

Using the PIMRS Self-Rating for Policy Implications for School Governance in the United Arab Emirates

Noura F. Assaf¹, Sufian A. Forawi^{2*}

¹ The British University in Dubai, Noura_assaf@hotmail.com

² The British University in Dubai, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, P.O. Box 345015, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Sufian.forawi@buid.ac.ae, 0000-0002-3008-3092

*Corresponding Author: Sufian.forawi@buid.ac.ae

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ABSTRACT

Education leadership is a multifaceted construct that plays a critical role in strengthening national education systems and improving student outcomes. This study investigates school principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS). Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative self-ratings of principals in private and charter schools in Abu Dhabi with qualitative insights from follow-up interviews. Findings indicate that principals generally perceive themselves as effective instructional leaders, with integrated practices and limited demographic influence. Interview data reveal areas for development, including stronger stakeholder collaboration and more direct involvement in curriculum design. The study underscores the need for systematic human-resource strategies to enhance principals' professional growth and instructional leadership capacity. Policy implications for school governance and leadership development in the UAE context are discussed, with particular attention to the role of regulatory bodies in shaping leadership expectations.

Keywords: Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), instructional leadership, school principals, mixed methods, United Arab Emirates, K-12 education, school mission, learning climate, educational policy.

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic and evolving sphere of education, the role of a school principal extends far beyond traditional administrative tasks. While principals undertake a multitude of responsibilities essential for school governance, including formulating school missions and visions, devising policies, managing budgets and operations, nurturing community ties, and fostering professional growth among educators and staff (Uddin et al., 2020)—the focus of their role has shifted markedly from operational management to instructional leadership. Conceptual and topical trends in research on instructional leadership were identified using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS); for example, the leadership effects on student achievement and school performance were most frequently studied, followed by research on teacher attitudes, school climate, gender, and instruction (Hallinger et al., 2025).

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), renowned for its pursuit of educational excellence, understanding the impact of school principals' instructional leadership on critical school functionalities remains pivotal. This study examines the intricate relationship between a principal's instructional leadership style and its far-reaching effects on shaping the school's mission, managing instructional strategies, and cultivating an environment conducive to

optimal learning. Critically, this inquiry aligns with a broader policy agenda: as the UAE advances toward the aspirations articulated in the UAE Centennial 2071 and the National Education Plan, the competencies of school leaders have emerged as a key policy lever for systemic reform (Abushpap & Lai, 2025).

Previous research (Leech et al., 2018) has identified various leadership styles—including transactional, transformational, and situational—that make leaders grounded in practices and standards essential to implementing instructional materials and monitoring. The principal instructional leadership style, however, is considered the most essential in the school environment (Bada et al., 2025). This style not only improves students' academic performance and enables teachers to provide quality instruction, but also positions the principal as the school's instructional manager (Timilsena & Sherpa, 2025). The principal is responsible for setting goals, curriculum review, evaluating teachers, and fostering collaboration to achieve the school's mission.

Recent research has illuminated the multifaceted nature of a principal's guidance, underscoring its significance not only in implementing curriculum but also in shaping the core values and direction of the entire institution (Smith et al., 2023). Effective teaching in schools necessitates that principals establish clear institutional visions and foster consistent communication with all stakeholders (Mujitapha et al., 2024). Equally imperative is the provision of substantial support and continual professional development opportunities for educators, accompanied by incentivising initiatives to foster their motivation (Al Mahdy et al., 2018). School leadership and instructional supervision play a crucial role in shaping teaching quality and learner outcomes, where contextual and research constraints influence school operations (Baucas & Martin, 2026), such as in the UAE.

This paradigm shift underscores an urgent necessity for comprehensive reforms in school leadership capacities, particularly honing the capability to instigate and navigate transformative changes within educational institutions. While elements such as school monitoring, curriculum restructuring, and teacher qualifications contribute to this reformative process (Assaf, 2023), educational reform resides ultimately in the competence and effectiveness of school leaders. Tai and Omar (2018) underscore the close correlation between principal competencies and student achievement, solidifying the pivotal link between effective leadership and educational outcomes.

