

## Alignment, Capability and Engagement: Is Your School Ready for School Improvement?

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### Abstract

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This paper reports on the initial developments of an International School in Abu Dhabi that has been engaged in the initial stages of a school improvement program. Investigating staff capacity for change has been the initial starting point for the newly appointed principal. Recent research from Lynch and Smith (2016) guided the school's action planning and the ensuing analysis helped understand teacher readiness to implement targeted school improvement initiatives. Initial findings highlight the engagement of staff, and their commitment to implementing educational change, was increased when the focus was on teacher performance. Building teacher capacity is seen as the first step for improved teaching and learning. This paper contributes to the limited data available on Middle Eastern International Schools engaging in change journeys and provides a valuable perspective on the challenges and opportunities for school reform in these contexts.

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**Keywords:** school improvement, teacher capability, educational change, school reform, school climate, leadership

### Introduction:

A common global goal for education systems around the world is the improvement of student outcomes. With the increased scrutiny on the performance of countries through international benchmark testing programs including PISA, TIMSS, many countries have initiated national testing programs. Whether it is the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy in Australia, the United Kingdom's National Curriculum tests or even the Hungarian National Assessment of Basic Competences, the emergence of the national testing program is seen as a key instrument used in the systematic measuring and monitoring of the performance of individual pupils, schools and national education systems (Davey, 1992). Consequently, school principals are charged with the responsibility of improving the student achievement levels using the diagnostic data from the tests.

However, the best schools are not those that have the highest scores on PISA, TIMSS or other international benchmarking scales. Rather, they are the ones that enable their students to make the maximum progress in learning. *“Wherever a student starts from on the first day of the year, he or she deserves to have made a minimum of a year's worth of progress by the end of it. Any less, and our students will fail to reach their full potential”* (Goss & Hunter, 2015, p 1).

This is the challenge for both school leaders and their educational authorities.

Gaining momentum in schools (in order to support their quest for improvement) is the focus on a data driven framework (Lynch, Smith, Provost & Madden, 2016). Data-driven decision-making is the systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing ‘data’, from a variety of sources and then making corresponding teaching decisions. The development of the teacher instructional program is based on the ‘decisions’ emanating from the data. Using the analysis of student performance data, family demographic information and even teacher appraisal policies are enabling educators to make more informed decisions about improving student learning. However, there is more to creating an outstanding school than simply the collection of data. Literature abounds in this arena (Hallinger et.al., 2014; Harris et. al., 2013; Hattie, 2008; Robertson & Lai, 2005) with a movement towards both instructional and distributed leadership practices yielding greater results.

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Instructional leadership comprises leadership practices that involve the planning, evaluation, co-ordination and improvement of teaching and learning. Distributed leadership in schools explores the degree of involvement of staff, parents or guardians, and students in school decisions. A brief synthesis of high performing schools (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, and Andree, 2010; Harris, 2010; Fullan, 2010) point to six common traits:

1. The implementation of shared vision and goals
2. Intentional targeted instruction;
3. Adherence to high expectations;
4. Unyielding focus on Teacher performance;
5. Fostering a safe, yet stimulating learning environment; and
6. Relentless focus on teaching and learning.

Although there has been a lot written on the effectiveness of schools there has been little on moving from less effective to more effective (Scheerens & Demeuse, 2005; Hargreaves, 2006; Hopkins et al., 2014). Collins (2001) found that great companies do not spend a lot of time restructuring but rather put energy into finding the right person for every position. Quality leaders place their energies in preparing their staff.

The ongoing research on the Collaborative Teacher Learning Model (Lynch, Smith, Provost & Madden, 2016; Lynch, Madden & Knight, 2014), the combination of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2012) and the job embeddedness of professional development (Fullan, 2011) indicate that the greater the focus on teacher quality, the greater the gains in student learning.

Linking teacher effectiveness to student achievement has been confirmed by researchers such as Marzano (1998), Hattie (2012, 2011, 2009) and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012). The consequence has seen a renewed interest in the teaching and instruction practices in schools. More specifically, Hargreaves & Fullan, (2012) purport that the role of building professional capital as a key function of school leadership is the central tenet for all leaders. They state the need to understand each teacher's personal narrative, their career journey and their motivation in order to devise an effective way forward for the school.

