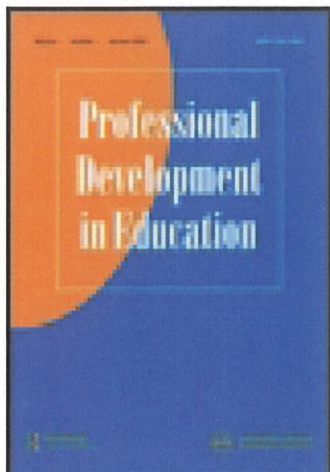


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Designing professional development for principals in a context of change: the case of Abu Dhabi

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Schools in Abu Dhabi are going through a period of transformation and reform. The Abu Dhabi Education Council commenced a professional development plan for principals to enhance their capabilities to manage and initiate change in light of the reforms. This study was conducted to explore principals' perspectives on professional development received. The research focused on anticipated areas of improvement as far as professional development design. Findings identify areas of improvement in terms of design related to content and process. The research employed a qualitative exploratory case-study approach. Semi-structured interviews, as tools for data collection, were contextualized within the framework of policies and decrees relevant to principal professional development. Interviews with 16 principals in different educational settings form the main source of data collection and analysis. Recommendations presented in this paper support the need for a more proactive stance in designing professional development that supports school principals to implement change.

Keywords: school reform; public policy; professional development; principal leadership; professional development design

Introduction

This research employs a qualitative exploratory case-study approach that focuses on exploring design elements of professional development offered to Abu Dhabi public school principals. The study was conceptualized within a context of change and school reform introduced in Abu Dhabi since 2005. It is framed by the principal performance standards set by Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), school self-evaluation Irtiqa'a requirements and the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, which emphasizes principal professional development through the Qiyada program. The paper explores the extent to which principal professional development is aligned with ADEC's professional standards and areas of improvement related to its design with respect to content and process.

Context of the study

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates situated in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula. Reform of the school system in Abu Dhabi has

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become a priority for desirable sustainable development in an attempt to reduce dependency on oil and create a knowledge-based economy (ADEC 2008).

Educational reforms in Abu Dhabi have been initiated by ADEC, a non-federal government authority established in September 2005. ADEC is in charge of formulating reform plans within the framework of the UAE's general education policy and for developing education through curricular, pedagogical and school leadership change (Kannan 2008, ADEC 2009). As part of the reforms to initiate change and improve standards in public and private schools, the Public Private Partnership project¹ was piloted in 2006. The Public Private Partnership project was designed to lay foundations for the New School Model (NSM) introduced in September 2010 (ADEC 2010a). Private operators from countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the USA and the United Kingdom assisted principals and staff to achieve standardized goals, enhance teaching practices and improve student performance to lift the quality of education.

School reforms and the call for principal professional development

Essential elements of the NSM signify the desire for a bi-literate child-centered learning environment designed to meet the individual instructional needs of children through differentiated instruction, application of research-based promotion and early identification of students in need of special education (ADEC 2009). The NSM is a catalyst to achieve the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030² (ADEC 2009) and is expected to be fully implemented across government schools by 2016 (ADEC 2012a). Through its implementation, ADEC aims to standardize curriculum, pedagogy and resources across public schools in Abu Dhabi.

Following the launch of the NSM, emphasis was given to professional growth and development of principals as 'leaders of learning' implementing reforms and supporting teachers to raise achievement. Professional development is considered a multidimensional lever providing principals with the knowledge and tools supporting teachers to adopt child-centered teaching-learning approaches inclusive of parents as partners in education (ADEC 2011a). It is underpinned by a series of decrees and policies aimed at enhancing principal, vice-principal and teacher professional capabilities. For example, Decree No. 53 (ADEC 2011b) that came into effect on 17 March 2011 stipulates that principals, vice-principals, heads of faculty and teachers must undergo professional development. In the same year, Administrative Decree No. 92 (ADEC 2011b) focused on the performance evaluation of staff in schools. ADEC's Educational Policy Agenda 1.1.3 states:

Abu Dhabi will provide high quality technical and professional education for all UAE learners by accommodating them through various educational pathways and promoting their readiness for further education, employment and contribution to the economic growth of Abu Dhabi as well as ensuring alignment with labor market needs ... professional education systems will equip learners with the knowledge, competencies and skills for a constantly evolving economy. (ADEC 2010b, p. 38)

ADEC's Educational Policy Agenda 2.2.3 highlights that: 'The emirate will develop and fund a professional development system that includes induction and continuous support programs for all public school educators and thus provide ongoing professional development to best equip them to meet the needs of all learners' (ADEC 2010b, p. 41). In such an educational context of reform and improvement, two

aspects of school leadership are prioritized: professional development for public school principals; and construction of professional standards to guide and evaluate performance.

To achieve the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 and better equip principals and vice-principals to support education reforms, ADEC initiated the Qiyada³ program. Qiyada offers principals professional development and training in strategic leadership, methods of leading people, organizations and communities and, more specifically, improving teaching and learning aligned with the NSM and school self-evaluation Irtiqa'a requirements. Qiyada was launched during the roll-out period of the NSM and focuses on leadership training for kindergarten and Cycle 1, 2 and 3 principals and vice-principals. Since September 2012 it is estimated that 800 principals, vice-principals and faculty heads across the Emirate of Abu Dhabi have participated in this professional development program (ADEC 2011a). Qiyada assists in the development of understandings and skills that guide principals to observe, assess and support classroom teachers in their planning and implementation of the NSM. ADEC recognizes and gives importance to the need to link professional development with five principal professional standards: 'Leading Strategically', 'Leading Teaching and Learning', 'Leading the Organization', 'Leading the People' and 'Leading the Community' (ADEC 2011a).

Professional performance standards and principals' performance evaluation

ADEC's (2011a) five professional standards have 18 corresponding elements (see Table 1). Principals are appraised against these five standards and elements.

Table 1. Principal professional performance standards and elements.

Standard	Elements		
'Leading Strategically': principals are visionary leaders of the school	Element 1: vision and strategic goals	Element 2: leading change	Element 3: school planning
'Leading Teaching and Learning': principals are the educational and instructional leaders of schools	Element 4: curriculum	Element 5: teaching effectiveness	Element 6: student achievement
	Element 7: learning environment		
'Leading People': principals are the apex of the school leadership team	Element 8: continuous learning	Element 9: professional development	Element 10: principal as leader
	Element 11: conflict management	Element 12: distributed leadership	
'Leading the Organization': principals are the organizational leaders of schools	Element 13: policies and procedures	Element 14: finances	Element 15: resources and facilities
'Leading the Community': principals are the leaders of the school community	Element 16: parent involvement	Element 17: collaborating with community/stakeholders	Element 18: sharing learning

The standards and elements lend structure and form a measure and/or guide for principals to perform their roles and responsibilities. They also serve to evaluate school performance and improvement in line with ADEC's self-evaluation Irtiq'a'a framework. The standards and elements are delineated to encompass six levels of performance starting with pre-foundation and progressing along a continuum to include foundation, emerging, established, accomplished and exemplary. Principals are required to assemble evidence by way of performance to facilitate a dialogue as part of their appraisal process. Evidence collected, collated and analyzed is used to demarcate the level of performance and create an individual portfolio or pathway for principal professional growth and improvement (ADEC 2012b). The importance of professional development in assisting principals to meet the standards and address professional needs is continually strengthened and reinforced.

