministry of Education will launch a specialised training programme tomorrow, so far the biggest such initiative,

targeting 11,500 teachers, 1,000 school principals, 92 academic supervisors and 300 laboratories specialists, in addition to 340 learning resource specialists and 370 special education teachers.

If policy makers really want to see reforms in education, a close look has to be taken at the role of teachers in the reform. Admittedly, teachers are central to the reform but the current paradigm of accountability seem to ascribe blame rather than to question whether or not teacher are adequately equipped . In a study conducted in the United States of America by the Gates Foundation in 2012, it was confirmed that many teacher training programs and professional development modules had not changed since 1909 (Kane & Stainger, 2012). The current reform agenda in UAE education sector will require a constructive approach which goes right back to the nature of teaching and learning for teachers themselves as shown in the figure 2.

Capacity development is the central purpose of education in the UAE, is highly correlated to economic development. It should not exclude teachers. Reforms should also look at the model of pre -service and in -service teacher development in the UAE. UAE recruits a large number of its teachers from who come from a variety of training backgrounds. The recent regulatory shift to licensure of all teachers will somehow align the quality of teachers and ensure a common standard. In 2016,

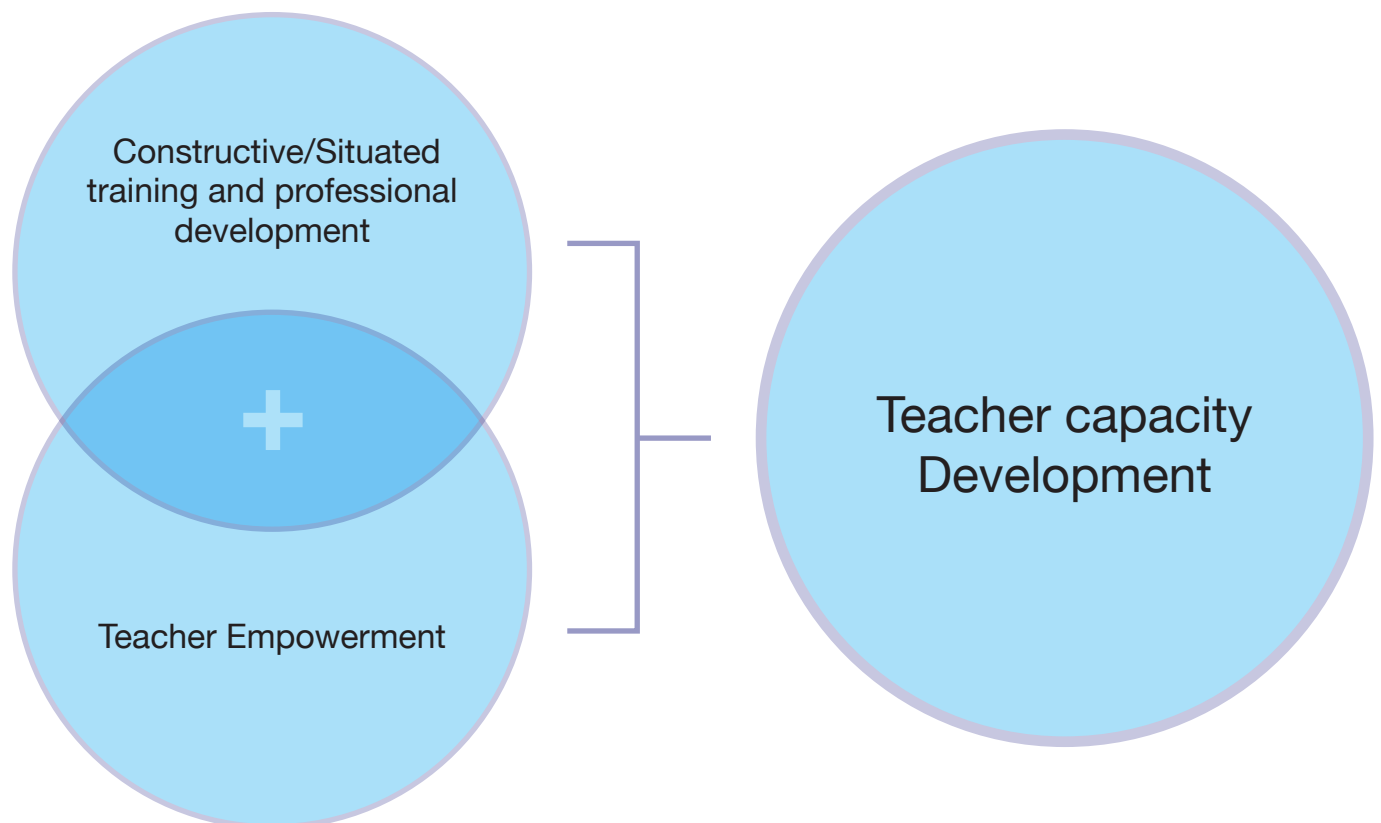


Figure 2 Model for teacher capacity development

The Ministry of Education announced a specialized training program, a precursor to licensure, that will offer professional development to 11,500 teachers, 1,000 school principals, 92 academic supervisors and 300 laboratories specialists, in addition to 340 learning resource specialists and 370 special education teachers (UAE Cabinet, 2016).

This licensure should be supported with in- service Professional Development (PD) which will standardize the practices of these teachers to the expectation of the UAE education system. Such a program should focus on desired teacher competencies and build the capacity of teachers to demonstrate these attributes. The quality of education, as demonstrated in quality of teaching, levels of student attainment and curriculum implementation are significant variables that are dependent on teacher capacity development. Figure 2 shows the essential elements that require consideration as the discourse on teacher accountability continues. Policies that are aimed at capacity building of teachers should consider factors related to how teachers are being educated, the social and emotional empowerment of teachers as part of the professionalization of the sector.

Models of Teacher Training and Professional Development

The message emerging from decision makers in the education sector is that developing the capacity of teachers is the one way to deliver the reforms expected in the education system through training and ongoing professional development. Between professional development and student achievement, the primary conduit is the teacher. However, researchers have encouraged caution when looking for the impact of professional development on student achievement because of the 'dilution effect' which asserts that there are other factors that influence student learning besides the teacher's practice, thus making it difficult to judge the impact of professional development (Adey, 2004). Extant research have been done to identify the components of the professional development programme that will have the desired impact on both teachers and students. Guskey and Sparks (1996) identified 3 sets of characteristics which, if taken into consideration when designing PD courses for teachers will make them more reflective, critical and analytical in their classroom practice.