While it is widely accepted that effective leadership is crucial in the era of Education 4.0, there remains significant uncertainty regarding which specific leadership behaviours are most likely to produce positive results, and how education policy environments shape those behaviours. To equip school leaders with the necessary competencies to lead change effectively, a reliable and valid model that can identify critical leadership competencies for gauging school improvement is needed. Therefore, this study endeavours to investigate these interwoven facets within the specific context of UAE schools, aspiring to furnish empirical evidence that underscores the significance of instructional leadership and delineates its profound effects across diverse educational dimensions, as well as the policy implications that flow from these findings.

Research Aim and Questions

Many countries have taken significant initiatives to enhance the level of education; however, very few have focused on evaluating the competencies of school leaders who are the pioneers driving the success of a school. Crucially, the question of how education policy frameworks create enabling or constraining conditions for instructional leadership remains underexplored, particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) contexts where state-driven education reform is central. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effects and views of school principals' instructional management on the school's mission, management of instruction, and the school learning environment in the United Arab Emirates, with attention to the policy implications for leadership development systems.

Principals hold a crucial role in cultivating a positive and productive school culture by providing effective instructional management. They need to ensure that students and teachers have the necessary information and opportunities to develop sound instructional practices. Additionally, principals need to establish and maintain positive relationships with students, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. Three main research questions drive this study: 1. What is the instructional leader profile of school principals in the UAE? 2. What are the relationships among school principals' instructional leadership styles and their rating of school mission, managing instruction, and school learning climate based on the PIMRS self-rating in the UAE? And 3. How do school principals view their instructional leadership role in school operations in the UAE, and what are the policy implications of their perceptions?

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) conceptual framework developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). This leadership framework was among the first to identify specific key behaviours exhibited by principals to accurately define the concept of instructional leadership. It is a widely

recognized instrument used to assess the instructional leadership practices of school principals and to identify the major predictors that link strong instructional leadership to improved student achievement. The PIMRS framework consists of three dimensions: (a) Defining the School Mission, (b) Managing the Instructional Program, and (c) Developing a Positive School Learning Climate, followed by a set of 10 functional roles or subscale dimensions. When using this assessment tool, a rater evaluates how often the principal performs specific behaviours associated with a particular instructional leadership function on a scale of 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The mean score is then calculated for each of the three dimensions to create a profile of the principal's practice and perception (Gurley et al., 2016).

Critically for this study's policy orientation, the PIMRS framework does not operate in a vacuum: it is shaped by the institutional, regulatory, and cultural context in which principals are embedded. As Hallinger (2018) argues, context is not merely background but actively conditions what leadership behaviours are valued, rewarded, and enacted. In the UAE, where the Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) set specific inspection criteria and professional standards for school leaders, the three PIMRS dimensions are not solely a product of individual capacity but also of systemic policy design. This framing positions the present study as contributing not only to knowledge about principal behaviour, but also to understanding how policy architectures enable or constrain instructional leadership practice.

Defining the School Mission

This dimension embeds two functions: framing the school goals and communicating the school goals. It focuses on how well the principal communicates and establishes a clear vision of the school's plans, a clear mission that takes into consideration students' performance, and goals aligned with educational standards and community needs (Hallinger & Lee, 2013). From a policy perspective, this dimension is particularly salient in the UAE, where school leaders are expected to align institutional missions with national objectives such as those articulated in the UAE Vision 2021 and the Emirati School framework.

Managing the Instructional Program

This dimension embeds three major functional roles: coordinating the curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, and monitoring student progress. It evaluates the level of the principal's involvement in developing, implementing, and evaluating the curriculum, as well as tracking and assessing student progress using data to make informed decisions (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Policy accountability mechanisms, including regular school inspections by ADEK, directly shape how principals enact this dimension.

Developing a Positive School Learning Climate

This dimension evaluates the principal's efforts in fostering a positive and supportive environment for students, teachers, and staff, promoting a culture of respect, safety, and inclusivity. This includes protecting instructional time, providing incentives for teachers and learners, promoting professional development, and maintaining high visibility. The UAE's multicultural school population renders this dimension especially complex, requiring culturally responsive leadership approaches that policy frameworks are only beginning to address formally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Context in the UAE

The public education model in the UAE has undergone several changes, as noted by Ridge et al. (2017). In the 1950s, curricula from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait were brought into the UAE. The Egyptian model was used until the late 1980s, after which a new English language curriculum was introduced in the 1990s, and the UAE National Curriculum was first introduced in 1985. The Abu Dhabi School Model was implemented in Abu Dhabi from 2010 to 2018, emphasising deeper learning, a results-focused curriculum, technologically advanced environments, and bilingualism. However, school leadership teams lacked implementation skills and teamwork due to a lack of communication, collaboration, and consistency of teaching methods (Al-Fadala, 2015).