School self-evaluation Irtiq'a'a

The Abu Dhabi government's intention is to create a high-quality, comprehensive education system that applies world-class standards and expertise (ADEC 2012c). Apart from establishing the professional standards, this vision has seen the launch of a school self-evaluation and inspection framework for improvement called Irtiq'a'a. Principals are expected to engage in self-evaluation and record their findings electronically using the self-evaluation form. Regular self-evaluation is envisaged as helping schools monitor the quality of education they provide through development of a school improvement plan.⁴ Judgment calls on school performance take into account the following: student attainment and progress; student personal development; the quality of teaching and learning; the meeting of student needs through the curriculum; the protection, care, guidance and support of students; the quality of the school buildings and premises; school resources to support its aims; and effectiveness of leadership and management. Core values underpinning Irtiq'a'a are: unrelenting commitment to high-quality and continuous improvement; transparency and integrity; and cooperation and partnership. Underpinning objectives include: identifying levels of performance quality in schools within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi; providing schools with clear recommendations for improvement; informing policy-making at sector level; and encouraging the sharing of best practice in education and the exchange of professional expertise (ADEC 2012c). Fulfilling Irtiq'a'a requirements provides yet another dimension that affirms the role principals play in managing change and improving schools.

Literature review

The roles and responsibilities that principals perform in schools range among strategic planning, curriculum development, enhancing teacher effectiveness, raising student outcomes, developing policies and procedures and building parent/school relationships to benefit students. In this regard, relevant literature on professional development for principals emphasizes three levels of results: acquisition of knowledge and skills; application of new learning to improve teaching and leadership; and raising student learning and achievement (Meador 2008). The review of the literature that follows explores leadership in relation to ADEC's performance standards. Further, aspects of principal professional development related to scope, value and issues of design are examined. In terms of the latter and related to aspects of design,

principal professional development is influenced by studies such as that of the Tierney Temple Fairchild Organization (2012) conducted in the USA, supporting the notion that mechanisms and processes accelerate leadership performance and school effectiveness. Wildy *et al.*'s (2011) study in Western Australia ascertains that professional standards for school leaders could be applied to the process of selecting and appointing school principals. Wildy *et al.* argue that robust measures sufficiently capable of differentiating performance help support judgment calls about effectiveness and suitability of principals in the public educational system. Further, the development of performance-based tasks framed within a set performance standard can be used to examine and assess the effectiveness and suitability of school leadership. Militello *et al.* (2013) provide an empirical measure of how principals enact prescribed leadership performance standards into practice. Their study examined how current school principals perceive and implement the practice of a specific set of leadership performance standards to enhance school change. A result of such studies is that several models of principal professional performance standards have emerged in recent times. All have elements considered globally appealing but vary in scope, parameters and outcomes. Specific dimensions relative to ADEC's professional standards include: leading strategically; leading teaching and learning; leading people; leading the organization; and leading the community. Next, each standard is explored from a more generic literature base inclusive of what this means for principals functioning in the context of Abu Dhabi.

Leading strategically

Establishing a school's vision as part of leading strategically is something all educationalists believe to be important (Day 2000). No doubt vision plays an important role in reform. Vision offers the organization a sense of direction and unified purpose. However, leading strategically is more than just developing a vision. It also concerns creating a shared mission statement followed by strategic planning with staff and community input (Davis *et al.* 2005). Ibrahim and Al-Mashhadany's (2012) study investigated the role of educational leaders in tackling change in public schools in Al Ain, UAE. The study revealed that principals demonstrated a reasonable understanding of their role as strategic and visionary leaders. For example, 50% strongly agreed on the value of this role, 26% agreed, 6% were uncertain, 4% disagreed and 16% strongly disagreed. The study however notes that few principals were convinced that it was their role to develop the vision and mission of schools.

Leading strategically requires principals to develop a collaborative school vision of excellence and equity that sets high standards for all. This means accepting responsibility for setting and achieving goals and targets, using appropriate technologies as learning tools, and participating in self-development (Day 2000). Strategic planning assists principals in dealing with changing environments and managing the daily challenges that confront an organization. As such, it is not a single concept, procedure or tool but embraces a range of strategies, of varying applicability, but with success and school improvement foremost in mind. Within the context of Abu Dhabi and in terms of leading strategically, ADEC stipulates the role of principals including components that promote knowledge about ADEC's strategic plan and the implementing of its vision. ADEC highlights the transformative role of principals from managers to effective and efficient leaders. Leading strategically endorses school improvements, being up to date with national and educational trends,

communicating with the community and stakeholders and enhancing the process of change creatively and innovatively (ADEC 2011a).

Leading teaching and learning

Relevant literature that relates to this standard promotes principals as instructional leaders whose roles and responsibilities include: developing, implementing and evaluating programs through academic and systemic reviews aimed at creation of effective programs in line with changing pedagogies (Bredson and Joanasson 2000, Meador 2008); monitoring teacher and student progress and creating positive learning environments (Day 2000); and influencing teacher learning through involvement in the design, delivery and assessment of professional development outcomes (Bredson and Joanasson 2000). As lead professionals involved in teaching and learning, effective principals are seen as raising student achievement (Cotton 2003, Leithwood *et al.* 2004, Davis *et al.* 2005, Hallinger and Heck 2010). School-related factors associated with improving outcomes for students place the influence of principals as second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood *et al.* 2004). Newman *et al.* state: 'we recognize the principal's leadership as a critical force in the school's capacity to educate students' (2000, p. 264). Davis *et al.* (2005) explain that principals can influence student achievement in two primary ways: through development of effective teachers; and through effective organizational processes. Instructional leaders promote and ensure student success through: developing a vision of learning in schools; promoting a school culture focused on student learning and staff growth; providing organizational management; supporting collaboration; and working ethically within the broader cultural context. These concepts have been and continue to be incorporated in principal professional development programs (Murphy 2001, Levine 2005, Pounder 2011).

Despite the literature advocating the role of principals as instructional leaders influencing teaching and learning, Davis *et al.* (2005) comment that, in practice, few act as instructional leaders. Their days are filled with activities of management, scheduling, reporting, handling relations with parents and community, and dealing with the multiple crises and special situations that are inevitable in schools. Further, most principals spend relatively little time in classrooms and even less time analyzing instructional strategies with teachers. Principals may arrange time for teachers to meet and engage in professional development but rarely provide intellectual leadership for growth in teaching and monitoring learning.

Much by way of support is offered to the viewpoint that professional development programs for principals must reinforce a shift away from solely developing administrative competencies to fostering learning, developing the curriculum and enhancing teacher effectiveness. This is justified on the basis that the latter is more likely to attract and retain effective teachers and influence student achievement (Davis *et al.* 2005). Betielle *et al.* (2009), Heck and Hallinger (2009) and Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) argue that the goal of principal professional development is to direct and promote effective action towards improving teaching and learning effectiveness and addressing problems negatively impinging on student outcomes. Further, enhancing change necessitates principals becoming involved in matters of the curriculum. Professional development for principals, focused on curriculum development, not only serves to advance their own curriculum knowledge but also strengthens the role they play as advocates and facilitators of teaching and learning.

In the absence of professional development, principals remain unsure of what to look for or how to intervene when they visit classrooms to conduct teacher evaluations. Sometimes outdated knowledge on pedagogy and curriculum fails to support principals' abilities to lead teaching and learning (Heck and Hallinger 2009). Within the scope of the 'Leading Teaching and Learning' standard, ADEC expects principals to demonstrate knowledge about ADEC curriculum standards; to develop effective modes and models of teaching-learning in order to employ strategies for improving students' academic achievements and motivating them to learn. These modes and models are organized in a teaching-learning environment where inclusion, differential learning and the use of technology are ensured (ADEC 2011a).

