

Perceptions of School Effectiveness and School Improvement in Abu Dhabi, UAE

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings related to the characteristics of effective secondary schools in Abu Dhabi from the perspectives of their stakeholders; namely, principals, teachers, students and parents. More specifically, the close examination of these stakeholders' perceptions made it possible to identify some overriding items out of five key sets of factors proposed in a survey that may contribute to improving effective schools within the UAE secondary education system. These factors correlate with those identified in the earlier school effectiveness literature and include school factors, teaching and learning factors, student factors, school-home relationship factors and local community factors. Together, these factors serve as an epistemic foreground for reframing the school effectiveness and school improvement debate in Abu Dhabi and in the UAE in general, perhaps leading towards more significant reform alignment. The data were taken from research conducted in three regions of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates.

Keywords: School effectiveness factors, UAE education

Background to the Study

What is it that makes a school effective? The term 'school effectiveness' 'was frequently related with the school effort to make changes toward improving the students' level of achievement' (Ghani et al, 2011: 1705). In general, school effectiveness derives its significance from the educational objectives to be attained in a given educational system. Therefore, the characteristics of effectiveness may differ depending on the variables to be considered in a given educational context. This being so, research within the field seeks to delineate the set of common factors that are likely to give a true picture of school effectiveness. Idealistically, 'the suggestion was that if we know what the characteristics of effective schools are and if we purposefully apply those characteristics to all schools, then all schools can become more effective' (Townsend, 1997:311-312).

Hernes (2000:7) makes it clear that 'school effectiveness is a difficult concept to define and, once defined, is of a nature that is difficult to measure'. From a 'raw definitional view', as Townsend (1994b: 127) contends, an effective school is one that 'produced a result' by undertaking certain actions. However, as most schools genuinely strive to achieve their objectives in an efficient way, the term 'effectiveness' seems to be the benchmark against which it is possible, given certain criteria, to compare schools in a given educational system. Research posits that it is difficult to define school effectiveness as 'schools differ in performance' (Scheerens, 2000:18). Strands of research within the field of school effectiveness did not necessarily focus on the same variables and factors to determine the extent to which a given school is effective. The variables contributing to the effectiveness of schools in a given country might not be totally applicable to another. Though Scheerens (2000:19) admits that there is a true linkage between school effectiveness and its output, that is 'the average achievement of the pupils at the end of a period of formal schooling', he draws our attention to another interesting question; why does school A do better than school B if the differences are not due to the variance in the student population of the two schools?

For more than three decades the argument has been made that effective public schools can significantly impact on the achievement levels attained by students, regardless of their background. According to Klopff et al (in Balci, 2007:10), an effective school is 'a school in which an optimum learning environment where cognitive, emotional, psychomotor, social and aesthetic developments of students are most properly provided'. Similarly, an effective school can be related to results such as development in social, academic, emotional, moral and aesthetic aspects, teacher satisfaction, effective use of sources, accomplishing aims and environmental conformity (Şişman, 2011:4).

In this sense, educating and changing the behaviors of students occurs by means of schools and other educational institutions. According to the definitions mentioned above, it is appropriate to include art, music and character in the learning dimensions of students.' (Döş, 2014)

There are numerous publications which review the history of effectiveness research which include: Gray, Reynolds, Fitz-Gibbon, & Jesson, 1996; Mortimore, 1991; Reynolds et al., 1994; Sammons, 1999; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Townsend, 2007 and Chapman, et al., 2015. The common conclusion is that effective schools have particular characteristics and processes that help children to learn at high levels. These characteristics are known as 'effectiveness correlates' because they are associated with student success (Lezotte, 1991; Kirk and Jones, 2004). Global research - implementing a diverse selection of data collection methods, such as experimental testing, interviews, observation, questionnaires and consultation with experts - has pinpointed many features that can be correlated with effective schooling.

In early research, Scheerens and Creemers (1989:692) argued that 'Five school characteristics are repeatedly mentioned in the literature as malleable correlates of educational achievement. These are strong educational leadership, high expectations of student achievement, emphasis on basic skills, a safe and orderly climate and frequent evaluation of pupils' progress'. These original five correlates, first identified by Edmonds in 1979, seem to have survived the test of time; however, various researchers have added other supplementary correlates. Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) expanded some of these so an emphasis on basic skill acquisition became a focus upon learning and a safe and orderly climate became a positive school culture. They also added more, such as involving parents, generating effective teaching, professional development for staff and involving students. Kirk and Jones (2004) contended that there were seven characteristics/correlates of effective schools: a clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, opportunities to learn and time on task, a safe and orderly environment, positive home-school relations and frequent monitoring of student progress.