1. *Content characteristics:* What is covered in the PD sessions, the validity and credibility of the strategy and content being delivered

2. *Process variables:* The models of PD and the types of ongoing or follow-up activities

3. *Context characteristics:* The four w's of PD (who, when, why and where) which refer to the organizational culture and the expectations or incentives for implementing new practices.

Other studies however revealed that teachers preferred professional development courses, which provided opportunity for them to advance their careers and consider promotion within their own institutions. There was a general sense that teachers were interested in improving their professional status within their institutions. Where this was facilitated through PD, there was evidence of enhanced professionalism in the classroom which had an impact on students' performance. (Galloway, 2000).

Policy Intervention 1: Effective Professional Development

Professional Development can only be effective in enhancing teachers' learning if it is firmly grounded in the day-to-day complexities of teaching. Recent research has shown that effective professional development includes enabling teacher to create classroom content, incorporate the use of ICT, develop techniques of effective teaching and classroom management that can immediately be used in their classrooms, and developing proper skills to provide feedback on lessons (European Commission, 2012). This is the consensus that is also emerging in PD research by organisations in the UK such as national Foundation for Education Research (NFER) and in the USA such as the National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (NPEAT). In earlier research, Sparks (2002) collated CPD data from around the world to conclude that effective PD:

- Focuses on deepening teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills;
- Includes opportunities for practice, research and reflection;
- Is embedded in educators' work ;
- Is sustained over time;
- Is founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and principals in solving important problems related to teaching and learning. (Sparks, 4-2002, 1).

Careful consideration should be given to how our teachers are being trained and trainers should ensure that their courses move away from the traditional type of professional development to more

reformatory modes. Garet, et al (2001) identifies and distinguish between 'traditional' and 'reform' types of PD. Traditional forms of CPD tend to take place at specific times, and are usually undertaken off-site with minimal follow-up. They offer little opportunity or support to enable teachers to integrate new learning with practice, and so are often ineffective. 'Reform' types of PD, on the other hand, typically take place within the school day, involve collective participation of teachers from the same school or group of schools, and are integrated into practice in the form of study groups, mentoring and coaching. In our current digital era, PD must incorporate the use of modern technology as a mean of facilitating learner engagement; managing varying abilities in the classroom and handling administrative tasks that teacher are burdened to complete. This reformed type of PD are easier to sustain because that are grounded in the daily duties of the teacher and are likely to result in better connections between new learning and existing practice.