### **Understanding Readiness for Change**

Understanding teachers is the first step for the school leader willing to undertake educational change within their school. Before a school improvement initiative can be engaged the need to undertake a readiness assessment to check that the teachers are ready is essential. This is a critical step to ensure the change will be incorporated and embedded leading to sustainability. Further, if co-ordinated effectively, the assessment for readiness will ascertain if the need for change is clear to staff and the process is understood. A successful change readiness assessment will enable the school leader to make necessary adjustments before implementation and help manage the risk of failure.

Knowing that staff are at varying points of their career, the school leader needs to be able to discern targeted strategies that will enhance the likelihood of success of implementing the school improvement initiatives. School leaders need to determine the readiness of their staff to undertake significant educational change initiatives.

Based on the work of Schiemann (2012), Lynch & Smith (2016) define readiness "*as the state in which the organisational conditions are such that school staff are prepared to engage with change*". Leaders need to be able to rally their team to implement new initiatives and school improvement strategies. Too often do we hear of non-sustainability of programs after they have been mandated down the school line.

### **Three Key Fundamentals**

One of the devilling questions for school leaders is "*How can you tell if your school is ready to engage in a reform agenda?*" As stated by Lynch and Smith (2016) the initial step to building school readiness is focusing on aligning their staff to the strategic intent of the school followed by an understanding of each staff member's capabilities to carry out the school's strategic intent. Understanding the fundamental elements that should be established in a school's staff before a process of whole-of school teaching improvement (a change strategy) takes place is a pivotal priority for the school leader.

Lynch & Smith (2016), offer some insight into the key requirements for setting up a successful change environment. Their reference to the work of talent management by Schiemann (2012) helps leaders understand the need for establishing the underlying strategies for improving teaching performance.

There are three fundamental elements that should be established in a school's staff before a process of whole-of-school teaching improvement (a change strategy) takes place: *Alignment, Capability and Engagement*. When staff in an organisation is aligned, capable and engaged, the performance potential of the school can be considered optimal and thus 'ready' for teaching improvement.

In short, the three fundamentals are:

1. **Alignment:** This refers to determining the extent to which staff agree to and have knowledge of both the goals and the associated strategies of the school as well as the espoused values and expectations of stakeholders. This element of readiness can be expressed in terms of alignment to the 'strategic plan' and the 'processes within the school' (Schiemann, 2012).
2. **Capability:** With the teacher being the centre of school improvement, the extent of their skills, technologies and associated processes that staff rely upon to effectively and efficiently complete their jobs is the focal point. How ready staff are in terms of 'staff capability factors' and 'resources available for staff to do their job' (Schiemann, 2012) is the focus of the school leader.
3. **Engagement:** A productive staff is engaged in the learning process. Determining the extent to which staff are working towards the goals and aspirations of the school becomes the third element on the leader's plate. It is not enough for staff to say they are on board but rather for the leader to find clear evidence that staff are "living and breathing" the school. Schiemann (2012) discusses this in terms of 'staff satisfaction with the school as a workplace' and 'their commitment to the school'.

These three dimensions collectively form together to provide an indicator to how the school is positioned to take on change and innovative initiatives.

### Education in the Middle East

The provision of education in the Middle East had its genesis in discovery of oil in the 1930s. Leaders wanting to modernise their countries turned to education (Ridge, 2014) to help with the transformation. The subsequent economic growth saw an influx of expatriate families to help with the economy building program. This led to the establishment of foreign curriculum schools as families wanted to provide the "home school" experience to their children.

However, the rapid increase in schooling options had seen an increase in school diversity and presented challenges for governments and education agencies. Kamel (2014) noted three key educational challenges facing the Middle East:

1. An increase in education inconsistency within the countries of the Middle East;
2. A marked decrease in the quality of student learning despite an increase in per capita education expenditure; and
3. A mismatch and growing divide between market needs in terms of capacity in skills and what the education system has to offer in terms of output (Kamel, 2014).

Kamel's findings are drawn from various educational agencies' statistical data that the school systems in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA) operate in. These indicate that the schools are generally of low quality, and key international student test measures (i.e. PISA, TIMMS) highlight that basic skills are not being learnt by students in the MENA region (Gatti et al., 2013). Additionally, UAE students scored below average in PISA testing in 2012 and the UAE was ranked 48th in mathematics, 44th in reading and 46th in science out of 65 participating Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. In the last round of TIMMS, the UAE ranked below the average.

