



Collaborative Leadership in Action: Fostering Teacher Collaboration in Culturally Diverse Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how principals' leadership practices influence teacher collaboration in multicultural private schools in the city of Al Ain, United Arab Emirates (UAE). In culturally diverse educational settings, differences in communication styles, expectations, and professional backgrounds can affect teamwork and collaboration. This study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore how leadership practices shape teacher collaboration processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty teachers from five private schools offering different curricula. The findings reveal that leadership practices characterized by visibility, inclusivity, and participatory decision-making promote trust, open communication, and professional engagement, which strengthen teacher collaboration. In contrast, leadership approaches that limit participation or rely on rigid hierarchical structures are associated with weaker communication and reduced collaboration. The study highlights the importance of culturally responsive and collaborative leadership in supporting effective teamwork in multicultural school environments. These findings provide practical insights for school leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance collaboration and improve professional practices in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, principal, communication.

INTRODUCTION

The education sector in Abu Dhabi plays a significant role in the United Arab Emirates' economic and social development, with private schools contributing substantially to national growth and the Gross Domestic Product (UAE Ministry of Economy, 2023). A large proportion of these schools are international institutions serving diverse expatriate populations and offering globally recognized curricula (KHDA, 2023). Within this context, teachers and students represent a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and professional backgrounds. While such diversity enriches the learning environment through the exchange of perspectives and pedagogical approaches, it can also present challenges for communication, collaboration, and leadership if not effectively managed.

In multicultural school settings, effective collaboration among teachers, heads of departments, and school leaders is essential for achieving shared educational goals. Differences in cultural expectations, communication styles, and professional practices may hinder teamwork unless leadership practices are inclusive and culturally responsive (Hallinger, 2021; Leithwood & Azah, 2017). Consequently, school leaders are required to move beyond traditional administrative roles and adopt approaches that foster mutual understanding, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration.

The UAE's national vision for educational development emphasizes adaptability, innovation, and global competitiveness, placing increasing expectations on school leaders to create inclusive and collaborative learning environments (OECD, 2022; UAE Vision 2030, 2021). In multicultural contexts, leadership extends beyond organizational management to include the development of relational trust, effective communication, and cohesive teamwork. Contemporary leadership approaches, particularly transformational and collaborative leadership, highlight the importance of shared vision, distributed responsibility, and active engagement in fostering professional collaboration (Leithwood et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2019).

Leading culturally diverse schools requires principals to balance multiple demands, including managing diverse teaching teams, supporting inclusive practices, and maintaining a positive school climate. Teachers often rely on leadership that promotes open communication, professional dialogue, and mutual respect to sustain engagement and collaboration (Banks & Banks, 2019). In such environments, leadership practices that are visible, participatory, and culturally responsive play a critical role in strengthening teamwork and ensuring alignment with institutional goals.

In Al Ain, a city in the United Arab Emirates, private schools implement a range of curricula, including international and national programmes, each with distinct structures and instructional approaches. This diversity further emphasizes the need for effective leadership and strong collaboration among teachers to ensure coherence in teaching and learning practices. Within this context, schools aim to promote values of

inclusivity, intercultural understanding, and global citizenship, reflecting broader national and international educational priorities (Thomas, 2016; Banks & Banks, 2019). To maintain anonymity, specific school identities are not disclosed in this study.

Existing research indicates that inclusive and collaborative leadership practices contribute to improved communication, stronger professional relationships, and enhanced teamwork in multicultural school environments (Sohmen, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Principals who actively foster collaboration by encouraging dialogue, supporting professional learning, and promoting shared responsibility are more likely to create cohesive and effective school communities.