A more constructivist approach to teacher learning which facilitates mentoring, peer observation and evaluation on an ongoing basis has the most positive impact on not only teaching but on learning as well, thus meeting expectations of the institution and the individual teachers. (Joyce & Calhoun 2010). Knight (2002) concurs that modern learning theories point to "situated nature of learning" which in effect would herald the end to formally delivered courses and see the introduction of professional development

courses which are more focused on the learning that takes place within a community of practice (Wenger ,2009 ;1998). This is antithetical to the traditional course-led models of professional development which required teachers to participate in externally developed and delivered material. A primary factor in ensuring the desired impact on the teacher and students from CPD is finding the 'fit' between the developmental needs of the teacher, the institution and the type of CPD activity. It is important to note that at various points in the cycle of an institution's development one need might prevail over the other for the greater good of the institution.

The notion of situated learning was popularized by Lave and Wenger over 20 years ago as a viable model of workplace learning. In education, this situated learning can take place within this community of practice in order to foster authentic, motivated learning among teachers. It may be argued that in the pressurized work environment that teachers operate, situated learning in this context is not suitable. However, a number of private school in Dubai have invalidated this argument by undertaking sustained programs of workplaces professional development within the community of practice consistently through the school year. Schools in the GEMS group in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, have found that this practice has improved teaching standards, driven evidenced based intervention for teachers and students and resulted in overall improvement in attainment across many of their school in Dubai. (Varkey, 2016).

In Figure 3 below a comparative table of the characteristics of the proposed training model for UAE teachers is presented.

	Traditional Model of Teacher Training & PD (cognitive)	New Model of Teacher Training and PD (constructive and situated)
Focus	Teaching	Learning
Context	Classroom	In Situ, Virtual
Instruction	Didactic	By engagement and interaction
Interaction	One way (from teacher to students)	Collaborative, Collegial
Timing	Planned in a curriculum	Flexible ,evidence or need driven
Outcome	Mechanical learning (transmission and absorption)	Metacognitive understanding of how learning is taking place and how behavior is changing
Participants	Trainer & Teacher	Colleagues

Figure 3: New Model of teacher development

Blanchard (2014) posits “people often resent change when they have no involvement in how it should be implemented. So, contrary to popular belief, people don't resist change -- they resist being controlled” (p.213). This proposed model of building capacity and increasing accountability among teachers. The successful implementation of the new ministry of education reforms is predicated upon the buy- in from the teachers. Teacher training and professional development requires a reformed approach to meet this expectation. The proposed model shown in figure 1 provides scope for teachers to be valued as individuals and for them to develop the required skills and competences within their community of practice.

The new model of professional development shifts the current paradigm of instruction and knowledge sharing that teachers engage in to make it more effective in terms of teacher capacity building. In the first place, it positions teachers themselves as learners. This gives them the freedom to try new ways of doing things, to build new skills and to be creative and innovative. The context of their development is based on a situational need and is personalized based on what their area of challenge might be. Putting a whole cohort of teachers through a PD session of giving feedback when only a few have this problem is counterproductive. PD done in this new model is targeted based on self-reported or evidence based need. Teachers are also able to access PD virtually and are not limited to only face to face instruction from a trainer. The internet is replete with excellent teacher development resources, which can be systematically accessed. The days of didactic instructional models are out of date. Teacher education and professional development programs require an upgrade to models of engagement and interactive pedagogy. Teachers are expected to model student engagement pedagogy in the classroom , but if they have not been taught, it is likely that they will resort to the didactic, rote learning methods.

Finally, the teacher training and PD programs should teach teachers how they are learning, not just to learn more content. Metacognition is central to the teaching profession. During their training, teachers need to be taught to identify how they are learning and the outputs they are realizing based on specific inputs. This will foster a pattern of self-efficacy and self-regulation, which makes them better teachers. These characteristics contribute to pedagogical mastery and have been identified by Blömeke and Delaney (2012) as cognitive abilities and affective-motivational characteristics, the two main components of teachers' professional competence. Teaching is often regarded as an isolated job but this misconception should be revised through training programs and PD sessions, which foster

collaboration and collegiality. This collaborative journey of development improves interpersonal relationships among staff, provides better motivation and a more collegial approach to problem solving.

