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Leading Change in Multicultural Schools: Principals' Leadership Practices in Four Schools in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

Educational change depends on principals translating improvement priorities into organised professional activity. This study examines how principals enacted educational change through leadership practices and organisational processes in four schools in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates: four private schools following different curricula. Using a qualitative multiple-case design, it draws on 15 structured observation records of leadership and professional activity and purposively selected external school-evaluation reports. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes within each case and then across cases; observation and documentary evidence were subsequently compared for convergence, complementarity, and discrepancy. Four interconnected processes were identified: establishing strategic direction, organising professional learning, coordinating communication and responsibility, and monitoring improvement activity. These processes were recognisable in all four schools, but their strength and systematic character differed, and external evaluations judged leadership and self-evaluation differently across the cases. Principals appeared to advance change where direction was accompanied by structured professional learning, clear communication, and systematic follow-up. Combining an educational-change perspective with a descriptive distributed-leadership lens, the study shows how principal-set direction is carried through organisational structures involving other staff, and why enacted and externally evaluated leadership should be examined together. For practice, the findings imply that principals should link strategic priorities to structured professional learning with explicit follow-up; that school-improvement plans should specify responsibilities, communication routines, and review arrangements; and that principal-development programmes should prepare leaders to coordinate change among staff from diverse professional backgrounds.

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Keywords: distributed leadership, school improvement, professional learning, school inspection, cross-case analysis

INTRODUCTION

Educational change requires more than the adoption of policy or the announcement of improvement priorities. It involves translating intended reforms into coordinated practices, professional learning, and organisational routines that can be enacted and reviewed over time (Fullan, 2020). Principals occupy a central position in this process because they establish direction and organise the conditions through which staff participate in improvement work (Bush, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020).

This translation is particularly significant in the United Arab Emirates, where schools in the same city may follow national, British, or American curricula, operate under private or charter arrangements, and respond to the same emirate-level quality-assurance expectations (ADEK, 2022). Principals therefore lead staff whose professional preparation and expectations of authority, collaboration, and accountability may differ, and they must connect common institutional priorities with structures that support shared understanding and coordinated action (Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Litz & Scott, 2017). Such diversity can widen the range of professional knowledge available to a school, but it can also produce different interpretations of communication, authority, and change.

Previous research has established the importance of principal leadership, professional learning, and culturally responsive practice, yet these strands are usually examined through leadership models or stakeholder perceptions (Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020). This emphasis provides valuable accounts of how leadership is experienced, but gives less attention to what principals do in the settings where improvement work is organised, and to how that enacted practice relates to the external evaluations through which school leadership is judged. Observations can identify leadership actions in meetings, briefings, and professional learning activities, while external evaluation reports show how independent reviewers judged leadership, self-evaluation, and professional development in the same schools. Examining these sources together is therefore appropriate for investigating how intended change is translated into school-level practice rather than how participants perceive that change.

This study addresses that gap by examining how principals enacted educational change through leadership practices and organisational processes in four schools in Al Ain. Its objectives are threefold: first, to identify the leadership practices and organisational processes through which principals enacted educational change; second, to compare how these processes appeared across schools operating under different curricula; and third, to examine how observed practice related to external evaluations of leadership in each school. The diversity of curricula and staff backgrounds is treated as a contextual condition that increases the need for shared expectations and coordinated professional activity, rather than as the object of study. The title therefore refers to the multicultural composition of the schools as the setting in which change was led. The analysis considers cultural and professional diversity where the evidence bears on it, notably in how communication and shared routines were used to coordinate staff from different backgrounds, but it does not compare practice by staff nationality or background. Accordingly, the study asks:

Research Question:
How do principals enact educational change through leadership practices and organisational processes in multicultural private schools in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational change is commonly understood as the movement from intended improvement to altered organisational practice. Fullan (2020) argues that change becomes meaningful through implementation, professional learning, and continuing interaction rather than through policy adoption alone. Coburn (2003) sharpens this argument by showing that the spread of a reform says little about its depth, sustainability, or ownership: practices can be widely adopted while leaving underlying norms of teaching unchanged. This distinction matters for leadership research, because evidence that a priority has been announced or a structure created does not establish that change has been enacted. Research on principals' contribution is broadly consistent that leaders influence improvement mainly indirectly, by setting direction, developing people, and shaping the conditions for collective work (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). It is less consistent about which forms of leadership matter most. Robinson et al. (2008) found that leadership focused on teaching and learning was associated with considerably larger effects on student outcomes than transformational leadership, whereas intervention studies such as Ma et al. (2024) treat principal and wider school leadership as jointly developed. Much of this evidence also relies on surveys of perceived leadership and comes largely from Anglo-American and East Asian systems, which limits what it can say about how leadership is enacted in particular settings.

Distributed leadership offers one response to that limitation, but the literature is itself divided. In its descriptive form, a distributed perspective treats leadership practice as constituted in interactions among leaders, followers, and the situation, so that the unit of analysis is the activity rather than the individual leader (Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane, 2015). In its normative form, distributed leadership is advocated as a more effective or democratic way of leading schools. Reviews of the evidence have found associations between distributed arrangements and organisational improvement, but have also noted conceptual ambiguity and a tendency for the descriptive and normative meanings to be conflated (Harris, 2008; Tian et al., 2016). Critics further argue that the language of distribution can obscure the persistence of hierarchical authority and the unequal capacity of staff to exercise influence (Lumby, 2013). Survey-based studies linking distributed leadership with teachers' professional development (Amzat et al., 2022) are therefore informative about associations, but they cannot show how responsibility is actually shared in practice or where authority remains with the principal. For this reason, the present study adopts the descriptive form of the perspective and treats the extent of distribution as an empirical question rather than an assumption.

The two perspectives are used together because each addresses a weakness in the other. Educational-change theory supplies a purpose and criteria: it identifies what must happen for change to take hold, including clear direction, collective learning, coherence, and follow-up (Fullan, 2020). However, it tends to describe leadership as the work of the individual change leader and says relatively little about how that work is carried by other staff in specific organisational settings. A distributed perspective supplies the missing unit of analysis by directing attention to the meetings, professional learning sessions, and delegated roles

through which leadership is enacted, but on its own it is silent about whether those interactions advance any particular change. Combined, educational-change theory indicates which practices matter, while the distributed perspective shows through whom and in which situations those practices are carried out. The combination also carries a tension that this study acknowledges: educational change theory is concerned with sustained change over time, whereas short periods of observation can capture the enactment of change but not its institutionalisation.

Conceptual framework

The two perspectives were applied at each stage of the study. Educational-change theory identified the processes to be examined (direction, collective learning, coherence, and follow-up), and these informed the categories of the observation guide (leadership actions, decisions, and follow-up) and the initial codes used in analysis. The descriptive distributed perspective defined the unit of analysis as leadership activity in specific settings and informed the guide's attention to participants, staff participation, and assigned responsibilities. In interpretation, educational-change theory supplied the criteria for judging whether a practice carried priorities through to follow-up, and the distributed perspective was used to identify through whom and in which situations this occurred, without assuming that authority was shared. The external evaluation reports served as a separate perspective against which these interpretations were compared.

Context complicates these processes. Culturally responsive leadership scholarship argues that leaders must recognise differences among staff and communities while building shared organisational purposes (Khalifa et al., 2016), although its evidence base is drawn largely from the United States. Research in the Gulf suggests that leadership models developed elsewhere do not transfer straightforwardly. Litz and Scott (2017), for example, found that principals and teachers in the United Arab Emirates differed in their perceptions of whether principals practised transformational leadership, and proposed a culturally modified model. Reviews of research on educational leadership in the Arab region likewise caution against transferring general leadership assumptions without examining local institutional conditions, and note that much of this research remains descriptive and perception-based (Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2025). In schools that follow different curricula and employ staff from varied professional traditions, communication and professional learning are therefore not merely administrative supports; they are mechanisms through which staff can develop common interpretations of improvement priorities.