The UAE government implemented additional reforms as part of the 2017–2021 national education plan, which aims to create a competitive knowledge society (Government of the United Arab Emirates, 2018). The Ministry inspects public and private schools in the Northern Emirates and public schools in the Emirate of Dubai. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) inspect private schools in Dubai. In contrast, the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) inspects charter and private schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. In 2021, to mark its 50th anniversary, the Ministry of Education published its UAE Centennial 2071 plans for education, including the creation of a national school framework with international standard

specifications called the ‘Emirati school.’ These sequential reforms represent a distinctive policy ecology that shapes how school leaders conceptualise and enact their instructional roles.

Principals as Instructional Leaders

Instructional leadership has been variously defined throughout the literature. Some refer to it as a proactive and influential role of school leaders, particularly principals, in promoting and improving teaching and learning within educational settings (Bush, 2014; Shatzer et al., 2014). According to Leithwood et al. (2002), instructional leadership encompasses fostering a shared vision of academic success, setting high expectations for teaching and learning, providing instructional guidance, facilitating professional development, and utilising data-driven approaches to improve teaching practices and student achievement.

The school principal holds a crucial role as an instructional leader, providing guidance to the school and surrounding community, and fostering a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning. The principal must actively engage in activities that support and enhance classroom instruction, curriculum development, and teacher professional growth—all with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement (Bush & Glover, 2016; Hallinger et al., 2018). The role of principals as instructional leaders can improve school standards since they are looked up to by the instructional personnel for leadership and guidance (Sanchez et al., 2020).

As an effective instructional leader, the principal has four main domains of action, as advocated by Andrews and Soder (1987). First, they are considered instructional resources to improve classroom circumstances that enhance learning. Second, they need to be good communicators who articulate and commit to school goals and adhere to clear performance standards. Third, principals are expected to be resource providers to achieve the school’s vision and mission. Lastly, they need to maintain visibility in the school. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2008) identified five dimensions comprising instructional leadership: principal involvement in learning; promotion of professional development; initiation of goals and expectations; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and learning; and maintaining a well-designed and supportive environment.

A critical gap in the existing literature concerns the policy conditions that enable or constrain these leadership functions. While the behaviours of effective instructional leaders are well-documented, considerably less attention has been paid to how national and institutional policy frameworks create the structural conditions that make such behaviours possible. In GCC contexts, where centralised education governance coexists with diverse private school systems serving expatriate communities, this policy-leadership interface is particularly complex (Ridge et al., 2017).

Principals’ Instructional Leadership Influence on Teachers

Principals play a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes through their instructional leadership, which significantly influences teachers and, by extension, student learning (Hallinger & Lee, 2013; Stein et al., 2016). Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) demonstrated that effective instructional leadership positively impacts teachers’ instructional practices, fostering a collaborative and supportive school culture. Principals who exhibit strong instructional leadership traits—such as providing clear direction, offering professional development opportunities, and fostering a shared vision of academic success—empower teachers to excel in their roles (Bryk et al., 2010). Additionally, Kovac and Pažur (2025) highlight that principals’ instructional leadership influences teachers’ instructional strategies, curriculum implementation, and their ability to adapt teaching methods to meet diverse student needs.

Studies (Bada et al., 2025; Hallinger & Lee, 2013; Al-Mahdy & Al-kiyumi, 2015) highlight that developing a positive school learning climate and defining the school mission are the two highly rated PIMRS dimensions by both teachers and principals themselves, as opposed to managing the instructional program dimension, which requires considerable pedagogical knowledge, skills, and understanding of learning (Southworth, 2005). Others, such as Ghavifekr et al. (2019), noted that the lowest dimension perceived by their Malaysian teachers is related to the third dimension concerning promoting a positive climate. The UAE’s professional development policy for school leaders, still maturing relative to systems in Singapore or Ontario, may partially explain patterns of perceived strength and weakness across these dimensions.