Policy Intervention 2: Teacher Empowerment

Shared decision making is a critical factor for successful education reform. By including teachers in the decision making process of an institution, principals and head teachers empower teachers to become leaders in their classrooms. Research on the subject of teacher empowerment suggests that the conditions under which most teachers operate is designed in such a way as to deny teachers a sense of efficacy, success and self-worth (Zeichner, 1991). Many principals and school administrators are known to participate in top- down, coercive management practice under the guise of trying to maintain a high standard. Some school managers manipulate salaries, evaluations and professional development opportunities in order to exercise control over teachers. In any talk of school reform and restructuring, these practices have to stop. For teachers to respond appropriately to the pressing demands of 21st century reforms in education, they need to be empowered to do so. The concept of teacher empowerment provides teachers with the confidence to act and the power to make appropriate instructional decisions that improve the quality of education for students (Harpell & Andrews, 2010). Teachers are the first line of response in the classroom, they interact daily with students and as such, their voice should be included in decisions about education affairs that affect learners.

Listed in figure 4 below are the provisions that should be in place to facilitate teacher empowerment.



Figure 4: Key provision for teacher empowerment

As early as 1980's Maeroff identified teacher empowerment as synonymous with professionalization and proposed it as an essential component in the improvement of teaching and learning (1988). It could be suggested that empowerment requires treating teachers like professionals who are given control over their own practice and the decision that have an impact of teaching and learning. Teachers need to be regarded as autonomous leaders who have the appropriate level of self-efficacy and self-regulation to effect change in their classrooms.

Another early advocate of empowerment, Ayers (1992) suggests that teacher empowerment is necessary in successful school restructuring and school reform efforts.

Empowerment is the heart and soul of teaching and it cannot be done well by the weak or the faint. There is no way for passive teachers to produce active students, for dull teachers to inspire bright students, for careless teachers to nurture caring students. Should teachers be empowered? Only if we want powerful students to emerge from our schools. (Ayers, 1992, p. 26).

Empowerment takes place in two phases. Firstly, the environment should enable experiences, within the school that fosters autonomy, choice, control, and responsibility. This will result in the second feature of an empowering context, which allows the teacher to display existing competencies as well as learn new competencies that support and strengthen functioning (Short et al, 1992). When teacher are enabled to operate from a position of empowerment, there is the possibility of an increase in knowledge and the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in meaningful collective practice.

The way forward

At present it seems training is being linked to licensure, which is a more utilitarian view of professional development. A reformed model of teacher training and professional development that empowers teachers can have significant long term impact on the Ministry of education policy of training teachers. The recommended PD model instils an ethos of lifelong learning among teachers, who will become more affective and motivational. They will also be responsive to students' needs and be empowered to design interventions as required. It is a known fact that the attrition rate among UAE teachers is of concern. The KHDA inspection report for 16/2015 records teacher turnover rates ranging from 11 to 30 percent (KHDA, 2016). This increase professionalization of the role of teacher in schools

and society will send a message to students and parents that teachers should be respected and valued. It might even result in a reduced attrition from the profession.

Education reforms are taking place at an unprecedented pace in the UAE. All policy-making stakeholders have a vested interest in making this round of education reform count toward the achievement of the National Agenda Goals 2021 and beyond. Teachers have become the focal point in terms of accountability in realizing the goals as they are the main contributors to students' learning. For teachers to meet this demand they must themselves be equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills required for this mandate that has been given to them. This should be done by revisiting policies on teacher training and professional development to ensure that they are constructive and situated within the community of practice. Additionally teachers should be given power over their own practices and circumstances without the top down coercion that is often evident in the management practices of schools. This empowerment should be a leadership journey on which teachers become lifelong learners who can respond appropriately and adequately to the pressing demands of teaching and learning in the 21st century and beyond.

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Author Biography

Dr. Racquel Warner is an Assistant Professor at Mohammed Bin Rashid school of Government with over 25 years international teaching experience across the full spectrum of the education, from the early childhood to tertiary level. She holds a Doctorate of Education from the University of Exeter in England. She works actively in communities in Nepal, Bangladesh and Kenya to support the development and accessibility of quality education to at risk groups. Since 2003, Dr. Warner has worked in various academic and leadership positions at three major off shore branch campuses in the UAE. Her research interest in student engagement and learner autonomy has led to her work in curriculum redesign, teacher training and education policy development. She has presented at many international conferences and published papers on the subjects of study skills, student engagement and the policy imperative of this approach. Dr. Warner is a member of a number of international professional associations and advisory boards.



كلية محمد بن راشد
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SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government
Convention Tower, Level 13, P.O. Box 72229, Dubai, UAE
Tel: 3290 329 4 971+ - Fax: 3291 329 4 971+
www.mbrsg.ae - info@nbrsg.ae