Leading people

Principals must manage the teaching and learning process. One way of managing the teaching and learning process is by leading people through created organizational structures such as professional learning communities informed by theories of distributed cognition and shared expertise. Leading people in this manner is not merely an act of individual consideration but draws on the social nature of learning. Principals charged with leading people are required to build opportunities for collective participation and use expanded resources in determining and sustaining learning for school improvement. As part of the leading people standard, principals are responsible for evaluating performance (Bredeson and Johanasson 2000). Evaluations should be fair, well documented and evidence based. Principals engaged in teacher evaluations are expected to spend quality time in classrooms whereby they conduct observations, gather information and provide feedback to initiate improvement inclusive of professional development. Related actions encourage inquiry and knowledge-building to advance outcomes for students (Meador 2008).

The leading people standard positions the principal in a role where she/he is expected to develop shared purpose and direction, build and sustain effective teams, engage in shared leadership, facilitate productive and positive work relationships, and engage in rigorous professional development for self, faculty and staff (Bredeson and Johanasson 2000). In terms of ADEC, this standard embodies building and valuing interpersonal relationships in the school environment. This can be consolidated through constructing models of adult learning and continual professional development in order to create a culture of team work and team development. Moreover, this standard focuses on developing ways to build and sustain a learning community that facilitates improvement and changes on the school and community levels (ADEC 2011a).

Leading the organization

Principals are expected to ensure the school is well managed and organized to meet its aims and targets. Principals, in their leading the organization management capacities, are charged with writing, reviewing and implementing policies and procedures as needed. Policy transmission to stakeholder groups also falls under the jurisdiction of what principals do to maintain an effective organization. An effective student handbook, for example, can ensure that students, teachers and parents have sufficient understanding on policies and procedures to determine accountability (Meador 2008). Leading the organization as a performance standard requires principals to

share leadership, management and decision-making in order to ensure equitable management of staff resources, to develop a culture that promotes self-motivation, to provide a safe, secure and healthy school environment and to collaborate with others in strengthening the school's organizational capacity (Harris 2010). As indicated by ADEC (2011a), undertaking this role means principals understand ADEC's organizational structure featured by the importance of two-way communication. This standard underpins the principles and models of school self-evaluation Irtiqa'a and strategies to functionalize school improvement and implementation of education changes. Under this standard, principals are proactive on informed decisions – in terms of financial planning and budget management.

Leading the community

Principals work to embed lifelong learning into the everyday life of school stakeholders, knowing that it enriches the ambience of the school and converts it into a place of excitement, energy, learning and direction (Lewis and Murphy 2008). As part of the leading the community standard, principals are required to nurture relationships with parents and community members to benefit the school (Meador 2008). ADEC (2011a) claims principals fulfill this performance standard through: knowing current issues and trends in education; utilizing local community resources; and recognizing the work of external agencies including official organizations and ministries. Through the collaborative opportunities with the community, benefits for the school are maximized.

What model is needed? Bottom-up or top-down professional development

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2012) notes that professional standards for principals raise student achievement, ensure equity and excellence, create a school where quality teaching and learning thrive, meet the needs of the community and help to shape the wider education system. The need for professional standards thus conceptualized appears inclusive of: leading teaching and learning; developing self and others; leading improvement, innovation and change; leading the management of the school; and engaging and working with the community.

These features endorse the concept of continuous improvement alongside different levels of self-learning and development for better leadership and school management practice. Continuous improvement is seen to take place through: understanding the context of change and deciding follow-up action; considering assumptions of change with respect to action; planning and acting for constructive change; reviewing outcomes of change; and responding to or reflecting on changes that have been initiated. The framework provides for professional dialogue among stakeholders, professional learning for principals, and principals communicating their role and the roles of other stakeholders to the community. Principal appraisal is measured against four criteria: aspiring, practicing, emerging and experienced. Principals report on aspects such as achievement of performance standards, identification of future professional development, communication of their role to the school council and parents and access to relevant research to improve practice (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2012).

With reference to the Australian example noted above, the design of principal professional development in terms of content and process needs to be emergent and organically conceptualized to galvanize and facilitate the implementation of reform and school development. The concept of an emerging or organic form of professional development is being adopted in countries such as Sweden and Norway where the reforms are linked to designing professional development shaped by a bottom-up approach (Berg 2003). Fullan (2002) suggests it is necessary to adopt bottom-up and top-down models in structuring professional development that is effective and sustainable; principal professional development has to be stakeholder and practice focused, recurrent and treated as complex, but not a quick-fix or a one-size-fits-all solution (Fullan 2002).

Professional development for principals: scope

To implement organizational change and bearing in mind the significance of measurable and well-defined performance standards, professional obligations that principals face range from fulfilling the requirements of a common purpose to an agenda accommodating diversified priorities. With reference to the context of the school and individual professional needs, the scope of principal professional development is: governed by the need to work in the best interest of students and focus on solving 'authentic problems' of practice (Harris 2010); aimed at individual and/or school improvement, embedded in the framework of the overall centralized professional development plan (Collins 2000, Guskey 2002); influenced by an emphasis on school-level development of education and the belief that principals play a big part in increasing the effectiveness of learning (Lewis and Murphy 2008); to cover aspects such as curriculum knowledge and instruction (Harris 2010); and to create propensity for opportunities to examine practice that aim at defining a sense of personal vision of being a principal of a high-performing learning community engaged in continuous improvement.

Cotton (2003) and Leithwood *et al.* (2004) highlight three sets of practices associated with professional development for principals: setting direction; developing people; and redesigning the organization. Leithwood *et al.* (2004) advocate that effective principal professional development programs should be shaped by the kinds of competencies that constitute effective principal action in support of stakeholder learning. These competencies require self-management; career growth; construction of professional development; establishing learning communities; and portfolio development.

Evaluating the value of professional development

Nicholson *et al.* (2005) reported that principal professional development practices and evaluation have changed little since school reform became a major policy issue over 20 years ago. In addition, much professional development continues to be the traditional type, where workshop-style construction is led by outside experts with little participant involvement. Furthermore, professional development significance and value are subject to the appropriateness of the topic, the effectiveness of the presenters' skills and the presentation format rather than changes in participants' behavior or the impact on student learning and school reorganization and effectiveness.

Knowing what constitutes effective professional development is important. However, determining its value necessitates criteria of success, merit or worth. Four elements to be considered include: socio-cultural context; sets of standards or criteria; comparison between what is being evaluated and standards/criteria; and making a judgment of worth or value in relation to the standards/criteria (Guskey 2000). Judging the value of professional development is marred by misconceptions. Guskey (2000), for example, identifies three common mistakes. First, much evaluation is not really evaluation but rather documentation of occurrence and participation, and the type of data that emerges does not provide information on value or effectiveness of the activity. Second, evaluations often lack depth of coverage, tending to seek only evaluation of participant satisfaction rather than gains in knowledge. Third, professional development programs are not evaluated critically in terms of their design. English (2000) condemns the use of professional standards as influential determinants when judging the value of professional development. He argues that standards are not research based or empirically supported and their resulting ambiguity may detract from fully determining value or success. Guskey (2000) states that just as much as the reforms are relevant to conducting and implementing professional development so is evaluating professional development to pinpoint areas of need. To adequately evaluate the effectiveness of professional development, Guskey (2000) suggests examining principal behavior and the impact this has on student achievement and school improvement. Informative evaluation of professional development is critical because poorly conceived and/or delivered professional development may be actually more damaging than no professional development at all. Poorly designed professional development can lead to cycles of non-implementation and low expectations for future growth and development (Knight 2007).

Issues of design

Guskey and Yoon point out that 'in the history of education, no improvement effort has ever succeeded in the absence of thoughtfully planned and well-implemented professional development' (2009, p. 498). Any rationale underpinning professional development must be informed by essential questions and problems of practice, teaching and learning. In this regard, Hirsh (2009) and Nicholson *et al.* (2005) suggest that professional development contains four characteristics: ongoing; job embedded; connected to school improvement; and site based. Ongoing means progressing beyond a single event to coverage over the school year and inclusive of activities such as multiple workshops on a single topic, workshops combined with follow-up meetings with a mentor/mentee, or action research projects. Job embedded means that all or some activities occur in the school site and/or are directly involved with the routine work of principals. Connected to school improvement addresses the applicability factor that contributes to improvement. Site based means that the needs of the individual or system are addressed (Nicholson *et al.* 2005, Hirsh 2009).