School Leadership Effectiveness and High-Stakes Testing: Importance and Impact

Leadership is considered the second most influential school factor, after teacher quality, that impacts student achievement (Clifford et al., 2012). Research shows that effective principals can significantly increase student achievement by two or more months in a single school year, while ineffective principals lower achievement (Branch et al., 2013). Studies performed in British Columbia showed that a one standard deviation improvement in principal

quality can boost student performance by 0.289 to 0.408 standard deviations in reading and math (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Grissom et al. (2021) conducted research spanning over two decades and showed a correlation between effective school leadership and student achievement, suggesting that investing in high-quality school leaders may yield one of the highest returns on investment in K-12 education.

Furthermore, Hallinger (2011) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis examining the relationship between principal leadership competencies and student achievement, suggesting a positive correlation between effective leadership competencies and improved student outcomes. Competencies such as instructional leadership, vision, and organisational management were highlighted. Additionally, Capper and Frattura (2017) emphasised the importance of cultural competence in school leadership, noting that school leaders with competencies in understanding and valuing cultural diversity were better equipped to address the needs of a diverse student body and promote equitable educational opportunities. This is a finding with particular resonance for the UAE's highly multicultural schools.

Taking together, this body of evidence situates the present study within a clear policy argument: if principal quality is among the highest-leverage investments in K-12 education, then policy systems must develop rigorous, evidence-based frameworks for principal selection, development, and evaluation. The UAE's current inspection-led accountability model provides one such framework, but its alignment with research on instructional leadership effectiveness requires empirical scrutiny.

METHODOLOGY

The study followed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, which involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data (school principals' PIMRS ratings) and qualitative data (through interviews). The study focused on analyzing quantitative data to statistically determine the effects of relationships and then used qualitative interview data to gain deeper insights into the views of school principals on instructional leadership in the UAE. The pragmatist philosophy is considered the appropriate underpinning of this approach (Creswell, 2014, 2015).

Participants and Sampling

The study sample included 30 school principals from Abu Dhabi who voluntarily participated after receiving ethical protocols via email. With approval from ADEK, the PIMRS was distributed to the principals through a form link sent to their school emails. The sample encompassed principals from various school systems (British, European, American, and MOE) and charter schools, representing diverse genders, nationalities, locations, and experience levels. Demographic details of the participating principals revealed that 56.7% were female and 43.3% were male. The majority of principals (63.3%) were from K-12 schools, with the rest distributed across other school cycles. In terms of experience, most principals had been in their current school for 1 to 4 years (53.3%), while the smallest group had served 10 to 15 years (6.7%).

This demographic composition reflects both the gender distribution of school leadership in Abu Dhabi and the relatively high turnover rates characteristic of international school leadership in the Gulf region, a structural feature with direct policy implications for leadership continuity and capacity building.

Instrumentation

The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), was used to collect quantitative data. The PIMRS framework evaluates three key dimensions of principal leadership, further broken down into 10 instructional leadership functions, each assessed with five behaviourally anchored items using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The instrument generates a profile of the principal's performance across the 10 functions. Hallinger (1983) reported the reliability of the PIMRS, with all subscales achieving a Cronbach's alpha of .80—the minimum standard for behavioural rating scales (Latham & Wexley, 1981). In the present study, the tool demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .930.

A demographic section was added to collect principals' information, including gender, field experience, years as a principal, school cycle, and the Emirate in which they work. Twenty principals were subsequently interviewed via Microsoft Teams to understand their views on their instructional leadership role in school operations in the UAE.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 23) to evaluate the reliability of the tool, participant demographics, descriptive statistics, normality, and inferential statistical tests. Normality tests, including the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, indicated that most of the data for the PIMRS categories did not conform to a normal distribution (see Table 2). Consequently, nonparametric tests were employed for inferential analysis, particularly due to the limited sample size ($n = 60$).