Given that the research indicates staff turnover in International Schools is between 20-25%, the ongoing recruitment of quality staff is a major challenge for school leaders (Preetika & Priti, 2013). Attracting and then retaining quality staff in itself is a problematic issue for all schools. While many factors contribute to teacher turnover, the disparity in teacher remuneration and the government control on private school fees are key contributors to teacher turnover, as highlighted in a 2015 report by Ardent Advisory and Accounting<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup><http://ardentadvisory.com/images/GCC%20Education%20Sector%20Report.pdf>

Furthermore, Kamel (2014) claims that, as the UAE government revise existing regulations and educational requirements for schools and teachers, education providers are finding it harder to attract quality teachers due to complicated regulations, licensing and educational requirements set by government entities.

### **Understanding the School Context**

The school at the centre of this paper is one of the new private schools to be established by the private sector. Situated in a growing area of Abu Dhabi, the K-12 school was established in 2014, and opened with an initial enrolment of 277 K-5 students. Since then it has rapidly grown with more than 1015 enrolled students to begin the 2017/2018 academic year. The school comprises of Emirati students with the breakdown being 90% Emirati and 10% expatriate (although predominately of Arab descent).

Given the school growth, the school has had to appoint a large influx of teachers and address the ongoing realignment of leadership across the school. The increase of middle leadership has had implications for the school, given their newness to the role and their relative inexperience. The teaching staff is currently a mixture of Arabic only speaking staff (30%), English only speaking staff (40%) and bilingual speaking staff (30%). As reported by Madden (2014) the focus on building teacher capacity centres on addressing the challenges of staff diversity.

It was from this understanding of the context of the school and the need to work towards the vision of the community that four key strategic enterprises were introduced. In short these were:

#### **Alignment**

1. **Goal Setting:** Professional growth of staff is a result of identifying individual professional goals to improve the teacher's professional practice and taking action towards achieving those goals. Each middle leader, in working with individual teachers helped set an action plan. Goals set direction, focuses the teacher on the tasks at hand and open the door for professional dialogue on improving practice. Furthermore, it galvanises teachers together as the goal setting targets are aligned to the "whole of school" action plan. Such alignment facilitates teacher understanding and commitment to school policies and procedures.

#### **Capability**

2. **Establishment of Coaching/Mentoring/Feedback:** The setting up of a mentor program to start the new academic year offered middle leaders the opportunity to understand their new and existing teachers more fully. In setting realistic performance targets and creative methods of achieving them, teachers are taking responsibility for their own professional development. Engaging in regular discussions on improving their practice has a cumulative effect on learning for both student and teacher. It is in this strategy that teachers develop their knowledge and skills and obtain the information and resources needed to achieve the school's goals.
3. **Job Embedded Professional Learning:** Professional learning activities are ineffective when they are not focused on the immediate work of teaching the students to whom the teachers are responsible for (Guskey, 2014). With the view that teacher learning that is grounded in day-to-day teaching practice and is designed to enhance teachers' content-specific instructional practices (with the intent of improving student learning), two key programs were put into place.
  - a. **Launching of Pilot Projects:** Adopting a more 'research-based' approach to their work, the staff undertook a number of pilot projects focused on areas of interest within the various aspects of classroom life. These ranged from digital portfolios to emerging writing skills to teaching English to second language learners. These action research pilots culminated in the publishing the results of their action research (see Madden, 2017). These pilot projects helped personalise learning and offered a competency based approach to building teacher capacity. It shifted teaching and learning from a culture of compliance to one of cultivating innovation in an effort to support and create powerful, personalized learning experiences to meet each student's needs.
  - b. **Staff Led Professional Learning Workshops:** Formalising the collaborative teacher practices (eg. discussion groups, data analysis, unit writing, co-teaching) was the fostering of teacher led learning. Teachers shared best practice via differentiated workshops. Such teacher-led professional learning created opportunity for teachers to enhance their professional autonomy and provided a space to validate their input into school improvement. This sharing of best practice helped teachers see each other as experts and opened the door to peer to peer learning.

## Engagement

4. Classroom Observation & Appraisal: Classroom observations were used to monitor the quality of teaching and learning on a day to day basis and were used for the teacher appraisal process. As teachers become more focused on improving their own practice their satisfaction, motivation and interest increased. Teachers began to inquire into what works best in their classroom.