A further limitation of the literature concerns evidence. Most studies rely on participants' accounts, while documentary sources are used less often and are rarely examined critically. Documents are produced for purposes other than research and must be read in light of who produced them and why (Bowen, 2009). External inspection reports, in particular, represent judgements made against an inspectorate's own standards and assumptions about how inspection drives improvement (Ehren et al., 2013); they are evidence of how leadership is evaluated, not neutral records of practice. Comparing such evaluations with direct observation makes it possible to identify where the two converge, where one adds detail to the other, and where they diverge (Yin, 2018).

The literature therefore supports three propositions and leaves one gap. Educational change depends on implementation rather than intention; leadership is enacted partly through organisational interactions that involve other staff; and diverse school contexts increase the need for shared meaning. What remains under-examined, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, is how principals connect these elements in observed improvement activity, and how that enacted practice relates to external evaluations of the same schools. Research on school leadership in the UAE has focused mainly on leaders' roles, professional development, leadership styles, and teacher leadership (Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2025). Some studies of leadership style have examined perceptions, for example Litz and Scott's (2017) mixed-methods comparison of principals' and teachers' views, and the wider Arab literature is relatively small and recent (Hallinger & Hammad, 2019). This leaves limited evidence on what principals do in improvement settings and on whether external judgements of leadership are visible in that practice. Guided by educational-change concepts and a descriptive distributed-leadership lens, this study addresses that gap by examining how direction was established, professional learning was organised, communication and responsibility were coordinated, and improvement activity was reviewed across four school cases. The study therefore contributes new knowledge in three respects: it offers observation-based evidence of enacted leadership in UAE schools; it compares that evidence with external evaluations across private schools following different curricula; and it shows how an educational-change perspective and a descriptive distributed-leadership lens can be combined to explain how change is carried through school organisation.

METHODOLOGY

This article presents a focused qualitative analysis derived from a broader multiple-case study of leadership and teamwork in four schools in Al Ain. The parent study included interviews, observations, and document analysis; interviews were excluded from the present article because its research question concerns enacted leadership practices and organisational processes rather than participants' perceptions. Perception data from the interviews address a different question and fall outside the scope of this article; excluding them keeps the evidence base to sources that record or evaluate what leaders did. Structured observations provided evidence of leadership activity in professional settings, while external evaluation reports provided independent judgements of leadership, self-evaluation, and professional development in each school. Restricting the analysis to these two sources created a coherent evidence base for examining the relationship between enacted practice and externally evaluated leadership.

The four schools were treated as separate cases, and principals' leadership practices and related organisational processes formed the unit of analysis within each case. All four schools are private schools. School B offers both British and Indian curricula, and only its British section was studied; School C follows the UAE Ministry of Education curriculum, and School D follows the British curriculum. The schools were purposively selected because they differed in curriculum while operating under the same emirate-level quality-assurance framework, and because they provided access to leadership activities. This variation supported comparison of the same phenomenon across distinct school settings. Observation data were collected over one school week in each school, in settings where leadership and collaborative work took place: leadership meetings and teacher collaboration sessions in School A; teacher meetings and principal–teacher interactions in School B; leadership and classroom settings in School C;

and strategic meetings and team-related settings in School D. Fifteen structured observation records were produced in total. Observations took place during one week in each school in November 2023, producing five records in School A, four in School B, two in School C, and four in School D, and each lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Each record concerned an individual participant (a principal or a teacher), observed on their own, except in workshops, where the principal was observed interacting with teachers. Sufficiency was judged by coverage of the main settings in which leadership and collaborative work occurred in each school rather than by equal numbers of sessions; consequently, the type and number of activities observed were not identical across cases, and this is treated as a limitation.