Other studies into factors associated with school effectiveness suggest there are as few as five (Lezotte, 1991) or six (Cunningham, et al. 2006), but could also be as many as eleven (Sammons, et al. 1995), twelve (Mortimore, 1998) or perhaps even eighteen (Townsend, 1994) indicators that can help to identify some schools that are more effective than others. One indicator that is common to all is the role of the school leader in the process; indeed, the literature suggests that quality leadership can have a powerful, if indirect, influence on student achievement (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000) through its ability to influence the quality of teaching (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001).

Both Lezotte (1991) and Haberman (2003) maintained that the school mission and vision should be clearly articulated by principals and teachers so that school staff can share a common understanding of and commitment to instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures and accountability. This view is supported by Cibulka and Nakayama (2000) who argued that teachers should be partners with the principal in creating their school mission and vision that, in turn, will help them all to influence students to excel. In the same vein, Wang et al (2013: 54) found that 'leadership, expectations, mission, time on task, monitoring, basic skills, climate and parents/community participation characteristics have emerged as key determinants of school effectiveness in Taiwanese junior high schools.

However, field-research concerning school effectiveness and school improvement in the Arab world and in the UAE in particular is still in its infancy due to the paucity of empirical studies in the Gulf region. The current paper attempts to tackle two issues from within the context of the United Arab Emirates and specifically its capital city, Abu Dhabi. The first aim is to identify what principals, teachers, parents and students in Abu Dhabi schools perceive an effective school to be. The second is to delineate the perceived importance of internal and external factors identified as being characteristics of effective schools in the literature. The identification of the perceptions related to what might be done to make UAE schools more effective than they are currently perceived to be will be dealt with in a forthcoming research project focusing on school improvement policies and strategies that might be adopted to revamp schooling in Abu Dhabi.

Outline of the Study

1. Statement of the Problem

Based on the school inspections that are undertaken every two years, the school summary inspection reports issued by ADEC since 2012 highlight the performance of schools and inform their development plans.

A sample school report generally consists of three parts. The first is an introduction focusing on aspects of daily school life and the tools used to collect data about the school's performance. The second is a general outline of the type of school, the curriculum, number, age and gender of students, as well as the fees and services provided on site. Then the third part consists in an evaluation of the effectiveness of the targeted school against three performance bands:

A - High performing (outstanding, very good or good)

B - Satisfactory (acceptable)

C - In need of significant improvement (weak or very weak)

In return, ADEC Research Office provides school principals with some annual 'Parent Survey Results' reports spotting the strengths and weaknesses of the schools (ADEC, 2013a: 2). These reports gauge parents' satisfaction in relation to parent-school partnership, school violence and safety; teaching effectiveness; and physical environment correlates.

ADEC Inspection Report (2013: 20) contends that 'Leadership and management are satisfactory or better in only four out of ten private schools and good or better in only one in six with considerable repercussions on these schools' academic outcomes. These shortcomings have been constantly used as a justification for calibrating the education policy of the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC) and aligning the school management practices towards more effectiveness.

2. Purpose of the Study

The overall aim of the current study is to compare the perceptions of stakeholders in the UAE secondary schools; principals, teachers, students and parents, with previous international findings on issues associated with the definition and key factors of effective schools. Creemers & Kyriakides (2010) highlighted the importance of the social and cultural context generated by society. In fact, context makes this study different. Not only is the study conducted in a society that has a strong religious base (in this case Islam), it is also conducted in a society that only has a very recent history of providing universal education to its citizens. Moreover, the study is conducted in a society that strives to catch up to the countries that have a much longer and proven history of supporting students to become effective, global citizens. The first of these two issues may well impact on how school effectiveness is defined and the second could affect what is perceived to be the actions needed to make schools more effective.

Hence, the study will consider the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do UAE school stakeholders (principals, teachers, students and parents) define an 'effective school'?

RQ2: What are the highly-rated characteristics of effective schools in the UAE according to each category of stakeholders?

RQ3: What are the reasons of any divergent or convergent perceptions all across the four categories of stakeholders?

3. Methodology

To gain an in-depth understanding and insight into the factors associated with school effectiveness in Abu Dhabi, UAE, this study attempts to explore the perceptions of a cohort of 46 school principals, 136 teachers, 142 students and 138 parents as representative of diverse groups in age, gender, experience and educational level. Based partly on a mixed method research (MMR), the study adopts an approach that integrates and cross-validates quantitative and qualitative strands of data mainly through surveys and informal field observation. Theoretically, 'mixed-method designs are defined as including at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words)' (Caracelli and Green, 1993: 195). Therefore, the present research aims to adopt the MMR approach first to scrutinize the stakeholders' perceptions both quantitatively and qualitatively for a valid and reliable analysis of the group samples' gathered data. Second, to utilize the stakeholders' ratings of certain school effectiveness' factors in order to paint a picture of the status quo of schools in Abu Dhabi.