Scher and O'Reilly (2009) in their study on professional development used a meta-analysis technique to examine the influence of professional development on teacher knowledge, teacher practice and student achievement. They suggest design decisions include those of duration, content versus pedagogy, and program components. Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) emphasize engaging participants in authentic practice; mentoring principals where the focus is on the participants' field experiences. The purpose of field experiences is said to 'stimulate the

theory-to-practice linkage' (2005, p. 11). Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) support the valuable opportunities that engagement with real-life problem-solving with colleagues presents. They argue the case for stated action research projects with a focus on the mentor-mentee working relationship and/or opportunities to work in teams as part of professional development design.

In response to today's complex world and mounting adaptive challenges, new ideas on professional development design are being expounded. Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2012), for example, advocate a learning-oriented design. Their four-pillar model incorporates teaming, mentoring, collegial inquiry, and leadership in support of building internal capacity for improvement. Ming (2005) proposes a 'Thematic Study Tour' as an effective design for professional development. Ming notes that, 'people benefit most from studying the practices of another system when they know more about their own problems and the system under study, and are able to link what they see to their own work' (2005, p. 25). In the Thematic Study Tour, participants take part in a process of sensitization that enables them to benefit more from the visit. The Thematic Study Tour involves assigning a facilitator for principals and a professional development plan that includes workshops on implementing improvements and follow-up action plans implemented in the principal's own school. This is followed by feedback and evaluation of professional development in practice.

Effective professional development involves more than just a quick-fix solution alienated from context. It is important to recognize that all teaching and learning activities take place in a social context where communities of practice function (Walker 2003). As a consequence, professional development needs to be associated with social constructs of learning where language as a cultural trait needs to be taken into account. Teaching-learning practices and the delivery of professional development grounded in a socio-cultural construct are advocated by authors. Putnam and Borko (2000), for example, argue for professional development and training programs that take into account an understanding of the environment where learners learn and practice their profession. The adoption of socio-cultural constructs acknowledges that learners in training do not work in isolation of their context. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung liken the scope of professional development to peeling an onion where multiple layers, identified by data and specific need, require uncovering (Timperley *et al.* 2007). Effective professional development should recognize not only the theories but also the rationale that underpins the principals' improved practice.

Research method and methodology

This research project was conducted by two Education Studies faculty members employed at a higher education institution in Abu Dhabi. One of the researchers is a bilingual English-Arabic speaker. The overall aim of this research was to explore the nature of professional development received by Abu Dhabi public school principals and areas of improvement related to design, situated within the framework of the professional standards and the transformative roles and responsibilities of principals. Therefore, the dimensions of the research questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the principals' perceptions and views on professional development?

- (2) To what extent is the professional development that principals received in harmony with the 'Principal Performance Evaluation Standards' and school reforms set by ADEC?
- (3) What areas are anticipated for professional development improvements, in alignment with the 'Principal Performance Evaluation Standards' set by ADEC?

The research employed an exploratory qualitative case-study approach. Case-study research focuses on 'discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied; offering the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education' (Merriam 2009, p. 3). Creswell (2003) argues that researchers in qualitative research use the literature and empirical material in a manner consistent with the assumption of learning from the participant and not prescribing the questions that need to be answered from the researcher's standpoint. Case-study research excels at bringing researchers to an understanding of a complex issue and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research. The purpose of case-study research is to describe the particulars of the case in detail, take learning from and develop theory that is particularistic and contextual (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). As part of this case study and in accordance with the research aims, semi-structured interviews with 16 principals formed the main tool for data collection.

Sample selection

Principal participants were Emirati native Arabic speakers employed in Abu Dhabi public schools. They were selected by purposive sampling. Criteria for selection included: being an Emirati national; and participation in ADEC's Qiyada professional development program offered by ADEC. Kindergarten and Cycles 1, 2 and 3 Emirati principals who undertook professional development over a two-year period with various providers participated in the research. Schools classified as within Abu Dhabi city were considered. Since the target population was Emirati principals, two common⁵ co-educational schools and one co-educational Cycle 1 school run by non-Emirati principals were excluded from sample selection.

There are 123 public schools in the city of Abu Dhabi (see Table 2). School types include the following: kindergartens; Cycle 1 schools (Grades 1–5, boys' schools and girls' schools); Cycle 2 schools (Grades 6–9, boys' schools and girls' schools); Cycle 3 schools (Grades 9–12, boys' schools and girls' schools); and common schools. There are three categories of common schools: boys' common schools; girls' common schools; and co-educational common schools. Co-educational common schools are exclusively for kindergartens and Cycle 1.

According to ADEC Department of Professional Development data, 79 principals from this pool of 123 schools received professional development during the academic years 2010–2012 (see Table 3).

From the 79 school principals, a 20% random purposive sample was chosen from the various school types. From the 24 kindergartens, five school principals were selected. With reference to the Cycle 1 boys' schools and girls' schools category, seven school principals were selected out of 36 schools. From Cycle 2 boys' schools and girls' schools, two school principals were selected out of 10 schools. From Cycle 3 boys' schools and girls' schools, one school principal was selected

Table 2. School distribution in the city of Abu Dhabi.

Kindergarten	Common schools Girls	Common schools Boys	Co-educational	Cycle 1 Girls	Cycle 1 Boys	Co-educational	Cycle 2 Girls	Cycle 2 Boys	Cycle 3 Girls	Cycle 3 Boys
26	3	6	1	21	21	1	11	11	12	10

Source: ADEC School Finder (ADEC 2012d).

Table 3. Distribution of principals who received professional development in public schools in the city of Abu Dhabi.

Kindergarten	Common schools Girls	Common schools Boys	Co-educational	Cycle 1 Girls	Cycle 1 Boys	Co-educational	Cycle 2 Girls	Cycle 2 Boys	Cycle 3 Girls	Cycle 3 Boys
24	1	2	1	17	19	1	7	3	2	2

Source: ADEC School Finder (ADEC 2012d).

Table 4. Distribution of principals participating in this research.

Cycle and type of school	Total number of principals who received professional development	20% of participants per cycle and school type	Principal's gender	
			Female	Male
Kindergarten	24	5	5	0
Common schools (gender segregated and co-educational)	4	1	1	0
Cycle 1 (girls' schools and boys' schools)	36	7	5	2
Cycle 2 (girls' schools and boys' schools)	10	2	1	1
Cycle 3 (girls' schools and boys' schools)	4	1	0	1

out of four schools. From the common schools, one common co-educational school, a combination of kindergarten and Cycle 1 to Grade 3, was selected out of four schools.

Public schools in Abu Dhabi continue to be gender administered, although changes are anticipated gradually. Selection of principals as per gender was not a determining criterion for this study; principals were selected according to school type and picked as part of a random purposive sample. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that kindergartens are run by females (this is embedded in the UAE as part of a social norm); all Cycle 1 girls' schools are run by females and Cycle 1 boys' schools are run by either males or females. Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 girls' schools are run by the same gender as the students. By virtue of this reality, the majority of principals who took part in this research were females, with the exception of two male principals in Cycle 1 boys' schools, one male principal in a Cycle 2 boys' school and one male principal in a Cycle 3 boys' school. Table 4 presents the distribution of participants.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to enter the inner world of another person to gain an understanding from their perspective (Patton 2002). For the purposes of this study, semi-structured interviews afforded depth of data (Denzin and Lincoln 2003) because principals were encouraged to reflect, discuss and share their thoughts and experiences.