The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and used the same structured guide in all four schools to record the setting, participants, leadership actions, staff participation, decisions, assigned responsibilities, and follow-up related to improvement priorities. Field notes were expanded after each session and accompanied by analytical memos that identified provisional patterns and questions for comparison. Documents were selected purposively against four criteria: each document had to relate to one of the participating schools or provide an external evaluation of it; contain information on leadership, professional learning, collaboration, or self-evaluation; fall within the period relevant to the cases; and be sufficiently complete and authentic to permit meaningful analysis. The resulting documentary set comprised one external evaluation report per school: a comprehensive school quality review conducted on behalf of the education authority for School A (March 2023), and education-authority school performance reports for Schools B (November 2021), C (February 2022), and D (November 2021). These reports differ in form. The School A review provides narrative evidence across four domains rated on a four-point scale, whereas the reports for Schools B, C, and D provide summary judgements on a six-point scale without narrative commentary. The reports were therefore used as contextual evidence and as a point of comparison for observed patterns, not as direct confirmation of observed practice or as records of each school's internal planning, and ratings from the two frameworks were not compared numerically (Bowen, 2009; Ehren et al., 2013). These differences in framework, rating scale, reporting period, and level of detail shape how the evidence can be read across cases. Judgements were interpreted within each report's own framework; a descriptor such as "Good" in the six-point reports was not equated with a numerical score in the School A review; and because every report was produced before the observation weeks (Table 1), each indicates a school's evaluated position at an earlier point rather than conditions during fieldwork. The reports therefore provide a contextual reference point for the observed practices, not a direct test of them. To preserve the anonymity of the schools, the reports are not individually referenced.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. In the first, within-case stage, each school was analysed separately using Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases: observation records, memos, and the school's evaluation report were read repeatedly; initial codes were generated for leadership actions and organisational processes, including direction-setting, professional learning, communication, responsibility, and follow-up; related codes were grouped into provisional themes; and these themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full evidence for that school before being defined. In the second, cross-case stage, the case-level themes were compared in a case-by-theme matrix recording, for each school, how each process was enacted, how strongly it was evident, and whether the external evaluation was consistent with, added to, or diverged from the observed pattern (Miles et al., 2020; Stake, 2006). Themes were

retained at the cross-case level when they appeared in several cases, while differences in how they were enacted were recorded rather than averaged out. Observation and documentary evidence were then compared for convergence, complementarity, or discrepancy (Yin, 2018). Coding was carried out by the researcher and was inductive, although the initial codes were informed by the research questions and the conceptual framework; examples include "department meetings" and "walkthrough feedback". Codes were revised iteratively against the full data set for each school, and peer debriefing was used to challenge analytical decisions through ongoing discussions with colleagues from different schools, including teachers, heads of department, principals, and other senior leaders.

Several procedures were used to manage researcher interpretation. The same observation guide and coding categories were applied in all four schools; analytical memos recorded the reasoning behind provisional themes; and a theme was not accepted on the basis of a single observation or a single source. Where the observation and documentary evidence did not align, the discrepancy was retained and reported as a limit on interpretation rather than resolved in favour of the expected pattern (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

The analysis identified four interconnected themes explaining how principals enacted educational change: strategic direction, professional learning, organisational communication and responsibility, and monitoring and alignment. These themes were present across the four cases, but their strength and systematic character differed. Table 1 describes the four cases and Table 2 summarises the external evaluation judgements most relevant to the themes; the account of each theme then sets out the observed pattern, the corresponding external evidence, and the main differences between schools. Table 3 then presents a cross-case matrix of the four themes.