Sample:

The sample of the study consisted of 60 principals and their deputies, 180 teachers, 180 students and 180 parents operating within 30 public secondary schools in the Abu Dhabi region of the UAE that represent one quarter of all secondary schools in the UAE. Out of the six hundred questionnaires delivered to these schools' stakeholders, 462 copies (77%) were officially completed with completion percentages ranging from 75.6% to 78.9%.

4. Questionnaire Instrument

The current study used a questionnaire to collect data from the 462 participants to identify the perceptions held by the four groups about 'effective schools' and their outstanding characteristics. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to identify:

- their level of support for each of four possible definitions of an effective school;
- the level of importance they allocated to factors previously identified in the literature as being associated with an effective school. These factors were incorporated in the following five domains:

1. School factors (16 statements)
2. Teaching and learning factors (12 statements)
3. Student factors (seven statements)
4. School-home relationship (seven statements)
5. Local community factors (six statements)

5. Results

5.1 The definition of an effective school

Participants were prompted to consider three different definitions of an effective school that appear in the SE literature, plus one that focused on the context of the Islamic world. Table 1 below provides the responses of the stakeholders with respect to the four definitions provided. The stakeholders' definition of an effective school was found to be complementary rather than discrete or isolated. Table 1 shows the perceptions of the individual groups related to how school effectiveness might be defined in Abu Dhabi. It indicates that all SE definitions were deemed important, with mean scores ranging from 4.55 to 4.76, however, two factors 'Islamic principles' and 'development of good citizens' were preferred and 'academic success' and 'employment skills' were not attributed the same level of importance.

Table 1: Stakeholder groups' agreement with definitions of an effective school

Item	definitions of effective schools	principals	teachers	students	parents	whole sample	
		M	M	M	M	M	SD
1	An effective school focuses mostly on academic success	4.61	4.29	4.77	4.73	4.60	0.52
2	an effective school supports the development of good citizens	4.65	4.38	4.90	4.64	4.64	0.59
3	an effective school ensures that graduates have the skills needed to find employment	4.09	4.35	4.84	4.93	4.55	0.56
4	an effective school supports the development of an understanding of Islamic principles	4.91	4.51	4.91	4.75	4.76	0.45

Although still being seen as important by all groups, focusing on students' academic success was the least supported definition by three of the groups. Rather than stressing the primacy of instructional outcomes, principals, teachers and students preferred fostering an assimilation of Islamic principles (M= 4.76, SD= 0.45) whereas parents opted for employment as the ultimate goal of schooling for their children. What is most striking is that, instead of underlying the importance of academic success or developing the skills for employment, both teachers and principals underscored the prevalence of citizenship and religious values. For principals and teachers, Islamic principles were most supported and academic success least supported. As for students, citizenship was most supported and academic success was least supported and for parents, employment was most supported and citizenship least supported. It seems that school parties hold slightly different values for what a school should be doing rather than what it is meant to be serving. Since one of the strengths of effective schools is to have a strong-shared purpose then these differences may affect the ability of the school to focus its attention on "what counts".

This would also seem to be a different result than one might expect from many Western countries where, in many cases, religious values are seen as being separated from school activity and instead are the province of the parents. In this sense, the context of the country in this study may have impacted on the values that underpin the way in which schools are led and operated.

Here, moral values seem to matter most in this religiously conservative society, portrayed by the UNESCO World Data Report on Education (2011) as ‘attempting to develop proud model citizens, [that] cherish their national identity, culture, and Islamic values, and [that promote] forgiveness and tolerance’. Given the data, school principals, teachers and students opted for definition 4 with a clear association of effectiveness and the maintenance of the religious and spiritual values. Put into other words, the preservation of Islamic principles could be a possible solution for regulating students’ behavior and fostering their citizenship. However, this focus, rather than on academic success may make it difficult for the country to achieve its first aim, that of elevating the quality of schools to international standards. Clearly, for many in the UAE, “quality of schools” means something different to the western world and may need to be measured in a different way.

5. 5.2 Correlates of school effectiveness

The data collected from the questionnaire made it possible to make comparisons of the level of importance attributed to each of the elements identified in the research associated with school effectiveness first on the level of each of the four groups of stakeholders then on the wider level of the sum of the four groups of stakeholders. For this, the participants were asked to rate 48 items pertaining to five different domains or general correlates in order of importance. This order was scored on a Likert Scale that reflected the intensity of the stakeholders’ agreement with the given set of items. In a further step, the responses from individual groups were also compared, as well as for the whole sample for each of the five domains. The SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software was used to analyze the dataset collected from the questionnaire. As a first step, the researchers adopted the descriptive statistics method using frequencies and percentages to determine the broad trends of the stakeholders’ responses. In the second step, they considered the means and standard deviations in order to determine the strength of agreement in terms of each element of importance across the samples.