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, which is considered appropriate for qualitative studies and can capture response patterns to answer research questions (Creswell, 2014). The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarisation, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and reporting findings. To enhance credibility and reflexivity, member-checking was conducted with a subsample of five interview participants, and inter-rater reliability for the thematic coding process was established with an independent reviewer, yielding a Cohen's kappa of .78, indicating substantial agreement.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The data from the PIMRS collected from 30 participating principals were analyzed. The tool demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .930, indicating strong consistency in measuring principals' perceptions. Principals consistently rated their instructional leadership practices highly, with mean scores ranging from 3.800 to 4.580 on a 5-point scale. The low standard deviations (less than 1.00) indicate minimal variation in responses, suggesting a high degree of agreement among participants (see Table 1).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for PIMRS Overall and Subscales

Subscale	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Provide Incentives for Teachers	60	1.80	5.00	3.800	.861
Monitor Student Progress	60	2.20	5.00	4.207	.736
Protect Instructional Time	60	3.20	5.00	4.227	.469
Provide Incentives for Learning	60	2.00	5.00	4.313	.634
Coordinate the Curriculum	60	3.20	5.00	4.373	.538
Promote Professional Development	60	3.40	5.00	4.427	.486
Communicate School Goals	60	3.20	5.00	4.467	.431
Supervise and Evaluate Instruction	60	3.00	5.00	4.487	.416
Frame School Goals	60	3.80	5.00	4.580	.401
Overall	60	1.80	5.00	3.952	.541

Normality Testing

Normality tests indicated that most of the PIMRS category data did not conform to a normal distribution (see Table 2). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests revealed significant departures from normality for the majority of subscales, justifying the use of nonparametric inferential tests.

Table 2 Tests of Normality Results (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk)

Subscale	KS Statistic	df	Sig.	SW Statistic	df	Sig.
Frame the School Goals	.242	60	.000	.865	30	.001
Communicate School Goals	.168	60	.030	.880	30	.003
Supervise and Evaluate Instruction	.145	60	.106	.866	30	.001
Coordinate Curriculum	.186	60	.009	.890	30	.005
Monitor Student Progress	.196	60	.005	.850	30	.001

Protect Instructional Time	.225	60	.000	.896	30	.007
Maintain High Visibility	.225	60	.000	.896	30	.007
Provide Incentives for Teachers	.161	60	.045	.888	30	.004
Promote Professional Development	.211	60	.001	.879	30	.003
Provide Incentives for Learning	.144	60	.115	.850	30	.001

Note. a Lilliefors significance correction applied.

Inferential Analysis

Results from the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests (see Table 3) revealed significant findings related to specific leadership practices, such as principals' classroom visits ($p = .043$), participation in extracurricular activities ($p = .014$), protection of instructional time ($p = .043$), and maintaining high visibility ($p = .043$), with gender emerging as a significant factor influencing these practices. These gender-differentiated patterns in leadership visibility and engagement are consistent with comparative findings from Hallinger et al. (2018) and carry policy implications for how principal development programmes address gender in professional learning designs.

Table 3 Mann-Whitney U Test: Significant Results by Gender

Item #	Null Hypothesis	Sig.	Decision
32	Distribution of visiting classrooms to discuss school issues with teachers and students is the same across gender.	$p = .043$	Reject null hypothesis
33	Distribution of attending/participating in extra- and co-curricular activities is the same across gender.	$p = .014$	Reject null hypothesis

Spearman correlation analysis highlighted strong, positive relationships among several key instructional leadership dimensions, including framing and communicating school goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress, underscoring the interconnectedness of these leadership practices.

Regression analysis (see Table 4) indicated moderate explanatory power ($R = .660$) for predicting principals' instructional leadership perceptions based on PIMRS variables. 'Framing the School Goals' was significantly influenced by 'Communicating School Goals' ($B = -.040$) and 'Maintaining High Visibility' ($B = -.050$). Demographic variables such as gender, school cycle, years in the school, and tenure as principal did not yield statistically significant effects on principals' perceptions overall (see Table 6).

Table 4 Model Summary for Regression Analysis (Dependent Variable: Frame the School Goals)

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of Estimate
1	.660	.436	.221	1.771

Note. Predictors: (Constant), CommunicateSchoolGoals, SuperviseAndEvaluateInstruction, CoordinateCurriculum, MonitorStudentProgress, MaintainHighVisibility, ProvideIncentivesForTeachers, PromotePD, ProvideIncentivesForLearning.

Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis of Principal Interviews

Twenty principals from schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi were interviewed via Microsoft Teams. Six common themes emerged from the interviews, summarising the principals' views on leadership.