Table 1. Characteristics of the four cases

Characteristic	School A	School B	School C	School D
Type and curriculum	Private school: American curriculum	Private; British curriculum	Private; UAE Ministry of Education curriculum	Private; British curriculum
External evaluation	Comprehensive school quality review; four-point scale; March 2023	Education-authority performance report; six-point scale; November 2021	Education-authority performance report; six-point scale; February 2022	Education-authority performance report; six-point scale; November 2021
Form of evidence	Ratings with narrative evidence	Ratings only	Ratings only	Ratings only
Overall judgement	2.4	Acceptable	Acceptable	Good
Observation week (records)	November 2023 (5)	November 2023 (4)	November 2023 (2)	November 2023 (4)
Observed settings	Leadership meetings and teacher collaboration sessions	Teacher meetings and principal–teacher interactions	Leadership and classroom settings	Strategic meetings and team-related settings

Table 2. External evaluation judgements relevant to the four themes

Evaluation area	School A (four-point scale, 2023)	School B (British curriculum; 2021)	School C (MoE curriculum; 2022)	School D (British curriculum; 2021)
Overall judgement	2.4	Acceptable	Acceptable	Good
Effectiveness of leadership / leaders guide instructional improvement	2.0	Acceptable	Acceptable	Good
Self-evaluation and improvement planning	Not rated separately	Acceptable	Weak	Good
Management / strategic leadership and operations	3.0	Acceptable	Acceptable	Good
Governance	Not rated	Good	Acceptable	Very Good
Professional development and collaborative structures	2.5	Not rated	Not rated	Not rated
Collective responsibility, trust, and efficacy	3.0	Not rated	Not rated	Not rated

Note: School A was reviewed under a four-point comprehensive school quality review framework; Schools B–D were inspected under the education authority's six-point framework (Outstanding to Very Weak). Ratings from the two frameworks are not directly comparable.

Table 3. Cross-case matrix: external evidence for each theme

Theme	School A	School B	School C	School D
1. Strategic direction	Shared vision; goals emphasised growth over grade-level expectations; leaders' guidance of instructional improvement 2.0	Leadership effectiveness Acceptable	Leadership effectiveness Acceptable	Leadership effectiveness Good
2. Professional learning	Weekly whole-school professional development and department collaboration; limited systematic evaluation of its effects (2.5)	Observation records only; not judged separately	Observation records only; not judged separately	Observation records only; not judged separately
3. Communication and responsibility	Responsibilities distributed across teams; no common meeting routines or	Management Acceptable; governance Good	Management Acceptable; governance Acceptable	Management Good; governance Very Good

	protocols; collective responsibility 3.0			
4. Monitoring and alignment	Weekly walkthroughs with feedback; no consistent protocol for analysing assessment data	Self-evaluation Acceptable	Self-evaluation Weak	Self-evaluation Good

Note: All four themes were evident in the observation records of every school; the entries show the external evidence available for each theme. Ratings from the two frameworks are not directly comparable.

Theme 1. Principals Established Strategic Direction for School Improvement

Observation records showed principals communicating improvement priorities, clarifying expectations, and connecting operational decisions with wider school goals during leadership meetings, briefings, and professional development activities. The distinctive feature of this theme was direction-setting: principals framed what required attention and why it mattered, rather than merely administering the activities.

The external evaluations are consistent with the presence of direction-setting but show that its quality was judged differently across cases. In School A, the review reported a shared vision centred on preparing students for the future and achieving rapid, sustained progress, but judged that school goals emphasised growth from students' starting points rather than grade-level expectations, and rated leaders' guidance of instructional improvement at 2.0. The performance reports rated the effectiveness of leadership as Good in School D and Acceptable in Schools B and C. Direction-setting was therefore observable in all four schools, but it was externally judged to be stronger in some than in others, and in School A the direction itself was judged insufficiently ambitious.

This evidence suggests that principals enacted change by keeping improvement priorities present in professional decision-making. It does not establish that the priorities were well judged or that they affected school outcomes.

Theme 2. Principals Organised Professional Learning as a Mechanism for Change

Observations of workshops and professional learning sessions showed principals facilitating reflection, collaborative activity, and feedback connected to school priorities. Unlike the first theme, the emphasis here was on developing staff understanding and practice. Principals did not only communicate what should change; they organised opportunities through which staff could examine and respond to improvement expectations. In School A, for example, the principal organised teachers into small groups in a workshop observed on 14 November 2023 to discuss teaching practices and exchange experiences. The field notes record that the principal facilitated discussion, encouraged participation, and gave constructive feedback, and that he ensured teachers could contribute their views rather than allowing a few participants to dominate. Participation was nonetheless uneven: a few teachers were hesitant to share their experiences for fear of criticism from colleagues.