## Key Findings

Given the initial implementation phase has now taken twelve months of operation, a number of findings and implications surfaced. These included:

1. Increased Teacher Diversity: Building staff coherence and professional consistency to the school is a complex task given the disparate range of staff demographics and their cultural (educational) formations. Understanding the inherent constraints and being able to mitigate its limitations is a challenge for the new leadership team. Some interesting findings were:
  - a. *Language Barriers*: With the cultural diversity comes linguistic diversity that further compounds communication within the school. In this school, there are three groups of language speakers (a; those that only speak Arabic, b; those that only spoke English and c; those that were predominately Arabic with some English or those predominately English with some Arabic), which further complicates not only communication but also professional relationships amongst and between staff members.
  - b. *Pedagogical Difference*: The diversity of cultural backgrounds of the staff also results in a wide variety of pedagogical differences. While difference can be beneficial, ensuring that there is consistency and a shared pedagogic vision becomes more challenging when the variety of pedagogies are greater and more disparate than in other, state-based educational systems in Western countries.
  - c. *Teacher Professionalism*: Notions of what it means to be a professional educator also vary greatly with this diverse cohort of teachers. Again, this adds another level of complexity as the school leadership seeks to develop consistency and professionalism in the staff.
2. Professional Appraisal of Teachers: As part of understanding staff the initial appraisal of teacher performance and teacher interviews highlighted a number of issues. Similar to findings of Hargreaves & Fullan (2012), the level of staff commitment was varied. A number of “courageous conversations” (Timperley, 2015) were held leading to the termination of some teachers, extension of probation for others and targeted performance plans for teachers at risk. However, as teachers became more (personally) engaged with using appraisal to help improve their classroom performance the greater support for school improvement initiatives was seen.
3. Whirlwind Effect: The early adopters (Fitzgerald, Danaia, & McKinnon, 2016) to school improvement initiatives offered opportunity for staff to have a professional dialogue on what works in the school. With the view that if positive change is to take place then we must stop doing things the old way and start doing things the new way, has guided the professional conversation. Consequently, more teachers were being caught up in the “whirlwind”.
4. Teacher Professional Learning: Given a risk-free environment and encouraging teachers to experiment (ie. undertake pilot programs as illustrated in the book, *Teachers TEACHing Teachers* (Madden, 2017)) encouraged teachers to be more reflective about their impact within the learning environment. Increasing collaboration and enabling teachers to take lead roles in professional learning discussions raised the notion of teaching experts. The cumulative effect raised expectations and improved the professionalism across the school.

## What do the Al Yasat inspirational teachers do in their classrooms?

Evidence from the school during the initial implementation phase is emphatic on what makes successful school improvement. It is not co-incidental that the Abu Dhabi Educational Council’s inspection rating has moved the school from the yellow, “Band B” school, to the green, high performing “Band A” school since the last school inspection<sup>3</sup>. Nurturing capable educators ready to take on targeted school improvement initiatives has been the focus of this research.

In short, our initial research highlights that the main characteristics of high performing teachers at Al Yasat ready to embrace targeted school improvement initiatives share the following traits:

- have and spread enthusiasm;
- cultivate positive relationship with students;

<sup>3</sup><https://www.adec.ac.ae/en/Education/KeyInitiatives/Pages/Irtiqaa-Reports.aspx>

- make learning purposeful and relevant for students;
- collaborate with colleagues on best practice;
- are flexible and able to adapt their practice;
- promote a safe and stimulating school wide climate;
- possess positive classroom management;
- reflection their teaching performance/practice; and they
- bring innovation and creativity to the classroom.

## Conclusion

Reflection on the implementation of the key strategic initiatives under the banner of alignment, engagement and capability outlined above indicate that teachers were less negative about their role at school and showed less “withdrawal behaviours”. In fact, teachers engaged in the pilot programs demonstrated the “going the extra mile” type behaviours. They tended toward a problem-solving approach, showing initiative rather than “waiting for the instruction” or direction from a designated leader.

In most school settings, the first step towards improving schools is the implementation of initiatives and programs. This paper offered insight into how Schiemann’s (2012) ACE talent management framework can be used to support the achievement of successful school improvement. This begins with the need to ascertain the capabilities of staff and the need to ensure there is alignment to the strategic intent of the school’s vision. Building conditions to enhance teachers’ commitment and motivation is pivotal to sustainability of any school improvement program. The results of the school’s appraisal process demonstrate that the quality of teaching is a strong determinant of high student achievement levels and offers school leaders an opportunity to engage teachers on their teaching performance. What teachers know and do is one of the most important influences on student learning and should be a priority for all school leaders.

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