Participants were informed of the study via bilingual introductory letters emailed to them and through a follow-up personal telephone call. Bilingual consent forms, attached to the letters, meant principals could indicate their willingness to participate in the research free of coercion. Sixteen individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals. All semi-structured interviews took place at respective school settings and were administered by the researchers. The interviews took between 50 and 60 minutes to complete. Interview questions in the form of an interview guide helped steer the interview. They were developed by the researchers through an extensive review of 'Professional Standards for Principals' and 'Principal Performance Evaluation' documents and a review of relevant school principal effectiveness literature. The bilingual semi-structured interview guide was given to

participants prior to interview commencement with reminders that questions were linked to the professional standards and designed in such a way as to facilitate a conversation.

The semi-structured interview guide used to steer the conversation contained questions that ascertained perceptions of key aspects of professional development as expressed by the principals. The guideline questions portray the five performance standards for principals set by ADEC. Stemming from the performance standards, the semi-structured interview guide endorses four major features. First, general features; this addressed how principals perceive their role and responsibilities in the current educational changes and school reforms, within the realm of strategic planning, community and school leadership and guiding the staff to develop the school.

The second feature focused on principals' learning. An example of questions addressed in this area was about the knowledge and skills received in helping principals achieve their jobs effectively.

Third was principals' reactions to professional development, such as: 'What areas do they think school principals need to be more knowledgeable about in the context of school reforms and change?' 'Do they have any suggestions or comments on how to improve the professional development received?' 'What areas would they like to see themselves developing at, in the future; within the framework of educational changes?' 'Are there any factors that may prevent or restrict them from undertaking professional development?'

The fourth feature addressed principals' roles and responsibilities as far as their newly anticipated roles and responsibilities in times of change and how professional development can be more effective, in terms of guiding them (principals) towards fulfilling these roles and responsibilities. For example, how can professional development be more supportive and efficient for conducting teachers' appraisal and school self-evaluation *Irtiq'a* and what skills and knowledge are still missing to introduce school improvements on academic, curricular and community involvement levels?

In construction of the guide the researchers opted to exclude the following elements linked to the standards: Element 2 – Leading Change was by-passed as the need to manage change appears in all standards and elements; Element 14 – Finances and Element 15 – Resources and Facilities were not considered on the grounds that they fell in the arena of ADEC's centralized macro administrative executive decision-making as opposed to within the realm of principal initiative or decision-making, and segments of Element 15 dealing with teaching effectiveness are also contained in Element 5.

In keeping with participants' wishes and respect for cultural protocols, the decision was made not to audio-tape the interview but to manually record participant responses at the time of the interview. Both researchers recorded responses but the bilingual researcher recorded the Arabic responses, which were translated into English at a later stage. This process of recording, albeit time consuming, facilitated the elicitation of deeper information and verification of information given by participants. Back-translation to verify data accuracy and integrity was undertaken and administered through a certified translator (Vitray 2007).

Data analysis

In terms of data analysis, the researchers began with an initial reading of one transcript and focused on: the perceived benefits of professional development received;

areas of improvement related to design; and the transformative roles and responsibilities of principals in a context of change. Interview data were coded into data chunks. A second reading of the same transcript prompted the underlining of key phrases, words or sentences that had deliberate bearing on each area of focus. Continuous questioning in the form of 'What does this mean?' initiated additional thoughts and ideas. Summary notes were made in the margin of the transcript. The second level of data analysis established tentative categories and sub-categories. As the analysis proceeded, an analytical framework relative to design and areas of improvement was developed. Throughout, inter-coder reliability was achieved by researchers working together with the data in the data analysis/interpretation process. Data analysis was both inductive and deductive: deductive based on the research questions and related to the 'Professional Standards for Principals' document, and inductive because codes and categories emerged directly from the comments provided by the participants. Inductive coding was recognized as important because it represented the perspectives of participants related to areas of improvement.

Findings

The findings indicate that principals' professional development was well received and in harmony with the 'Professional Standards for Principals' and 'Principal Professional Evaluation' documents. Perceived benefits relate to enhancement of principals' knowledge, skills and capabilities in relation to the five standards, including: 'Leading Strategically', 'Leading Teaching and Learning', 'Leading People', 'Leading the Organization' and 'Leading the Community'. Areas of design improvement focused on content and processes.

Benefits

Within the realm of 'Leading Strategically', principals noted that professional development modules were informative as far as understanding ADEC's vision and mission (Principal 1). Relevant to this standard, professional development was significant in terms of enhancing school change. Principal 12 stated: 'I became proactive and learnt how to change and develop.' Principal 13 added: 'I have gained the knowledge and skills to implement change in our school.' Benefits within 'Leading Strategically' included knowledge about school improvement plans and its indicators within the *Irtiqa*'a framework.

In terms of 'Leading Teaching and Learning', principals explained that professional development assisted them in organizing workshops for staff in areas of need that improved teaching proficiency. Principals felt they were more knowledgeable about positive and attractive classroom environments (Principals 1, 2 and 7). In addition to this, benefits were relevant to the principals' newly allocated instructional leadership role. These benefits were traced on the curricular and pedagogical levels. Principals became enlightened with student-centered teaching-learning strategies, the significance of hands-on activities and students' engagement in learning (Principals 2 and 5). Within the newly introduced scope of the principals' roles and responsibilities, more benefits were witnessed through the professional development on offer. In this respect, principals portrayed that benefits revolved around observing teachers and giving them feedback on implementing the new methodologies in delivering the NSM curriculum (Principals 11 and 14). In terms of the integration

approach and thematic teaching introduced by the NSM, kindergarten and Cycle 1 principals said that the NSM was introduced in kindergarten and Cycle 1 schools and this involved curricular integration. Hence, principals promoted integrating music, art and physical education with language arts subjects: 'I started implementing integrated thematic teaching across English, Arabic subjects and music' (Principal 13). In line with teaching effectiveness, the benefits encompassed facilitating the use of teaching and learning resources (Principal 12). Understanding the notion of special needs inclusion and differentiated teaching-learning were also recognized as benefits (Principals 13 and 15). In the area of technology, principals generally noted the benefits regarding the use of technology tools for entering grades electronically and using ADEC's electronic Student Information System. Principal 11 mentioned, 'I am now using technology tools and excel sheets to calculate absenteeism.' Despite this benefit, principals expressed the need to acquire technology tools on how to enter assessment records and monitor grades data analysis (Principals 1, 2 and 4).

For the 'Leading the People' standard, principals commented that professional development equipped them with skills required for training other principals (Principal 8). In response to 'Continuous Learning', Principal 2 stated that, 'Professional development helped me train other principals. It helped me organize workshops for staff in the areas they need.' Principals benefited in terms of sharing their knowledge in their schools. The principals became more confident to deliver professional development to their teachers and parents, and this boosted their morale. They added that professional development will eventually help them implement the eight performance areas stipulated in Irtiqa'a (Principals 4, 6, 8 and 18). As for benefits relevant to anticipated roles and responsibilities, Principals 1 and 9 said that professional development equipped them with knowledge of leadership qualities, including expectations of their roles and responsibilities. Principal 13 reflected: 'I became more verbal in expressing my views and helped me justify administrative decisions for parents and teachers.'

In the area of 'Leading the Organization', principals stated that professional development endowed them with the knowledge and understanding of health and safety measures required in schools (Principal 2). Recommendations on health and safety were taken on board by all the principals and were integrated within the school regulations and safety procedures. Principals voiced that professional development was informative in making them understand the focus of Irtiqa'a in terms of its implication and importance for school self-improvement. Principals learnt about school self-evaluation (Irtiqa'a) and the criteria to measure school quality and school effectiveness to monitor improvement (Principal 4). Moreover, Principal 15 indicated, 'I learnt how to prepare a written warnings and communicative letters.'

