



Framing Professional Identity in School Leadership: A Critical Exploration within the UAE Inspection Context

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Abstract

This study focuses on the role of school leadership within the public schools of Abu Dhabi, examining how leaders shape and reshape their professional identity over continuous cycles of school inspections. In the context of ongoing accountability policies in education in the United Arab Emirates, it poses a peculiar problem for school leaders whose values differ from system-driven expectations to balance between personal educational ideals, emotional labour, and philosophies of leadership. The qualitative research methodology centres on obtaining individual interviews from school leaders of grades K to 12. The results indicate that professional identity is not simply something one assumes; instead, it is strategically shaped in relation to frameworks, cultures of the institution, and personal models of leadership. Participants exhibited greater alignment with governance frameworks and criteria focused on empirical evidence alongside a claimed commitment to deeper levels of relational leadership, moral obligation, and holistic care for students. It is noteworthy that accountability serves concurrently as both a means for improvement and an emotionally draining paradox. Moreover, it demonstrates how success criteria within inspection frameworks can be far too simplistic and neglect the crucial yet often invisible components of leadership practice. The described rapid pace of reform alongside multiculturalism combined with centralized governance creates a one-of-a-kind educational context in the UAE which adds complexity in terms of how leaders perceive their role. Contributing to understanding the professional identity gap within frameworks of institutional demand and human agency shifts invites discourse around educational leadership in the global context. As has been pointed

out, there are no well-developed systems for cultivating leadership archetypes, suggesting a balanced policy framework alongside the practice within schools is urgently required. As multicultural changes to the UAE's centralized educational system evolve with new policies, frameworks, and methods of administration, the situation remains dynamic based on how those in leadership positions interpret and define their roles. This study seeks to shift the global conversation about an educational leader's professional identity by framing it as something that can be continuously reshaped through governance frameworks policies of inspection, institutional demands, and personal agency. It highlights an ever-pressing need for more precise approaches tailored specifically for school leaders, from discipline-based guidance structures to developing respect for self-defined goals constrained by rules placed upon them.

المستخلص

هذه الدراسة تركز على دور القيادة المدرسية في المدارس الحكومية في أبوظبي، حيث تستكشف كيف يعيد القادة تشكيل هويتهم المهنية عبر دورات متتالية من عمليات التفتيش المدرسي. في ظل سياسات المساءلة المستمرة في التعليم بدولة الإمارات، يواجه القادة المدرسيون تحدياً يتمثل في الموازنة بين القيم التربوية الشخصية والتوقعات المفروضة من النظام، إضافة إلى إدارة الضغوط العاطفية وفلسفات القيادة المختلفة. اعتمدت الدراسة على منهجية بحث نوعي من خلال مقابلات فردية مع قادة مدارس من الصفوف (K-12). وأظهرت النتائج أن الهوية المهنية لا تُفترض بشكل تلقائي، بل يتم تشكيلها استراتيجياً بما يتماشى مع الأطر المؤسسية والثقافات الداخلية ونماذج القيادة الشخصية. كما بيّن المشاركون توافقاً أكبر مع الأطر الحاكمة ومعايير قائمة على الأدلة التجريبية، إلى جانب التزامهم بمستويات أعمق من القيادة القائمة على العلاقات والواجب الأخلاقي والرعاية الشمولية للطلاب. ومن الملاحظ أن سياسات المساءلة تعمل في الوقت نفسه كوسيلة للتطوير وكعضلة تستنزف الجانب العاطفي. علاوة على ذلك، توضح الدراسة أن معايير النجاح في أطر التفتيش قد تكون مبسطة للغاية وتهمل مكونات أساسية لكنها غير مرئية من الممارسات القيادية. إن سرعة الإصلاحات وتعدد الثقافات إلى جانب الحوكمة المركزية يخلق سياقاً تعليمياً فريداً في الإمارات، مما يزيد من تعقيد تصور القادة