5.2.1 School Factors

Table 2 below presents the descriptive statistics of the four stakeholders’ groups as well as the full sample’s responses to school factors rated in terms of perceived level of importance. The table indicates that all school factors’ means ranging from 4.07 to 4.43 are viewed by stakeholders as being important.

Table 2: Mean scores for stakeholders’ responses to school factors in terms of level of importance

ITEM	School Factors	Principals	Teachers	Students	Parents	Whole sample	
		M	M	M	M	M	SD
1	There is a clear vision for the school	4.40	4.14	4.36	4.57	4.38	0.60
2	Teachers know what they are supposed to do	4.50	4.37	4.15	4.14	4.30	0.87
3	Staff are committed	4.50	4.34	4.08	4.17	4.28	0.98
4	The curriculum is appropriate	4.50	4.26	4.26	4.43	4.37	0.73
5	There is an effective discipline policy	4.60	4.41	4.14	4.13	4.31	0.88
6	The school has a clear plan for development	4.70	4.36	4.40	4.23	4.43	0.64
7	Teachers obtain good support from senior staff	4.60	4.20	4.16	4.04	4.24	0.86
8	The school is accountable to parents and families	4.50	4.40	3.93	4.12	4.20	0.86
9	Excellence is rewarded	4.00	4.03	4.06	4.04	4.07	0.99
10	The school offers co-curricular activities	4.50	4.14	3.87	3.86	4.08	0.94
11	Teachers use professional development to improve their teaching	4.70	4.32	4.35	4.12	4.37	0.61
12	The school conforms to UAE heritage and culture	4.50	4.37	4.46	4.29	4.39	0.64
13	School buildings and resources are used well	4.0	4.42	4.4	4.19	4.37	0.58
14	There is a good relationship between staff and students	4.6	4.39	4.18	4.37	4.39	0.83
15	The school evaluates its progress	4.6	4.26	3.75	4.15	4.18	0.88
16	Counseling services are provided	4.5	4.12	4.15	4.18	4.27	0.90

As seen from the table above, the full sample (especially principals and students) agreed on the high level of importance for effective schools to have a clear plan for development, in addition to a systematic planning of their activities (*Item 6*). The full sample (especially students) agreed on the high importance of valuing national culture and heritage (*Item 12*), a fact that demonstrates a deep concern on their part with preserving the national culture in schools. Furthermore, the full sample (especially principals and parents) strongly believed that effective schools should primarily strengthen the bonds between staff and students (*Item 14*). Both teachers and students reported that within an effective school, resources and facilities have to be used with due care and respect. Their agreement on the importance of this factor might be due to the continued need for up-to-date and effective resources in schools, without which the ability for teachers to teach effectively and students to achieve the necessary learning outcomes would be severely hampered. Conversely, the item ‘rewarding excellence’ was deemed as having the lowest degree of importance for stakeholders, scoring the lowest average mean response rate of ($M=4.07$), except for students. Possible reasons for this could be that introducing incentive programmes, such as pay for performance to reward excellence and combat student laziness, would be financially costly. The item relating to ‘extra-curricular activities’ also received less attention from stakeholders than other factors, except for principals. This could be attributed to the extensive formal class work already provided in public schools.

5.2.2 Teaching and Learning Factors

Table 3 below indicates that all teaching and learning factors are deemed important to the full sample with means ranging from 4.21 to 4.48. Promoting Islamic and Arab identity, setting an appropriate environment for learning and recruiting committed and well-qualified teachers (*Items 1, 2 and 12*) are seen as the most important teaching and learning factors to leverage school effectiveness. On one hand, this reveals a shared conviction across the stakeholder sample that it is imperative for effective schools to employ a qualified and dedicated teaching staff, to maximize student achievement and to secure a solid environment promoting local cultural and religious identity. On the other hand, stakeholders did not strongly support the development of a range of classroom learning activities ($M=4.21$), extra-curricular ones ($M=4.29$) and innovative academic tasks or learning activities.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of stakeholder responses to teaching and learning factors in terms of level of importance