For the 'Leading the Community' standard, the benefits accrued point to the usefulness and significance for enhancing parental involvement, which was viewed as a challenging dimension within the context of curricular changes and school reforms (Principals 2 and 7). Principals viewed professional development as useful in the area of parental involvement, as the principals became knowledgeable on the significance of parental involvement and home-school links, although paths to improve home-school links and partnerships were not covered. Moreover, the benefits were recognized in terms of the opportunity to communicate, and to compare notes and share ideas with other principals in relation to school management, school self-evaluation and responsibilities of principals (Principals 2 and 4). Principal 13 added,

'Benefits revolved around learning how to share information with other principals to fulfill Irtiqa'a school self-evaluation and constructing School Improvement Plans.' Principals have seen the significance of professional development with respect to motivating teachers and parents to become more involved in school community activities and events (Principals 10 and 13).

Areas needing improvement

An analysis of data from interviews revealed areas of design improvement relative to content and process. Perceived areas of improvements to content fell into the category of knowledge advancement and are presented according to the standards: 'Leading Strategically', 'Leading Teaching and Learning', 'Leading the People', 'Leading the Organization' and 'Leading the Community'. In terms of process, structural issues of delivery, provider capabilities, timing and communication were highlighted as needing improvement.

Design: content – 'Leading Strategically'

According to ADEC, 'Leading Strategically' involves vision and goal construction, leading change and school planning. Within this realm, principals felt that aspects of vision construction, mission statement formulation and strategic planning were not fully explained (Principals 3, 9 and 10). Principals noted the need to become knowledgeable about planning strategically, prioritizing school goals and operationalizing planning to inform practice (Principals 2 and 14). Principals voiced an urgency to learn about the logistics and mechanisms of piloting the newly introduced educational changes, such as conducting teacher and staff appraisals (Principals 15 and 16).

Principals raised concern that professional development effectiveness was not in alignment with the current educational framework of school reform and change; that is, professional development did not sufficiently synchronize their new roles as facilitators of school development with that of Irtiqa'a requirements. Principals claimed that they need to be introduced to the 'what' and 'how' to improve schools; and added that as each school varied in its nature and demands, a unique take of improvement was needed (Principal 3).

Design: content – 'Leading Teaching and Learning'

On the 'Leading Teaching and Learning' level, principals felt they did not have enough curriculum knowledge to gauge appropriateness and suitability of the curriculum in line with catering for students' needs. They wanted to know how to facilitate the curriculum for better learning in line with Emirati students' needs and abilities (Principal 1). Principals valued the importance of knowing the scope of the curriculum to meet the needs of second-language learners (Principal 4). One principal noted:

I need to be critical about the curriculum and knowledgeable about how to evaluate its appropriateness and suitability for UAE learners who are bilingual Arabic native speakers. I need to know the curricular terminologies in order to know what we are talking about when we are implementing the professional standards for teachers. (Principal 3)

Adjusting to curricular changes was another area of improvement. This included understanding and delivering an integrated curriculum (English, mathematics and science). Principals stated that training on matters of the curriculum is a content area neglected by professional development. Training in curricular issues was regarded as crucial in order to implement new teaching and learning methodologies such as student-centered and discovery learning (Principal 4). Principals alluded to their desire to be knowledgeable on curriculum organization, outcomes and assessment procedures (Principals 11 and 13). Others wanted specific information on differentiated teaching-learning methods and meeting the demands of inclusion and special needs children, as far as instructional resources and support systems required (Principals 1, 5 and 15).

The failure of professional development to provide curriculum-related information specific to different school cycles was also raised. Principals commented that professional development ought to clarify the needs relevant to Cycles 2 and 3 and not just Cycle 1 because each cycle has distinctive features (Principals 7 and 9). They conveyed the need to be skillful in bridging curricular gaps that exist between cycles; for example, between Cycles 2 and 3. Principal 10 remarked, 'Curricular changes presented in professional development modules were more relevant to Cycle 1 ... Professional development didn't specify the curricular needs for Cycle 3 and didn't cover Cycles 2 and 3 issues, such as adolescence behavior.' One principal reflected:

I moved from Cycle 1 to KG [kindergarten] and the curriculum and teaching strategies are totally different. I was not trained to suit the requirements and needs of kindergarten. My knowledge was in Cycle 1 and the skills and expectations are different for each level. (Principal 14)

Conclusively, principals expressed the need for curricular training across cycles in order to absorb the curricular dimensions per cycle and within the context of reform.

Alongside educational reforms comes the need to meet the expectations of the newly addressed roles and responsibilities that principals are expected to fulfill. Principals are required to monitor and engage in assessment data analysis as part of the 'Leading Teaching and Learning' standard. Principals have to endorse standardized testing and continuous assessment to facilitate the construction of individualized plans for at-risk students and to construct school development plans for improving student achievement. Related to this, principals stated the need for more training within the assessment domain (Principals 1, 8 and 7). Principals felt the urge to be equipped with tools and mechanisms to analyze assessment and examination data. Supporting principals with such tools helps in the construction of action plans to improve students' achievement (Principal 13). Principal 11 stated, 'We need to learn more about how to enter grades on the excel sheets and how to analyze student achievement and school results as far as standardized testing.' Learning about Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Individual Development Plans (IDPs) to monitor the progress of at-risk students and those with special needs was an area that required further attention (Principals 11 and 14).

Within the NSM, curriculum delivery is one dimension that teachers are held accountable for and forms a core element in the teacher performance appraisal process. With this in mind, principals claimed that professional development shortcomings exacerbated their lack of understanding on how to conduct teacher appraisal and the ramifications of this on their own appraisal as both were interwoven. Principal 5 said:

The criteria for conducting class observations are still vague in terms of teachers' capabilities to deliver the curriculum. I am still reluctant in this area. I need to know about specific measurable observations and what features to look at, for evaluating effective teaching in order to conduct teachers' appraisals.

Principal 10 said: 'Principals can't fulfill their roles and the criteria of principal's standards of performance in vacuum without the teachers receiving training.' Principals noted that teachers do not understand the evaluation/appraisal process so they cannot identify their weaknesses and areas of improvement. Principals need to support their teachers but are not in a position to do so due to their lack of knowledge in this domain. They argued for more training on the teacher appraisal elements, its implications and implementation (Principals 2, 6, 9 and 12). Principal 12 commented, 'We need more training in both the teacher appraisal and principal appraisal.' Principal 6 agreed: 'It was a big jump for us to be involved in appraisal in such a detailed and comprehensive way.' Principals claimed that specific measurable indicators on how to fulfill each performance standard and its elements were missing. They stated that measurable indicators of performance need to be included in the professional development provided (Principals 2, 10 and 13).

Principals explained the need for a training model/module on how they can improve from one level to the next and what indicators determine their progress (e.g. from foundation to emerging). They added that there was a desire to acquire skills that help them construct follow-up development plans (Principals 2 and 13). Principal 10 reflected:

The continuum for professional performance and professional development are not linked or in harmony with each other. If I am still at the emerging level in certain areas, I need to receive training in that area specifically, and if I am at the accomplished level of the appraisal in a certain performance area then I don't need professional development in that area. Professional development should be in line with the results of appraisal, therefore needs to cater for my weaknesses tracked in certain performance area.

Principals confirmed that professional development and professional performance appraisal need to be linked and followed by an individual career development and improvement plan according to professional and school needs. They felt the performance standards and their indicators were general and not measurable (Principals 2, 10 and 13).

Issues relevant to classroom management were also raised. Principals indicated that there are crucial shortcomings in terms of monitoring student behavior. Due to the school reforms and the banning of corporal punishment, codes of conduct have not been introduced as a replacement, which made principals suggest that behavioral and classroom management issues needed to be part of the professional development agenda. Principals expressed a desire to become knowledgeable and skillful in classroom management techniques in order to support their teachers (Principals 1 and 12).