لأدوارهم. وتُسهم هذه الدراسة في فهم فجوة الهوية المهنية ضمن أطر الطلب المؤسسي وتحولات الوكالة الإنسانية، كما تدعو إلى حوار أوسع حول القيادة التعليمية في السياق العالمي. ومن المهم الإشارة إلى عدم وجود أنظمة متطورة لرعاية أنماط القيادة، مما يبرز الحاجة إلى إطار سياسات متوازن يدعم الممارسة داخل المدارس. ومع استمرار التغيرات المرتبطة بالتعددية الثقافية داخل النظام التعليمي المركزي في الإمارات وظهور سياسات وأطر وأساليب إدارة جديدة، تبقى الأوضاع متغيرة تبعاً لكيفية تفسير القادة لدورهم. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إعادة صياغة النقاش العالمي حول هوية القائد التعليمي المهني باعتبارها عملية مستمرة يعاد تشكيلها عبر السياسات والأطر المؤسسية والطلبات التنظيمية والقدرة على التكيف، مؤكدة الحاجة الملحة إلى مقاربات دقيقة تستجيب لخصوصية القادة التربويين من خلال هياكل إرشادية منضبطة وتقدير الأهداف الذاتية رغم القيود المفروضة عليهم.

Introduction

Focus recently has shifted to the softer aspects of policy; therefore, the role of school leadership has changed. In the context of educational reform within the United Arab Emirates (UAE), inspection frameworks serve not only as summative evaluative tools but also as formative feedback mechanisms that impact perception and professional self-worth in the intricate web of a school's life.

This comes from a genuine question that arose during my doctorate: How does the inspection system shape, challenge, or influence the professional identity of school leaders in the UAE? While speaking to principals and other stakeholders, I saw this mental tug-of-war between genuine influence and performative compliance. While all such aspects are human nature, their expressions vary politically and culturally uniquely, like in the UAE.

The UAE inspection system fulfils national ambitions while serving an international goal. It simultaneously provides order, transparency, and direction in processes and systems; effective leadership is ordered value separately termed. This dynamic determines how leaders decide to craft their persona:

comply with resist, or reimagine the prescribed expectations surrounding them.

This research does not aim to critique the inspection process itself, but to examine the human impact it has on school leaders — how it frames their sense of self, their decisions, and their development. Using a qualitative approach grounded in my doctoral methodology, this paper seeks to explore professional identity not as a static concept, but as a lived and negotiated experience within a system that constantly evaluates and labels. In a time when educational leadership is expected to be both transformational and accountable, this research invites readers — policy makers, school leaders, academics — to pause and reflect: Are we supporting leadership identities that empower innovation and ethical practice, or are we unknowingly narrowing the space for authentic leadership to grow?

Background and Rationale

The study draws on data collected from public (governmental) schools in Abu Dhabi, covering all educational levels from kindergarten to Grade 12. The objective here focuses on understanding how school leaders situated in these contexts perceive their professional identity regarding inspection and accountability domains.

Effective leadership is paramount within any institution, and it has always been regarded as a principal factor influencing the functioning and evolution of institutions. Traditionally understood in simplistic terms, leadership is now an emotionally intelligent and transformative endeavour. This change is particularly marked in the UAE owing to its strategic national educational policies and international frameworks along with an unprecedented emphasis on outcomes-based accountability revolving around rigorous school evaluations.

These are especially true for UAE where there has been a relentless drive towards both community contribution together with change through design. It must be mentioned that this prescriptive model of 'leadership' overlooked one particular dimension - professional identity - which remains largely neglected. In what ways do school leaders position themselves concerning roles within the intra-school ecosystem as well as within broader societal structures? What accounts for their agency in leading or choosing to function within systems? Where do their beliefs, values, and sense of purpose lie within a narrative that seeks to define all actions against externally set benchmarks?

The UAE's school inspection framework has become a powerful mechanism for driving school improvement. While it offers clear expectations and feedback loops, it also subtly communicates what leadership should look like, act like, and prioritize. As such, it plays a formative role in how leaders shape their identity — whether they adapt to, internalize, resist, or reinterpret these expectations.