Educational Vision and Policy Alignment

All principals in the UAE took the lead in articulating a compelling educational vision for their schools, aligned with national educational priorities outlined by the UAE Ministry of Education—particularly in areas such as innovation, entrepreneurship, and global citizenship. However, only two principals highlighted the importance of working collaboratively with stakeholders to ensure that the vision reflects the aspirations and values of the school

community. This gap between policy-driven vision-setting and participatory vision construction represents a structural tension that merits attention in leadership development policy design.

Leadership Values, Role, and Style

Among the 20 principals interviewed, the most frequently cited values were equity, empathy, and collaboration. Fifteen of the principals characterised their roles as multifaceted, emphasising their responsibilities as facilitators, visionaries, mentors, and advocates, while the remaining five described themselves primarily as education leaders and managers focused on administrative responsibilities. This divergence reflects the competing accountability demands principals navigate within UAE inspection frameworks.

Curriculum Development, Implementation, and Assessment

Most of the principals ($n = 17$) highlighted the importance of curriculum alignment with national and international standards. None mentioned their role in overseeing or being part of curriculum development and implementation directly; ten principals noted weekly meetings with curriculum coordinators to ensure proper curriculum implementation. Eighteen principals emphasised integrating elements of UAE culture and heritage into the curriculum. This delegation of curriculum leadership raises a critical policy question: if principals are not direct curriculum actors, what structural supports are needed to ensure coherent instructional quality at the school level?

Teacher Development

Most principals ($n = 15$) prioritised the professional development of teachers, organising workshops, seminars, and training sessions to address specific areas for improvement. Ten principals highlighted that their school leadership teams had encouraged collaboration among teachers through professional learning communities. This finding is consistent with policy research emphasising distributed leadership as a mechanism for building sustainable instructional capacity (Robinson et al., 2008).

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity

Given the multicultural nature of the UAE, all principals highlighted that they promote cultural sensitivity and inclusivity within the school community. Twelve principals reported that diversity, equity, and inclusion guide their school's policies and practices. This finding underscores the importance of culturally responsive leadership competency frameworks in UAE principal preparation and continuing professional development policy.

Supporting Student Achievement

All principals ($n = 20$) emphasised the significance of establishing a positive and encouraging learning environment. They shared various approaches ranging from personalised learning experiences and differentiated instruction to targeted interventions and the development of student resilience, perseverance, and self-confidence. The policy implication is clear: principals who are effective in this dimension serve as architects of a school-level achievement culture, a function that requires both leadership preparation and ongoing policy support.

DISCUSSION

The study results revealed high reliability in principals' self-ratings of instructional practices, consistent with Al-Mahdy et al. (2018), who highlighted the collective impact of instructional leadership on teacher commitment across schools. The low standard deviations, suggesting consensus in leadership approaches, mirror findings by Bush and Glover (2016) on cohesive management structures, particularly relevant in diverse educational settings. The discussion below is organised around the three research questions, before turning to the broader policy implications of the findings.

Instructional Leader Profile of UAE School Principals

The demographic data and quantitative findings from the PIMRS illustrate that UAE school principals, irrespective of gender or tenure, exhibit strong instructional leadership traits. The high mean scores (ranging from 3.800 to 4.580 on a 5-point scale) reflect a cohesive and focused approach to instructional management. Principals demonstrate a structured approach, aligning their roles with national educational standards through framing and communicating school goals and supervising instruction. This consistent focus on core instructional responsibilities, irrespective of demographic variables, points to a shared understanding and commitment to instructional leadership across diverse school settings in the UAE, which aligns with Baucas and Martin (2026) and Grissom et al. (2021).

Qualitative data further supported this profile, as principals emphasised vision-driven and values-based leadership approaches. Key values included equity, empathy, and collaboration, with principals largely viewing their roles as multifaceted. This perspective reveals a hybrid leadership model in UAE schools, where principals

prioritize instructional goals while addressing operational demands. Importantly, this hybrid model appears to be shaped not merely by individual preference but by the dual accountability pressures of national curriculum alignment (Government of the United Arab Emirates, 2018) and international inspection standards (Braun et al., 2026), a dynamic that policy architects should explicitly acknowledge in leadership frameworks.