Detailed documentary evidence on professional learning was available only for School A. Its review reported weekly whole-school professional development, weekly department

collaboration planned and led by heads of department, and professional development adjusted in response to findings from classroom walkthroughs; however, it found limited evidence that professional development was systematically evaluated, and rated professional development and collaborative structures at 2.5. The performance reports for Schools B, C, and D do not judge professional development separately, so cross-case comparison of this theme rests mainly on the observation records. The School A evidence nonetheless points to a pattern relevant to the theme: professional learning was well established as a routine, while follow-up on its effects was weaker.

The combined evidence suggests that professional learning served as an organisational mechanism through which intended change was interpreted collectively. From a distributed-leadership perspective, these settings also created space for responsibility and professional knowledge to extend beyond the principal, while remaining connected to principal-established direction.

Theme 3. Principals Strengthened Organisational Communication and Leadership Structures

Leadership meetings, staff briefings, and planning sessions showed principals clarifying responsibilities, coordinating discussion, and maintaining attention to agreed priorities. This theme concerns the organisational pathways through which change work was coordinated. Participation was evident in the observed settings, but the data do not establish that decision-making authority was equally distributed across all cases. In the same School A workshop, teachers presented the outcomes of their group discussions and responded to colleagues, and expressions such as "we" and "our" suggested a sense of shared responsibility, although this single setting does not show how responsibility was distributed more widely.

In School A, the review described operational responsibilities distributed across specialist teams and department agendas and notes shared with school leadership, while noting the absence of common meeting routines or discussion protocols; collective responsibility, trust, and efficacy were rated 3.0. For Schools B, C, and D, management was judged Good in School D and Acceptable in Schools B and C, and governance Very Good in School D, Good in School B, and Acceptable in School C. These judgements suggest that the structures through which communication and responsibility moved were more firmly established in some schools than in others. The School A evidence also shows that strong collegial relationships and regular meetings can coexist with weakly structured collaborative routines.

The evidence suggests that principals enacted change partly by creating organised routes through which priorities, responsibilities, and information moved across the school. These structures helped connect principal direction with the work of leadership teams and staff.

Theme 4. Principals Monitored Improvement Activity and Organisational Alignment

Observation records showed principals reviewing progress, clarifying expectations, and following up agreed actions during meetings and professional learning activities. Monitoring was treated as a continuing leadership practice rather than evidence that change had already been sustained over time. The School A workshop record also noted teachers' concern about the limited time available to implement the strategies introduced, a condition that routines for follow-up would need to accommodate.

External evaluations showed the clearest cross-case variation on this theme. Self-evaluation and improvement planning were judged Good in School D, Acceptable in School B, and Weak in School C. In School A, the review reported weekly walkthroughs by senior leaders and heads of department with feedback to teachers, but no consistent protocol for analysing assessment data and only occasional feedback on lesson plans. Monitoring was therefore present in all four cases, but its systematic character differed considerably, with School C's evaluation indicating the weakest formal review processes.

Comparison of the two sources suggests that principals enacted change by checking the relationship between planned priorities and current organisational activity. Where observation and documentation converged, the evidence showed clearer alignment; where they did not fully converge, the difference was retained as a limit on interpretation rather than treated as proof of implementation.

Integrated Interpretation

Collectively, the findings suggest that principals enacted educational change through four connected processes. They established direction, organised professional learning through which staff could interpret priorities, coordinated communication and responsibility, and reviewed the alignment between plans and activity.