In light of these considerations, this study explores principals' leadership practices and their role in fostering teacher collaboration in multicultural private schools in Al Ain city. The study focuses on understanding how leadership approaches shape collaborative processes among teachers and contribute to the development of effective and inclusive school environments.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do principals' leadership practices influence teacher collaboration in multicultural private schools?
2. What leadership strategies are perceived by teachers as most effective in fostering collaboration?
3. How do culturally diverse school environments shape the relationship between leadership practices and teacher collaboration?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leading culturally diverse schools requires principals to balance administrative responsibilities with the need to create inclusive and collaborative learning environments. This challenge is particularly evident in private schools, where limitations in resources may restrict access to teaching materials, professional development opportunities, and coordinated planning structures. Research indicates that insufficient access to instructional resources, modern technologies, and continuous professional development can negatively affect both teaching quality and teachers' ability to collaborate effectively (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2022). In multicultural school settings, such constraints may further complicate communication and coordination among staff, making effective leadership practices essential.

To address these challenges, leadership must extend beyond reactive solutions and adopt a more systematic and sustainable approach. Contemporary leadership emphasizes strategic planning, equitable resource allocation, and the establishment of structures that support ongoing professional learning and collaboration (Leithwood et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2019). Initiatives such as resource sharing, collaborative

planning, and interdepartmental cooperation have been shown to enhance instructional practices and strengthen professional relationships among teachers (Al Mansouri, 2014; Nielsen, 2008). However, these practices are most effective when embedded within a broader leadership framework that prioritizes inclusivity and long-term capacity building.

Professional development is another critical factor influencing teacher collaboration. Continuous and collaborative professional learning supports teachers in developing new skills, sharing effective practices, and improving student outcomes. Hallinger and Heck (2010) emphasize that professional development should be structured, ongoing, and aligned with collaborative goals to ensure sustainable impact. In this regard, principals play a key role in facilitating access to relevant professional development opportunities and fostering a culture of shared learning within the school.

Cultural diversity introduces complex challenges for collaboration, particularly in relation to communication patterns, professional expectations, and interpersonal dynamics among teachers. Differences in cultural norms, communication styles, and expectations may lead to misunderstandings or reduced engagement among staff. Research suggests that principals who actively promote inclusive school cultures are more successful in fostering collaboration in multicultural environments (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Creating such environments requires deliberate leadership practices that encourage cultural understanding, mutual respect, and equitable participation.

Effective communication and visible leadership are central to building strong collaborative cultures. When communication channels are open and teachers feel included in decision making processes, collaboration is strengthened. Conversely, limited access to leadership or exclusion from decision making can weaken teamwork. Sohmen (2013) highlights that collaborative leadership promotes shared responsibility, engagement, and open communication, enabling teachers to feel valued and motivated. In multicultural contexts, fostering this sense of inclusion requires intentional leadership strategies that address diverse perspectives and ensure equitable participation.

Overall, the literature highlights that effective leadership in multicultural schools is characterized by inclusivity, shared decision making, and a strong emphasis on professional collaboration. Principals who adopt such approaches are better positioned to address the challenges of cultural diversity, resource limitations, and evolving educational demands, thereby creating environments that support both teacher collaboration and school improvement.

In multicultural school contexts, leadership practices must explicitly address the complexities associated with cultural diversity, including differences in communication styles, professional expectations, and approaches to teaching and learning. Research

indicates that culturally diverse teaching teams may experience challenges related to misunderstanding, reduced cohesion, and variations in professional norms if these differences are not effectively managed. Therefore, leadership in such environments requires not only general collaborative strategies but also culturally responsive practices that promote inclusivity, respect, and equitable participation. Principals who recognise and actively respond to these cultural dynamics are better positioned to foster meaningful collaboration and sustain cohesive professional relationships among teachers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: transformational leadership and collaborative leadership. Both frameworks are widely recognized in educational leadership research and provide a useful lens for understanding how principals' leadership practices support teacher collaboration in multicultural school contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). These perspectives are particularly relevant to this study as they offer insights into how leadership practices can foster inclusive environments, support professional interaction, and strengthen teamwork among culturally diverse teaching staff.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is characterized by the ability of leaders to inspire and motivate individuals to work toward shared goals that extend beyond personal interests (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In educational settings, this form of leadership is reflected in principals who promote a shared vision, encourage innovation in teaching practices, and support continuous professional growth. Such practices are particularly important in multicultural schools, where diverse perspectives require alignment through strong and inclusive leadership.