ITEM	Teaching and Learning Factors	Principals	Teachers	Students	Parents	Whole sample	
		M	M	M	M	M	SD
1	The school promotes Islamic and Arab identity	4.75	4.48	4.28	4.37	4.47	0.87
2	There is an appropriate environment for learning	4.81	4.52	4.27	4.33	4.48	0.79
3	There is a challenging and attractive atmosphere for learning	4.72	4.42	4.18	4.19	4.38	0.83
4	Teachers emphasize core knowledge and skills	4.58	4.35	4.12	4.22	4.32	0.80
5	Teachers expect students to learn	4.58	4.32	4.46	4.10	4.37	0.78
6	Learning is monitored	4.65	4.33	4.08	4.16	4.31	0.83
7	Teachers support a range of classroom learning activities	4.41	4.09	4.13	4.19	4.21	0.81
8	Teachers support extracurricular activity	4.53	4.37	4.14	4.12	4.29	0.87
9	Teachers provide positive feedback	4.58	4.44	4.15	4.31	4.37	0.78
10	Class time and resources are used well	4.47	4.39	4.36	4.28	4.38	0.83
11	Teachers emphasize pupils’ personal, spiritual, moral, social, etc., development	4.56	4.43	4.42	4.28	4.42	0.81
12	Teachers are committed and well qualified	4.60	4.51	4.40	4.36	4.47	0.87

5.2.3 Student Factors

Table 4 below displays the descriptive statistics of the importance of the stakeholders’ responses (from both the full and sub samples) to student factors.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of stakeholder responses to students’ factors in terms of level of importance

ITEM	Student Factors	Principals	Teachers	Students	Parents	Whole sample	
		M	M	M	M	M	SD
1	Teachers emphasize the positive behavior of the students	4.71	4.57	4.30	4.45	4.51	0.85
2	Teachers encourage students to reach their maximum potential	4.65	4.50	4.38	4.40	4.48	0.84
3	Teachers encourage a high level of student self-esteem	4.57	4.35	4.32	4.29	4.38	0.81
4	Students are highly motivated in terms of learning	4.57	4.34	4.09	4.16	4.29	0.91
5	Teachers emphasize the development of higher order thinking skills	4.54	4.38	4.26	4.23	4.35	0.85
6	There is the provision of equal learning opportunities for all	4.60	4.45	4.26	4.32	4.41	0.85
7	There is the provision of effective counselling services	4.60	4.43	4.13	4.35	4.38	0.80

The four items in table 3 that received the highest rates reflect a deep concern with fostering students’ motivation (*Item 4, M=0.91*), positive behavior (*Item 1, M=0.85*), higher order thinking skills (*Item 5, M=0.85*) and equal opportunities for learning (*Item 6, M=0.85*). Other less-rated school factors such as elevating students’ self-esteem (*Item 3*) and counselling services seem to be taken more or less for granted. It could be argued that this focus on schools’ instructional goals echoes, to a certain extent, a similar one in many western countries where the development of higher-order thinking skills has been identified as a priority not only for science (Ben-Chaim et al., 2000), but for citizenship as well (Ten Dam & Volman, 2004; Zohar & Dori, 2003).

5.2.4 School-Home Relationship Factors

Table 5 below considers the school-home factors in relation to school effectiveness, as perceived by the stakeholders’ groups. Items 1 (*M= 4.38, SD =0.66*), 2 (*M= 4.20, SD = 0.78*) and 4 (*M= 4.33, SD =0.92*) were at the top of the school-home relationship list of factors. These three items reflect a parental involvement policy whereby effective schools have to connect with parents and provide them with regular information about their children’s performance.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of stakeholder responses to school –home relationship factors in terms of level of importance

ITEM	School-home relationship factors	Principals	Teachers	Students	Parents	Whole sample	
		M	M	M	M	M	SD
1	Parents are regularly informed about their child’s progress	4.82	4.91	3.52	3.53	4.20	0.78
2	Parents are involved in their child’s learning	5.00	4.87	4.00	3.65	4.38	0.66
3	There is an effective parent-school association	4.72	4.70	3.68	3.64	4.19	0.82
4	Parents are encouraged to help in the classroom	4.80	4.85	3.86	3.80	4.33	0.92
5	There is an active and supportive parents’ committee	4.60	4.44	3.41	3.46	3.98	0.93
6	Parents’ days are well attended	4.80	4.65	3.54	3.61	4.15	0.82
7	Parents are proud of the school	4.65	4.13	3.40	3.51	3.92	0.79

Individual group’ responses reflect differences of opinion. Standard deviation values for these factors indicate disagreement among stakeholders regarding the level of importance of these items. With respect to the array of items in table 4, principals and teachers were more supportive than were either students or parents.

This suggests that even though school administrators might be interested in increasing parental engagement in their child's learning, students are not really interested in having their parents involved, and in most cases parents themselves are even less interested in becoming engaged. As can be seen in Table 5, items 5, 6 and 7 were generally perceived as being less important. Principals and teachers were interested in more efficient parental involvement in which the parents are kept abreast of their child's progress through effective participation in children's learning on a regular and systematic basis, rather than being involved in occasional formal activities such as parent committees or parent days. Hourani et al. (2012) argued that students and parents are moderately interested in parent participation through parent-school associations and that their desire is to take a much more active role in schooling. They also noticed that due to 'lack of support systems [that] have failed to effectively develop an organizational process' (Hourani et al, 2012: 151), the principals and teachers believe that such associations are not effective and sufficiently well-structured so as to impact on school life efficiently mainly because of the heavy teacher workloads and overburdened administrative staff.