- The processes were mutually reinforcing rather than sequential. Direction provided a shared focus; professional learning developed collective understanding; communication and delegated responsibility organised participation; and monitoring returned information to subsequent decisions and follow-up.
- Across the cases, these processes were recognisable but not identical in strength or systematic character. The study therefore contributes a practice-based, cross-case account of how principal leadership and distributed organisational activity were connected in four schools working under different curricula, while remaining within the limits of observation and documentary evidence.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that principals enacted educational change by connecting strategic direction with professional and organisational structures. This interpretation is consistent with Fullan's (2020) view that change depends on implementation and continuing professional interaction, but it adds contextual detail by showing the practices through which this connection was organised in schools following different curricula. The central contribution is not evidence that change was successful or sustained; it is evidence of how principals attempted to translate intended improvement into coordinated activity, and of how that activity compared with external judgements of their schools.

Direction-setting was visible when principals linked meeting decisions and professional activities to school priorities. The external evaluations, however, judged the quality of that direction differently across the schools, and in School A judged the direction itself to emphasise growth over grade-level expectations. This distinction matters: the presence of direction-setting in observed practice does not establish that the direction is ambitious or shared, and the comparison therefore supports a cautious distinction between setting direction and enacting it (Coburn, 2003).

Professional learning provided the main bridge between institutional priorities and staff practice. This supports Harris and Jones's (2019) emphasis on leadership-supported professional learning and Fullan's (2020) argument that implementation depends on learning within the organisation. In the present cases, workshops and professional learning communities created settings in which staff could interpret priorities collectively. Through a distributed-leadership lens, these settings show how principals can establish direction while leadership work is carried through interactions with other staff (Spillane, 2015). The evidence does not, however, show that authority was distributed equally or that professional learning produced long-term outcomes. This is consistent with critiques that distributed arrangements can coexist with centralised authority (Lumby, 2013), and with the School A finding that professional learning was a well-established routine whose effects were not systematically evaluated.

Communication and role coordination were significant because staff in these schools came from different professional and curricular traditions and may not begin with identical assumptions about authority and collaboration (Khalifa et al., 2016; Litz & Scott, 2017). Here, formal communication channels and clarified responsibilities functioned as mechanisms for reducing ambiguity and coordinating improvement work. The School A review's finding that department meetings lacked shared routines, despite strong collegial relationships, illustrates that effective participation should not be inferred merely from the existence of structures or from positive staff relationships.

Monitoring connected priorities, professional activity, and follow-up, and it was the theme on which the schools differed most clearly. The analytical value of combining observations and external evaluations lies in this comparison: convergence showed that an evaluated strength or weakness was also visible in practice, complementarity showed that one source added detail to the other, and discrepancy limited the strength of the claim. Because inspection judgements reflect the standards and assumptions of the bodies that produce them (Ehren et al., 2013), they were treated as one perspective to be tested against observation rather than as confirmation of it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018).

The cross-case synthesis revealed shared processes but differences in their visibility and emphasis. All four cases provided evidence related to direction, professional learning, communication, and monitoring, yet formal priorities were not equally apparent in every observed setting. This variation reinforces the conceptual value of combining educational change and distributed leadership: change required principal direction, but its enactment depended on the organisational situations and interactions through which other staff participated.

Overall, the study extends existing work by showing how educational change can be examined as an alignment problem between enacted organisational practice and the way school leadership is judged externally. In schools working across different curricula, principals' work involved creating sufficient coherence for diverse professional groups to act around common priorities. The findings explain these processes within the observed cases but do not establish leadership effectiveness, causal impact, or long-term sustainability.

The study's contributions can be stated at three levels. Theoretically, it shows how educational-change theory, which specifies what must happen for change to take hold, can be paired with a descriptive distributed-leadership lens to show through whom and in which settings those processes are carried, while treating the extent of distribution as an empirical question. Methodologically, it illustrates a way of reading structured observation records alongside external evaluation reports, using convergence, complementarity, and discrepancy as analytical categories rather than treating evaluation judgements as confirmation. Practically, it identifies where improvement routines were established but follow-up was weaker, which gives principals and authorities specific points at which to look. These contributions are bounded by the design: the study does not establish effects on student outcomes or the long-term sustainability of improvement.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings offer bounded implications for principals, schools, and educational authorities. These implications concern the organisation of change processes observed in the four cases rather than claims about measured leadership effectiveness. They are offered as considerations for practice, proportionate to what observation and documentary evidence can show.