Four key components of transformational leadership are especially relevant in this context: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence refers to leaders acting as role models, establishing trust and credibility among staff. Inspirational motivation involves articulating a clear and meaningful vision that aligns individual and collective goals. Intellectual stimulation encourages teachers to reflect on and improve their practices, fostering adaptability in diverse classroom environments. Individualized consideration ensures that the professional needs of teachers are recognized and supported, which is essential in culturally diverse settings.

These dimensions provide a valuable framework for understanding how principals' leadership practices can encourage collaboration among teachers. By promoting shared purpose, trust, and professional engagement, transformational leadership supports the development of cohesive and collaborative school environments.

Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership emphasizes shared responsibility, mutual trust, and joint decision making (Sohmen, 2013). Unlike hierarchical leadership models, collaborative leadership distributes leadership roles across the school, enabling teachers to actively contribute to decision making processes related to curriculum, teaching practices, and school improvement initiatives.

In multicultural school settings, collaborative leadership is particularly important as it allows diverse perspectives and experiences to be incorporated into collective decision making. By involving teachers in professional learning communities, curriculum planning, and problem-solving processes, principals create opportunities for meaningful collaboration and shared ownership of school outcomes.

Collaborative leadership also supports teacher empowerment by providing opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles within their professional communities. This may include leading initiatives, facilitating discussions, or coordinating collaborative projects. Such practices not only strengthen professional capacity but also enhance teachers' commitment to shared goals and continuous improvement.

Integrating Transformational and Collaborative Leadership

Although transformational and collaborative leadership differ in focus, they are closely interconnected. Transformational leadership provides the vision and motivation that guide school improvement, while collaborative leadership establishes the structures and processes that enable shared participation and collective action (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Bush, 2020).

When applied together, these approaches support inclusive and participatory school environments. Transformational leadership encourages teachers to engage with a shared vision, while collaborative leadership ensures that this vision is implemented through collective effort and shared responsibility. This integration is particularly relevant in multicultural schools, where effective collaboration depends on both strong leadership direction and inclusive participation.

In this study, these frameworks are used to explore how principals' leadership practices support teacher collaboration in multicultural private schools. Together, they provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how leadership can create conditions that promote trust, communication, and professional collaboration among diverse teaching teams.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design to explore principals' leadership practices and their role in fostering teacher collaboration in multicultural private schools in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates. The multiple case study approach enabled in-depth exploration across different school contexts, allowing for comparison of leadership practices and collaborative experiences among teachers (Yin, 2018). The qualitative design was selected to gain a detailed understanding of teachers' perspectives and experiences of leadership and collaboration within culturally diverse school environments.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who could provide informed insights into leadership practices and teacher collaboration. Twenty teachers were selected from five multicultural private schools offering international and national curricula. Participants were required to have a minimum of three years of teaching experience and prior involvement in team-based or departmental work to ensure meaningful contributions to the study.

The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where no new themes emerged from the data, as well as practical considerations related to access and feasibility. The selected schools were chosen based on accessibility and willingness to participate, while also reflecting the multicultural nature of private education in Al Ain. Participants represented diverse nationalities, subject specialisations, and grade levels, allowing for a range of perspectives on leadership and collaboration in multicultural contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2024. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and followed an interview guide developed from existing research on educational leadership and teacher collaboration (Hallinger, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). The interview questions focused on teachers' experiences of leadership practices, communication, and collaborative processes within their schools.

The interview guide was reviewed by two academic experts to ensure clarity and relevance, and it was piloted with three teachers to refine the sequencing and wording of questions. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of data.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis framework: data familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Thematic analysis was selected as it is well suited for

identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data, particularly when exploring participants' experiences and perceptions.

Data familiarisation involved repeated reading of interview transcripts to develop a deep understanding of participants' responses. Initial coding was conducted through a systematic line-by-line process to identify meaningful segments of data. Codes were then organised into broader themes that reflected patterns related to leadership practices and teacher collaboration. NVivo 14 software was used to support data organisation and coding.