In summary, principals felt that the skills and knowledge component related to the 'Leading Teaching and Learning' standard appeared to be a 'one-size-fits-all' model; professional development received was generic and based on a top-down initiative. All principals were given the same professional development regardless of variations in areas of weakness, performance and/or consideration per cycle (Principals 1 and 13).

Design: content – 'Leading the Organization'

In terms of the 'Leading the Organization' standard, principals pinpointed areas of improvement as falling within the area of collecting evidence and documenting teacher performance (Principal 13). The skills and knowledge required to store and archive evidence were noted as an area needing development. They said they wanted to know how to build school archival systems to store and retrieve documentary evidence on teacher performance, student achievement, policies and procedures and organizational roles (Principals 13, 15 and 16).

With the introduction of the NSM, the need to write new policies has emerged. For example, policies expected to be written relate to conflict resolution, health and safety and parental involvement. Writing policies and constructing procedures was an organizational element missing from the professional development received. Principals expressed the need to be trained in writing policies pertaining to numerous operational requirements such as teacher performance, attendance, absenteeism and behavior. Regardless of receiving a theoretical understanding base concerning policy writing, the praxis element related to mechanisms, systems, procedures and logistics implementing them was missing. As part of the 'Leading the Organization' standard and in terms of managing finances, principals indicated the need for more training on budgeting and procurement of school funds (Principals 2, 3, 7 and 14).

Design: content – 'Leading the Community'

From the perspective of the 'Leading the Community' standard, principals acknowledged the necessity to learn more about parental involvement and pathways of sharing school-related matters with the community. This was specifically poignant in relation to transmitting knowledge relevant to the school reforms and change. Principals commented that change had been resented from within the school community. For example, teachers resented writing weekly plans, communicating with parents and adopting child-centered teaching-learning approaches, and parents needed to understand the changes in curriculum and assessment and take these changes on board in their capacity as school stakeholders. Principals viewed dealing with parents, building positive relationships, involving parents in learning and transmitting messages of change to all stakeholders as a challenge not addressed by the professional development (Principals 1, 2 and 15).

Design: content – 'Leading People'

Data collected indicate that the 'Leading People' performance standard was not fully covered in the professional development on offer and elements that were dealt with marginally encompassed continuing learning, conflict management and distributed leadership. Although continuing learning was mentioned in the benefits section, it was felt by the participants that more proactive knowledge was required as to how to create opportunities for continuous and lifelong learning within the school community, and more specifically to the parents (Principals 1, 2 and 7).

Design: process

Principals stated that although the professional development they received was flexible, areas of improvement were substantial and related to: types of delivery; provider capabilities; communication; timing; and logistics.

Design: delivery – hands-on experience. It was voiced that the providers presented general themes related to information on the curriculum and not on how to implement it within the context of Abu Dhabi's educational changes; that is, theoretical knowledge was delivered on various curricular, organizational and leadership themes, but the praxis element was absent (Principals 12 and 14). Principals were subsequently concerned about the effectiveness of the professional development on offer because it lacked application. Principals hoped for school-based training and added that there was a mismatch between the reality in schools and the professional development provided. They felt the knowledge they received did not enhance improvement on the performance level. For example, knowledge on inclusion was delivered but hands-on action plans on this theme and how to implement IEP were absent (Principals 2 and 7).

Within the realm of classroom management, principals have been exposed to the theories of classroom management styles. However, classroom management techniques were not demonstrated. In the area of teachers' and principals' appraisals, indicators were not referred to using hands-on measurable examples (Principals 9, 12 and 14). In relation to teacher appraisals, Principal 1 said, 'I need to be observed by trainers while evaluating our teachers and during our walk through in order to enhance better implementation of the teacher and principal practice and consequently enhance appraisals.'

Design: delivery – catering for individual needs and action plans. Follow-up and career development plans were raised as an aspect requiring attention in designing delivery and implementation of professional development (Principals 7 and 9). Principals explained the necessity that processes of principals' appraisal be embedded within the professional development received (Principals 6, 7 and 8). Principals viewed the shortcomings in light of a lack of feedback and failure to initiate action plans for professional development based on their appraisal and performance. One principal stated, 'We should get feedback from the cluster managers (as principals' evaluators) on what areas we need to improve and accordingly this needs to be catered for in small group professional development meetings' (Principal 6).

Principals mentioned that there was a need to organize professional development in small groups based on a cluster approach. By way of argument and advocating for such an approach, principals referred to receiving professional development in the same areas without differentiation of level of performance (pre-foundation, foundation, emerging, established, accomplished and/or exemplary). Principals claimed the need for redesigning professional development requirements in alignment with individual principal appraisal need and current performance level (Principals 3, 10 and 14).

Design: provider capabilities. Issues relevant to provider/trainer efficiency and effectiveness were raised. Principals stated their preference was to be with the same trainers because trainers needed to have established knowledge about the context of their schools and this helped in terms of continuity and professional input based on unfolding needs of individuals and schools. Principals also drew attention to levels of experience, noting that some expatriate trainers had depth of experience and better ideas about the context of UAE schools which made their delivery more effective. Principals revealed that the quality of professional development delivery was not uniform across all providers. For example, some providers gave support plans

and resources and others did not. Some were more theoretical while others gave hands-on and practical experiences (Principals 2, 6 and 8).

Principals remarked on the high turnover of trainers over the course of receiving professional development input. They noted that once principals get used to the trainers and the trainers become familiar with the UAE and the school context, they (trainers) move on somewhere else. Within this perspective, principals referred to the significance of providers' familiarity with the UAE socio-cultural context and the school's uniqueness in terms of its contextualized needs. Principals voiced their preference to stick with the same trainers to maximize benefits received (Principals 2, 4, 6 and 9).

Design: communications – language barrier. Language of delivery was another area of concern. Principals said that it was hard for principals to elaborate in English how they were implementing different performance standards in their schools. Principals face difficulties when cluster managers conduct their (principals') appraisal in English. Consequently, they cannot identify their shortcomings to determine their professional development needs. Moreover, English was the medium of delivering professional development; a language in which not all principals are proficient. Although translation services were provided, this was on a limited scale (Principals 9 and 12). To concur, one principal stated, 'We understand English generally speaking but the educational jargon and terminologies need to be translated so we understand its notions, implications and practicalities' (Principal 9).

Design: timing and logistics. Given the design structure of professional development, principals noted that they are overwhelmed with duties and it was hard for them to leave the school to attend to professional development during school time. They added that they were also understaffed so they could not leave their schools frequently to attend professional development meetings – especially when issues at the school require immediate attention (Principals 2 and 8). Additionally, timing for professional development was unsuitable since it was offered after school or during the day and outside the school premises (Principals 2 and 6).

Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that the content aspect of professional development was in line with ADEC's five principal professional standards. ADEC's actions to accomplish these standards are underway. The professional development and actions taken by ADEC to promote constructivist education changes and school reforms were acknowledged by the participants. Areas not covered related to elements of continuing education, conflict management and distributed leadership. Professional development has enhanced principals' knowledge and skills' capacities, but failed to consolidate the knowledge/praxis nexus due to: not fully addressing principals' professional needs; not meeting the conceptualized needs of the school; and shortcomings inherent in the framework's design.

Professional development was undertaken in a generalist manner and did not specifically cater for specific school needs. For example, training on curricular domains and classroom management did not address specific needs aligned with school cycle specifications. Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 principals claimed that professional development was targeted at the Cycle 1 and kindergarten curricular and behavioral

management level. Although Abu Dhabi school reforms and the implementation of the NSM initially targeted kindergarten and Cycle 1, from March 2013 ADEC has held workshops and school visits for Cycle 2 principals in preparation for NSM implementation. It is envisaged that eventually professional development will attend to the demands and unique specifications of curriculum, pedagogy and classroom management across all cycles.