5.2.5 Local Community Factors

The findings presented in Table 6 below indicate that the four sample groups have more or less convergent perceptions regarding the degree of importance of the local community factors that are likely to contribute to the effectiveness of schools. The three highest response means indicate that the most important local community factors are items 4 ($M= 4.15$, $SD = 0.90$), 3 ($M= 4.13$, $SD = 0.95$) and 2 ($M= 4.12$, $SD = 0.92$).

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of stakeholders responses to local community factors in terms of level of importance

ITEM	Local Community Factors	Principals	Teachers	Students	Parents	Whole sample	
		M	M	M	M	M	SD
1	There is a variety of societies and clubs in the school	4.18	4.15	3.76	3.98	4.02	0.98
2	Staff play an active role in the community	4.24	4.12	4.09	4.02	4.12	0.92
3	Pupils play an active role in the community	4.32	4.17	4.01	4.02	4.13	0.95
4	Members of the community play an active role in the school	4.39	4.20	3.99	4.00	4.15	0.90
5	There are good links with local industry	4.22	4.02	4.00	4.02	4.07	0.93
6	Supporting social services is a major activity for the school	4.09	3.94	3.96	4.01	4.00	0.99

The stakeholders' responses to these three items show that most participants place a similar level of importance on these factors and that they are in favor of forging mutual school-community links and partnerships in order to achieve effectiveness. Stakeholders rated items 6, 1 and 5 slightly less important than the items discussed above with comparatively low means and standard deviation values ranging from $M= 4.00$, $SD = 0.99$; $M= 4.02$, $SD = 0.98$ to $M= 4.07$, $SD = 0.9$ respectively. This indicates that school involvement in the local community, social activities and services inside school, were of less interest to stakeholders probably due to the fact that most of the stakeholders still need to be informed and trained on how to liaise with various social communities beyond the school context. Within this perspective, Foskett (1992: 6-7) contends that 'In looking at the nature of external relations management, it is essential to start by considering which groups or individuals constitute the partners with whom a relationship must be established and developed'.

5.3 The stakeholders' highly-rated items

The previous discussion considered how stakeholders reacted to each of the characteristics individually. The questionnaire provided them with the opportunity to rate any or all the items in a relative way according to the degree of importance they allocated to each of them. The collected responses made it possible, on one hand, to have an insight into the way the stakeholders assessed the different items they were asked to rate using the Likert scale.

On the other hand, the responses' means made it possible to assess the stakeholders' mindsets and attitudes of the various aspects of school effectiveness represented by the forty eight statements as well as the most critical elements they highly rated as important. To paint a picture of the general perception each of these groups has of effective schooling in Abu Dhabi, the discussion below considers the results drawn from each of the stakeholder groups' responses to explore their perceptions regarding the whole set of items the five correlates encapsulate. Then with reference to table 2, we will compare the top-rated items within each group with the preferred school effectiveness definition to highlight any possible consistency and resonance of these items with the already selected definitions. In the same vein, as these items might differ from one group of stakeholders to another, we will select those factors that attracted the highest levels of agreement across all the stakeholders' groups so as to delineate the common overarching elements of school effectiveness within the context of the study.

5.3.1 What do principals see as the main correlates of school effectiveness?

The items that received the highest average score by principals are mostly in relation with the *school-home relationship factors* mainly items 2 ($M= 5.00$), 1 ($M=4.82$) and 4 ($M=4.80$) in addition to items 2 ($M=4.81$) and 1 ($M=4.75$) belonging to the *teaching and learning factors'* correlates. Three out of these five items are in close connection with parental involvement in school life. Local community factors and school ones were not given due importance. As such, Principals consider parental involvement worthwhile as long as parents are '*involved in their children's learning*' ($M= 5.00$) and '*informed about their progress*' ($M = 4.82$) in addition to '*helping in the classroom*' ($M = 4.80$). Additionally, principals stressed the importance for schools to promote '*Islamic and Arab identity*' ($M= 4.75$) secure an '*appropriate learning environment*' ($M = 4.81$). Nevertheless, it is questionable whether principals are outlining the importance of parental involvement in the schools' management as a factor that might contribute to the development of a participative leadership style or that parental involvement has just to be limited to the home-based follow-up of children's attainments and learning. Baker and Hourani (2014) made it clear that some school administrators do not support the idea of involving parents into the broader mission of the school such as hiring and firing teachers and making decisions relevant to the school budget. Others are cautious about the fact that their professional status is at risk in case parents interfere in activities that are the responsibility of the school. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Randeree and Chaudhry (2007:227) contended that '*Arab culture nurtures consultative and participative styles*' and that '*preference for these types of leadership styles in the Arab world is associated to the influence of entrenched Islamic and values and beliefs [...] since both Islamic and tribal law reinforce consultation in all aspects of life*'. Out of the four definitions proposed in table 2, principals opted for definition 4 of effective schools -that which "*supports the development of an understanding of Islamic principles*" ($M = 4.91$). As a result, the top-rated items enlisted in table 8 reflect an explicit correlation between this definition and two paramount factors namely the contribution of parents in the attainment of their children's learning outcomes as well as the school's role in sustaining an Islamic ethos as well as an Arab patriotic identity.