To enhance the accuracy of interpretation, member checking was conducted with six participants, who reviewed summaries of the findings and confirmed that they reflected their experiences. Minor clarifications were incorporated based on their feedback.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the quality and rigor of the study, trustworthiness was established following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and further discussed by Nowell et al. (2017), including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility was enhanced through the use of multiple cases, member checking, and prolonged engagement with the data. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting all stages of data collection and analysis. Confirmability was supported through reflective journaling to minimise researcher bias and ensure that findings were grounded in participants' perspectives. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

Analysis of the interview data revealed two main themes related to how principals' leadership practices support teacher collaboration in multicultural school settings.

1. Principal Visibility and Engagement Strengthen Collaboration

Teachers consistently highlighted the importance of principals being visible and actively engaged in school activities. Participants described principals who regularly visited classrooms, attended meetings, and interacted informally with staff as more approachable and supportive. This visible presence reduced the perceived distance between leadership and teachers and contributed to a more collaborative working environment.

One teacher noted that the principal's presence made them feel "part of a team rather than working individually" (Teacher 1), indicating that leadership visibility encouraged

a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Teachers explained that when principals were accessible and involved, they felt more comfortable sharing ideas, discussing challenges, and participating in collaborative initiatives.

Several participants also reported that visible engagement created an environment where open communication was encouraged. Teachers felt more confident expressing their views and proposing new approaches when they perceived leadership as supportive and responsive. In multicultural settings, this was particularly important, as it helped address potential misunderstandings arising from differences in communication styles and cultural expectations.

In addition, teachers indicated that principals who participated in professional development activities alongside staff reinforced a culture of shared learning. This involvement signaled that collaboration and continuous improvement were valued across all levels of the school. Overall, leadership visibility was associated with increased trust, stronger communication, and greater willingness among teachers to engage in collaborative practices.

2. Delegated Decision Making Enhances Ownership and Professional Collaboration

A second key theme that emerged from the data was the role of delegated decision making in strengthening teacher collaboration. Teachers reported that when principals involved them in decision making processes, particularly in areas such as curriculum planning, instructional strategies, and professional learning activities, collaboration became more meaningful and sustained.

Participants described how delegation allowed them to contribute their expertise and take ownership of school initiatives. One teacher explained that being involved in decision making “made us feel responsible for the success of the work we do together” (Teacher 7), highlighting the link between participation and professional commitment.

Teachers noted that collaborative structures, such as departmental planning and shared projects, were more effective when they were actively involved in shaping them. Examples provided by participants included opportunities to lead professional learning groups, coordinate subject-based initiatives, and collaborate on cross-curricular activities. These experiences not only strengthened teamwork but also supported professional growth by allowing teachers to develop leadership skills within their roles.

However, teachers also emphasized that the effectiveness of delegation depended on how it was implemented. Delegation that was accompanied by clear guidance, support, and feedback was viewed positively, while delegation without sufficient support was described as challenging and sometimes overwhelming. This suggests

that successful delegation requires a balance between empowerment and ongoing support.

Overall, delegated decision making was found to enhance collaboration by promoting shared responsibility, increasing engagement, and encouraging active participation among teachers in multicultural school environments.

Implications for School Leadership

The findings of this study provide important insights into how principals' leadership practices support teacher collaboration in multicultural school contexts. Two key themes emerged from the data: principal visibility and engagement, and delegated decision making. These findings can be understood in relation to existing theoretical perspectives on transformational and collaborative leadership.

The first theme, principal visibility and engagement, reflects key aspects of transformational leadership, particularly the role of leaders in building trust, modelling professional behaviour, and fostering a shared vision (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Teachers in this study associated leadership visibility with increased trust, open communication, and a stronger sense of belonging within the school. This supports previous research indicating that leadership presence contributes to positive relational dynamics and encourages collaborative engagement among staff (Hallinger, 2021). In multicultural settings, where differences in communication styles and expectations may exist, visible leadership plays a critical role in creating a stable and inclusive environment that supports effective teamwork.