Evident from the data was that principals felt that as professional abilities and skills varied, professional development design would alter to cater for differentiated learning needs which offered an individualized career development plan as a valued outcome. This was not the case. An alternative suggestion noted that would alleviate the 'one-size-fits-all' approach was that professional development should occur in small group settings based on professional needs and where a filtering of information through networking was awarded weight. Participation in the current model of professional development did not allow catering for individual needs from the viewpoint that it was also heavily dependent on trainer expertise and appeared to buy into a top-down rather than a bottom-up model. Fullan (2002) suggests that for professional development and school improvement to take place, both models must be interwoven; and Meador (2008) suggests setting a specific scope for professional development rather than randomly providing uniform modules across the board and without giving consideration to specific need or appraisal outcomes.

The need for hands-on training was advocated by principals in this study. Authors such as Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) promote the notion of professional development that engages participants through responding to issues encountered and resolved within the school context. Hirsh (2009) and Nicholson *et al.* (2005) present a job-embedded and ongoing schematic approach to the design of professional development. Timperley *et al.* (2007) note the importance of a grounded approach to professional development whereby principals' theories and reasons for undertaking professional development springboard the design of home-grown, individualized professional development designs. Models considered useful and applicable to the UAE context could either adopt an inherently action research direction with in-house school support gained from providers or establish mentor-mentee programs where professional development support exists through a build-up of trust and rapport between the trainers and trainees. As facilitative agents of change, mentors are expected to work in spaces that build relationships between ADEC and school principals. Their knowledge, expertise and people skills award them credibility to deliver the message and enact change. For this to be successful, Putnam and Borko (2000) and Walker (2003) caution that such professional development must be situated within the socio-cultural context of mentees and the contextual factors of the setting need to be acknowledged.

In the case of Abu Dhabi, the positive influence of trainers on professional development needs to be strengthened and legitimized on the basis of their ability to provide objective assessment of the need to improve professional practice and instill in-depth knowledge relevant to principal career development. Professional input based on need can ensure authentic exit and entry points adjusted to achieve organizational fit, and also has the potential to build individual, collective and systemic knowledge capacities not necessarily achievable within the scope of a more traditional top-down model. Guskey (2000) states the necessity of recognizing the worth of professional development and its effectiveness through conducting and implementing professional development evaluation that is intertwined with a

pre-performance and post-performance evaluation. Taking professional development seriously with the ultimate goal of improvement to practice involves recognition of need, adoption of alternative models, monitoring, evaluating learning and implementation of new knowledge in practice. To design and improve professional development that fits an organic and pragmatic perspective, the following initiatives are suggested: individualized coaching; peer learning; and mentoring.

Individualized coaching

Individualized coaching indicates that every school principal receives specific attention as an integral part of an allocated professional development fund. This individualized coaching system needs to be linked to the accountability of both principal and teacher performance standards and appraisal. In the case of Abu Dhabi, an individualized coaching model needs to be linked to ADEC's professional standards. To improve the current status of designing professional development, principals need greater emphasis on collaborative interchange, reflective practice and openness to new ideas within the realms of flexibility and room to maneuver. The catch in the individualized coaching frame is that it may allow room for high dependency of the trainee on the coach, rather than the trainee adopting a model for gradual career development and improved practice (Knight 2007).

Peer learning

Peer learning is best when situated in small group settings where the notion of communities of practice encourages an array of peer interactions for mutual benefit. School principals in this study voiced the value of inter-school visitations paving the way for continuous learning among colleagues around purpose. As Ming (2005) notes, opportunities to discuss and analyze specific issues with a view to improving practice lead to more informal collegial sharing of problems and defining of strategies/action plans by way of solutions.

Abu Dhabi principals noted that inter-school visitations encourage an array of peer interactions among school heads both locally and internationally. Visits by one principal to another's school may be initiated by the individuals involved or promoted locally and globally. Either way, inter-school visitations are built around a specific practice that the visiting principal wants to be knowledgeable about by observing and analyzing activity in another school. Whatever its particular 'expertise', a school will attract visitors who want to learn how to improve a particular leadership practice. Inter-visitation provides the opportunities for principals to jointly walk-through classrooms, explore the practice that is new, witness the implementation of school improvement and deconstruct and construct their own school improvement model. Planned inter-visitations can lead to more informal 'buddying' to share problems and strategies of professional development and leadership that are grounded. In this study, suggestions made by principals fell within the realm of gaining expertise from outside the country and sending principals to explore global systems of management to observe how schools function in high-quality and effective systems.

Mentoring

The principal mentoring program is shaped by extended coaching that goes beyond theoretical knowledge of professional development modules and content. In the

mentoring program, principals who are judged to need help are guided by principals who are judged to be more expert. Mentoring relationships are established with careful attention to matching individuals in terms of personal compatibility and similarity of need. Principals chosen as mentors are sometimes the most experienced but with demonstrated expertise in instructional leadership rather than time in the role. Principal mentors would retain responsibility for their own schools but would work with two or more principals regularly advising refinement of goals, objectives and budgets and helping develop plans of work with specific teachers. Principal mentoring is another layer of a nested professional development approach for principals (Fink and Resnick 1999, Knight 2007). Within the context of Abu Dhabi, mentoring relationships can be established through school cluster managers with careful attention paid to matching individuals in terms of personal compatibility and similarity of need. As an alternative to the current model of principal professional development, this design is appealing.

Conclusion

Professional development is neither a quick fix nor a 'one-size-fits-all' option. It is a continual process that passes through stages, levels or steps considered a process. Professional development requires an integrated approach of reflection, evaluation and critical structuring that draws on evidence from appraisal and continuous feedback embedded in school-based practice and synchronized with career development plans in mind. The design of principal professional development in Abu Dhabi is aimed at creating a contextual framework for school leaders to meet a common set of standards for teaching, learning and overall school functioning. This research presented findings on design elements of content and process with suggested amendments to improve the current status. As such, this relatively small exploratory case study paves the way for policy-makers to design alternative professional development models and/or schemes to fit within the UAE context of change. Evaluating the value of professional development *in lieu* of the newly introduced principal leadership roles and responsibilities needs consideration of overall school purpose and outcomes and the audience or reference group from whose viewpoint the evaluation is being conducted. Policy-makers must assess the design components in relation to achieving better practice outcomes. Here, two considerations are indicated: first, identifying measurable and specific indicators for each standard and corresponding elements; and second, identifying the anticipated principal's roles and responsibilities in the context of change within the scope of ADEC's professional performance standards.

Notes

1. The Public Private Partnership project launched by ADEC in 2006 was designed to lay foundations for the New School Model introduced in the lower grades and designed to boost education standards. The partnership was established on a three-year contract basis where private operators would help the school achieve standardized goals to improve students' performance and align teaching practices to international methods (<http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/schools-ppp-future-to-be-revealed-soon>).
2. A long-term plan for the transformation of the Emirate's economy, including a reduced reliance on the oil sector as a source of economic activity over time and a greater focus on knowledge-based industries in the future.

3. Arabic word meaning leadership.
4. A plan that shows how the school intends to improve facilities and resources, all aspects of provision including the quality of teaching and the progress and achievement of students (ADEC 2012c, p. 7).
5. All schools in the city of Abu Dhabi are gender segregated. Common schools include more than one cycle. Common schools are a combination of two or three of the following: kindergarten, Cycle 1, Cycle 2 and Cycle 3. Common schools in Cycles 2 and 3 are gender based. Two common co-educational Cycle 1 schools in Abu Dhabi are a combination of kindergarten and Cycle 1.

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