For principals, the findings suggest making the connection between strategic priorities and everyday professional activity explicit. Meetings and professional learning can be used to clarify why a priority matters, who is responsible for related action, and how follow-up will occur, while allowing staff to contribute professional knowledge within a shared direction.

For schools, formal plans should be accompanied by communication, professional learning, and review arrangements that make implementation visible. Records of responsibilities and follow-up can support continuity, but they should be examined alongside practice rather than treated as evidence of implementation by themselves.

For leadership-development providers, the findings support preparing principals to coordinate change across culturally and professionally diverse staff. Development activities should address culturally responsive communication, facilitation of collective learning, delegation, and the interpretation of evidence from plans and practice.

For educational authorities, evaluation can distinguish between the presence of formal improvement documentation and evidence that related processes are occurring in school practice. Observation and documentary evidence may be considered together, with discrepancies used to guide further inquiry rather than immediate judgements about effectiveness.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is limited to four private schools in Al Ain, and is not intended to be statistically generalisable. The one-week observation period in each school provided a bounded view of leadership activity and could not establish how practices changed over time, and the types and numbers of activities observed were not identical across schools. The documentary evidence consisted of one external evaluation report per school, produced under two different frameworks and at different times: the reports for Schools B, C, and D preceded the fieldwork,

those reports provide ratings without narrative evidence, and internal planning documents were not analysed. The analysis also excluded participants' interpretations and may not capture informal leadership activity. Because practice was not compared by staff nationality or professional background, the study cannot show how cultural differences shaped leadership practice; diversity is treated as context.

The focused evidence base was appropriate for examining enacted and documented practice, but it limits claims about leadership effectiveness, stakeholder experience, causal influence, and the long-term sustainability of change. The cautious cross-case synthesis identifies recurring processes and variation in visibility; it does not rank the schools or determine which principal was more effective.

Future research should address the specific questions raised by these findings rather than only extending their scale. First, studies should examine how heads of department and other middle leaders translate principal-set priorities into department routines, and whether shared meeting protocols change the quality of collaborative work. Second, research could follow a single professional learning initiative from workshop to classroom over a term or a year to identify where follow-up weakens. Third, studies that pair external inspection visits with independent observation in the same period could examine why evaluated and enacted leadership sometimes diverge. Fourth, research should investigate how staff from different professional and curricular traditions interpret the same principal-set priorities, which would test the assumption that communication structures reduce ambiguity. Finally, comparing schools judged strong and weak on self-evaluation could clarify which monitoring practices underpin those judgements.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how principals enacted educational change in four schools in Al Ain. Its distinctive contribution is to treat educational change as a problem of alignment: between the direction principals set, the organisational routines through which other staff carry that direction forward, and the external judgements made about a school's leadership. Examining these together showed that the presence of leadership routines is not the same as their effectiveness. A school can hold regular collaborative meetings and walkthroughs while lacking the shared protocols and systematic follow-up that allow those routines to change practice.

This matters for principals and for quality-assurance bodies alike. For principals, it shifts attention from establishing improvement structures to ensuring that those structures carry priorities through to follow-up. For education authorities in the United Arab Emirates, it suggests that evaluation frameworks could distinguish more clearly between structures that exist and structures that demonstrably shape practice. By combining an educational-change perspective with a descriptive distributed-leadership lens, the study offers a framework that future research can use to examine where, and through whom, change is carried in schools working across different curricula.

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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. Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (JKEP) of Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia in January 2021, and written consent was also obtained from each participating school. No artificial intelligence tools were used in data collection or analysis.

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