5.3.2 What do teachers see as the main correlates of school effectiveness?

A different picture appears when teachers are compared with the other stakeholders. What is striking is that the teachers' five top-rated items belong exclusively to the *School-Home Relationship* set of factors. The main focus was respectively on items 1 ($M=4.91$), 2 ($M=4.87$), 4 ($M=4.85$), 3 ($M=4.7$) and 6 ($M=4.65$). The selection of such items reflects the teachers' predominant perception to associate school effectiveness primarily with the roles parents might play in effective schooling. For the group of teachers, parental involvement is an outstanding contributor to leveraging the quality of school performance. Partly like the principals, they consider that parents have to be regularly informed about their children's progress ($M= 4.91$), involved in their learning ($M= 4.87$) and encouraged to help in the classroom ($M= 4.85$). An effective parent-school association ($M= 4.7$) along with attending parents' days ($M= 4.65$) are likely to foster parental involvement. What is striking about the teachers' perception of effective schooling is that no other factors are likely to be crucial compared with the parents' involvement. Rather than focusing on instructional or logistic factors, it is clear that the teachers are placing the onus for children's learning and progress onto the other stakeholders namely parents.

It is noteworthy that the group of teachers, all alike the schools' principals have previously selected definition 4 depicting an effective school as that which '*supports the development of an understanding of Islamic principles*' ($M= 4.51$). This means that school effectiveness is perceived as the concomitance of Islamic, religious and moral dimensions. Nevertheless, for unknown reasons, the teachers did not rate item 1 '*The school promotes Islamic and Arab identity*' (item 1 in '*Learning and Teaching Factors*') so highly as it ranks lower than the other host of items with an average score of 4.48.

5.3.3 What do students see as the main correlates of school effectiveness?

The students' main focus was on *School Factors* (items 12, $M=4.46$ and 13, $M=4.40$) and *Teaching and Learning Factors* (items 5, $M=4.46$; 11, $M=4.42$ and 12, $M=4.40$). The students' major responses reflected in the top-rated items they assessed as being too much important are in connection with the *school factors*' domain but predominantly of the *teaching and learning factors*' one. With a striking focus on the school and teachers, the students emphasized the importance for schools to be in congruence with the Emirati local heritage and culture ($M= 4.46$) and to duly make use of the available logistic resources and infrastructure ($M= 4.40$). Additionally, they highlighted the importance of a committed and well-qualified teaching staff ($M= 4.40$) in shaping students' personalities ($M= 4.42$) and directing them towards success ($M= 4.46$) as table 10 below shows.

Previously, students were in favor of definition 4 whereby "*An effective school supports the development of an understanding of Islamic principles*" ($M = 4.91$). Accordingly, an effective school for the students is that which is expected to adopt a clear policy based on loyalty to Islamic teachings in addition to preservation of the country's heritage and culture. These three components are in most cases associated with a spiritual and patriotic school identity that 'committed and well-qualified' teachers have to develop in students as item 3 '*Teachers emphasize pupils' personal, spiritual, moral, social, etc., development*' ($M= 4.42$) shows. Within this perspective, Simadi and Kamali (2004) studied the values structure namely gender and citizenship among 14,372 United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) students' and concluded that 'The results indicate that Islamic values ranked first with significant difference from all other values, which implies that Islam is still a main source of judgment among the UAEU student community'. They added that 'This result is not unexpected because it is consistent with UAEU philosophy which emphasizes Islamic tradition in modern life. This philosophy is thought to help students to develop talents to deal successfully with modern life expectations' (Simadi and Kamali, 2004: 27).

5.3.4 What do parents see as the main correlates of school effectiveness?

It has been stated previously (table 2) that parents strongly agreed with the definition 3 of an effective school "*an effective school ensures that graduates have the skills needed to find employment*" ($M = 4.93$). The data revealed that parents agreed upon the duty of teachers to get students to acquire these skills within '*a clear vision for school*' ($M= 4.57$), an '*Islamic and Arab identity*' ($M= 4.37$), along with an '*appropriate curriculum*' ($M= 4.43$) and '*a good relationship between staff and students*' ($M= 4.37$). All alike, teachers have to foster the '*positive behaviour of the students*' ($M= 4.45$) and '*encourage students to reach their maximum potential*' ($M= 4.40$).