Relationships Between Leadership Styles, School Mission, and Learning Climate

The strong correlations identified among leadership practices—framing school goals, communicating these goals, supervising instruction, and curriculum coordination—demonstrate a deeply interconnected leadership framework. These relationships suggest that principals perceive instructional leadership as a holistic process where each element reinforces others, fostering a school climate that supports continuous improvement in teaching and learning. Gender-based differences in leadership practices, such as protecting instructional time and maintaining high visibility, underscore the nuanced ways in which personal and contextual factors might influence instructional practices, as supported by Braun et al. (2026) and Dou et al. (2016).

From a policy perspective, this finding suggests that one-size-fits-all principal development programmes may be insufficient; differentiated professional learning pathways that account for the intersectionality of gender, school context, and leadership experience may yield stronger outcomes.

Principals' Views on Instructional Leadership in School Operations

The qualitative data provide rich insights into how principals view their instructional leadership role, highlighting both strengths and areas for potential growth. While principals placed strong emphasis on setting a clear educational vision aligned with national priorities, a gap was noted in principals' direct involvement in curriculum development. This delegation, while practical, may distance principals from directly shaping curriculum alignment and assessment standards—areas critical for achieving high instructional quality. This gap is particularly relevant for UAE inspection frameworks, in which curriculum leadership is an expected principal competency (Abushpap, 2025).

Furthermore, the principals highlighted their role in promoting cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, a significant aspect of UAE education that addresses the needs of its multicultural society. This focus on cultural inclusivity not only enriches the learning experience but also strengthens community ties and contributes to a supportive school climate, consistent with Ridge et al. (2017) and Al-Fadala (2015).

Policy Implications

The findings carry several substantive policy implications for school governance in the UAE. First, the pattern of high self-rated instructional leadership, coupled with acknowledged gaps in curriculum development involvement, points to a need for policy frameworks that formally delineate and support the curriculum leadership role of principals—not merely their oversight and monitoring functions (Abushpap and Lai, 2025). ADEK and equivalent bodies could consider revising school leader standards to include competencies in curriculum design and instructional innovation.

Second, the limited stakeholder engagement in vision-setting, identified in the qualitative data, suggests that current leadership preparation models may over-emphasise compliance with national policy directives at the expense of building distributed, community-responsive leadership capacity. Programmes that build principals' skills in participatory governance and community engagement would strengthen this dimension.

Third, the relatively short tenure profiles of principals in this sample (53.3% had served one to four years in their current school) suggest that leadership continuity is a structural policy challenge in Abu Dhabi's private and charter school sector. Policies that incentivise longer tenures, such as multi-year performance agreements and career development pathways, may be warranted to ensure that instructional leadership capacity is sustainable over time.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth exploration of instructional leadership practices among UAE school principals, revealing key insights into their self-perceived roles, strengths, and areas for growth. Using the PIMRS self-rating tool, findings show that UAE principals exhibit a strong commitment to instructional leadership, as reflected by high self-assessment scores, with particular strengths in setting school goals, supervising instruction, and fostering a positive learning environment. Qualitative data further illuminate their emphasis on values such as equity, collaboration, and inclusivity, underscoring the multifaceted nature of their roles.

Consistent with findings from Ridge et al. (2017), Al-Fadala (2015), and UAE Ministry of Education initiatives (Abushpap and Lai, 2025), the results highlight the evolving educational landscape in the UAE and the pivotal role of effective leadership in advancing national educational goals. UAE principals not only guide students' educational journeys but also actively support teacher growth and cultivate a culture of innovation within their schools.

However, the study also identifies areas for enhancement, particularly in terms of increased principal involvement in curriculum development and the need for more comprehensive collaboration with stakeholders. Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge: (a) encouraging principals to actively engage in curriculum design and assessment to reinforce instructional coherence; (b) developing professional development programmes focusing on adaptive and culturally responsive leadership skills; (c) fostering an inclusive school climate that addresses the multicultural needs of the UAE's student population; and (d) developing policy incentives for principal tenure stability in the private and charter school sector.

This study has several limitations. The sample was limited to 30 principals from Abu Dhabi, which constrains generalizability across the broader UAE. Self-rating instruments are subject to social desirability bias, and the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Further studies incorporating perspectives from teachers, students, and parents, along with longitudinal assessments, would provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of instructional leadership practices on school performance and student achievement. Comparative research across the seven Emirates, and between the UAE and other GCC states, would also be particularly valuable for informing regional education policy.

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