The second theme, delegated decision making, aligns with the principles of collaborative leadership, which emphasize shared responsibility and participatory decision making (Sohmen, 2013). The findings show that when teachers are actively involved in decision making processes, they develop a stronger sense of ownership and commitment to collaborative work. This is consistent with studies that highlight the importance of distributed leadership in enhancing teacher engagement and professional collaboration (Galdames-Calderón et al., 2023; Çoban, 2020). By creating opportunities for teachers to contribute to curriculum planning, professional learning, and school initiatives, principals can embed collaboration within everyday school practices.

The integration of transformational and collaborative leadership perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of how leadership practices support collaboration. Transformational leadership offers the vision and motivational foundation for collective work, while collaborative leadership establishes the structures that enable shared participation. Together, these approaches create conditions that promote trust, communication, and professional interaction among teachers.

The findings also highlight the importance of culturally responsive leadership in multicultural school environments. Leadership practices that are inclusive, participatory, and sensitive to cultural diversity were found to support more effective collaboration. This is particularly relevant in the UAE context, where schools operate within highly diverse educational settings. By recognising and valuing diverse perspectives, principals can strengthen professional relationships and enhance teamwork across culturally varied staff.

Practical Implications

The study offers several practical implications for school leaders and policymakers:

1. Principals should maintain a visible and active presence within the school to build trust, support communication, and encourage collaboration among teachers.
2. Schools should promote participatory decision making by involving teachers in curriculum planning, professional learning, and school improvement initiatives.
3. Professional development programmes should focus not only on individual skill development but also on collaborative practices and teamwork.
4. Leadership training should emphasize culturally responsive approaches to support effective collaboration in diverse school environments.

These implications highlight the importance of leadership practices that are both relational and participatory in fostering sustainable collaboration in multicultural schools.

CONCLUSION

This study explored principals' leadership practices and their role in fostering teacher collaboration in multicultural private schools in Al Ain City, United Arab Emirates. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, the research drew on semi-structured interviews with teachers to examine how leadership practices support collaborative processes within culturally diverse school environments.

The findings indicate that leadership practices characterized by visibility, active engagement, and participatory decision making play a central role in strengthening collaboration among teachers. Principals who maintained a visible presence, encouraged open communication, and involved teachers in decision making processes were perceived as more effective in fostering trust, professional interaction, and shared responsibility. These practices contributed to the development of cohesive and collaborative school environments.

In contrast, leadership approaches that limited participation or relied on rigid hierarchical structures were associated with weaker communication and reduced collaboration. Teachers in such contexts reported lower levels of engagement and

fewer opportunities to contribute to collective work. This highlights the importance of leadership practices that prioritise inclusivity and active participation.

The study also emphasizes the significance of culturally responsive leadership in multicultural school settings. Leadership practices that acknowledge and value diverse perspectives were found to support stronger professional relationships and more effective teamwork. In highly diverse educational contexts, such as those in the UAE, the ability of principals to foster inclusive and collaborative environments is essential for sustaining school improvement.

The findings have important implications for school leaders and policymakers. Promoting leadership practices that support visibility, shared decision making, and collaboration can enhance professional engagement and strengthen school effectiveness. Additionally, professional development initiatives should focus on building collaborative capacity and supporting leaders in managing cultural diversity within school communities.

While this study provides valuable insights into leadership practices in multicultural schools, it is limited to a specific context and a sample of teachers within selected private schools in Al Ain. Future research may extend this work by exploring perspectives from school leaders or examining how leadership practices evolve over time in different educational contexts.

In conclusion, effective leadership in multicultural schools requires more than administrative competence. It involves fostering trust, encouraging participation, and creating environments where collaboration is embedded in everyday professional practice. Principals who adopt inclusive and participatory leadership practices are better positioned to support cohesive, effective, and culturally responsive school communities.

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Reda Ahmed Moustafa (Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Investigation; Writing – original draft, review & editing)
Sakinah Binti Ahmad (Review & editing)

Hayati Binti Ismail (Review & editing)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study adhered to ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and no identifiable information was disclosed. No artificial intelligence tools were used in data collection or analysis.

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