The data reveal also that, the parents' highly rated items belong to three domains; *school factors* (3), *student factors* (2) and *teaching and learning factors* (1) with the roles of school, teachers and students being considered. Conversely, parents did not pick any item from the seven ones related to '*school-home relationship*' factors where parents are at stake. In fact, the lowest mean score within this variable was attributed to the item '*parents are proud of the school*' ($M= 3.40$). This might be clear evidence that either parents are not effectively involved, one way or another, in school governance or that they themselves feel they are relegated to a minor position at school and that they are not - *ipso facto* - accountable for any school reform as they are not directly implicated in any decision making process. In a study conducted in seven Abu Dhabi primary Public-Private Partnership (PPP) schools to explore parent and school administrator perspectives on the value and nature of parent involvement in the city of Abu Dhabi through their perceptions of roles and responsibilities, Baker and Hourani (2014) concluded that parents considered their role as recipients of information from the school regarding what their children do at school as well as their academic, social and emotional progress. They also made it clear that school administrators perceived parents as deflecting their parental responsibilities onto the school and that there were parents who viewed their role as being critical and becoming adversarial to the teachers and school. Hence, though there is a clear correspondence between parents' global vision of school effectiveness as shown in their selection of definition 3 and the top-rated factors that contribute to that paradigm, parents seem to distance themselves from any kind of involvement or active engagement into the process of school effectiveness holding the other stakeholders responsible for it.

In other words, what needs to be investigated further is the parents' predisposition to take part in forging an effective school vision that encompasses Islamic values, Arab identity and students' positive behavior.

6. Discussion of findings

Numerous issues are raised in the current study in regards with possible implementation of school effectiveness in Abu Dhabi. Further scrutiny of the data reveals the prevalence of the following phenomena in relation with the educational reform and the landscapes of leadership in the UAE. It appears from the gathered data that, in dealing with school effectiveness factors, the four groups of stakeholders rated the targeted items in various degrees of importance in a way that all the stakeholders do not seem to have an overwhelmingly coherent vision of what effectiveness really means.

6.1 Roles of the stakeholders and power struggles

A glimpse into the way the stakeholders rated the varied proposed items in the surveys shows that there are latent power struggles amongst them due to the rigid centralization of the decision making process. The roles and tasks of the stakeholders are not fairly distributed and shared. As a result, no one is ready to afford any aspect of failure. Al-Taneiji and McLeod (2008: 275) make it clear that ‘no formal documentation has been prepared for schools to outline or explain what decentralization means for them. The breadth of transfer (Cohen, 2004) of responsibilities has not been described, and the degree or depth to which schools will manage their own affairs has not been articulated. Neither has any detail been provided about the future roles of the Ministry of Education or the current Education Zones in relation to schools, or about the functions that have been retained by them. As an illustration of how the stakeholders involved in this study deflected responsibility for school effectiveness and improvement on one another, most of the items that the principals rated highly are in close connection with ways of parental involvement mainly schooling children, helping in the classroom and being informed about children’s progress. As such, apart from promoting Islamic and Arab identity, which is a common concern, the principals did not point to any aspect of school leadership as highly important and crucial in achieving effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study provided some insights into understanding school effectiveness in the context of the UAE. It considered what people perceive an effective school to be. It identified the correlates that are likely to make schools more effective from four different perspectives reflecting the perceptions of schools’ principals, parents, teachers and students. Additionally, the findings revealed both some specific individual perceptions held by the stakeholders’ groups as well as certain commonalities all across the four groups. The comparative analysis of the data led to a set of key correlates or features of school effectiveness in the UAE that might be taken into consideration in any incumbent improvement strategies to help align schools to international standards. The major difference between most other studies conducted on school effectiveness and the current one can be seen through the lens of cultural and religious contexts. Since most western studies have not considered the impact of a religious perspective on school effectiveness, the current study opens up a new option for future research. The current study has found, clearly, that religious and cultural values of Islam have been seen as a critical element to how people in the UAE perceive school effectiveness. The context of the Middle East is very different to that of western countries and stakeholders’ perceptions of what makes an effective school reflect that. One prevailing view across all the participants’ responses is that students’ behavior represents a level of concern. It may be the case that the perceptions of the adults in the school community differ quite substantially to what students see an effective school to be. Such a conflict in views may have led to concerns about behavior, even if the behavior itself has not been negative. However, further research needs to discern the nature of the cultural, ethical and community expectations of the Emirati emerging society with a focus upon improving students’ outcomes and consolidating the UAE identity and Islamic culture.

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