This research is motivated by a desire to understand that deeper layer — not the checklist of leadership competencies, but the internal narrative of the leader. Drawing on my doctoral journey, I realized that inspection outcomes alone do not tell the whole story. They don't capture the moments of doubt, resilience, adaptation, or even resistance that leaders experience as they navigate between personal beliefs and institutional expectations.

The rationale for this study is therefore twofold. First, to explore professional identity in leadership as a dynamic, constructed, and contextually influenced experience, particularly in systems governed by inspection and accountability. Second, to contribute to the local and international discourse by offering insights from the unique educational landscape of the UAE — a system that

merges global education reform models with local cultural and policy contexts.

By grounding this research in the lived experiences of school leaders, the aim is to bring forward voices that are often absent in policy discussions: not just what leaders do, but how they feel, perceive, and construct their identity in response to the systems they are a part of.

Research Aim and Questions

The primary aim of this study is to critically explore how school leaders in the UAE construct and negotiate their professional identity within the context of the national school inspection framework. While school inspections serve as mechanisms for improvement and accountability, they also exert a strong influence on how leadership is defined, practiced, and perceived. This research seeks to understand how these external structures interact with the internal beliefs, values, and lived experiences of school leaders.

Rather than treating leadership identity as a fixed trait or a list of competencies, this study views identity as a fluid, evolving construct, shaped by both individual meaning-making and systemic pressures. The research is particularly interested in how leaders respond to inspection expectations — whether through alignment, adaptation, or resistance — and what this tells us about their deeper sense of self as professionals in a complex educational system.

To guide this inquiry, the following research questions have been developed in the main research question's part.

Main Research Question:

- How do school leaders in UAE government schools construct their professional identity in response to the national school inspection framework?

Sub-questions:

1. What beliefs, values, and personal narratives shape the professional identity of school leaders?
2. How do school leaders perceive and respond to the expectations imposed by the UAE school inspection system?
3. In what ways does the inspection process influence leadership practices, priorities, and self-perceptions?
4. How do school leaders reconcile potential tensions between personal leadership values and externally imposed standards?

These questions are rooted in the idea that identity is not simply what we say about ourselves, but what we live through — especially when working in systems where outcomes are closely measured, reported, and compared.

Significance of the Study

In the UAE, as in many parts of the world, education is a sector that is changing at breakneck speed. Modern school leadership comes with greater and more complex responsibilities: achieving high outcomes, meeting inspection criteria, delivering meaningful value aligned to student well-being, innovation, inclusion, and holistic values. Given this reality, it is indispensable to understand how school leaders are shaped professionally in order to formulate appropriate strategies within sociocultural frameworks of leadership and educational policy.

This study is one of the most distinctive because first it addresses an overlooked dimension of educational leadership. While almost all policies centre around what leaders must perform as mandated by evaluators and other external stakeholders, this research centres on who leaders are and their emotive perception of the role in relation to systems that are in place. By engaging with school leaders' narratives, this research

captures dissenting voices that remain unheard during evaluations or reports that are done externally.

second, this research adds scholarly work about the Gulf region by intertwining emotions and ethics into the storytelling framework which often gets missed in conversations dominated by innovation and governance structures.

Third, by situating the research in the framework of school inspection, this study provides insights that are contextually relevant and policy-informing. As change mechanisms, inspection systems impact leadership behaviours in complex and sometimes ineffective ways. Examining these effects through the framework of identity reveals the relationship between policy and practice and highlights where efforts for improvement are possible.

For these reasons, this study is relevant as it has implications that can be acted upon by education policymakers, principals, coaching leaders, and even reformers. It champions a move away from compliance to more relating centred leadership which honours authenticity and context along with personal agency.

Literature Review

This chapter investigates the studies related to school leaders in the UAE and how they shape their professional identity concerning educational inspections. It combines some relevant theories and offers a critical review of literature about professional identity, leadership actions, accountability mechanisms, and the impact of various frameworks for inspection, particularly in relation to the UAE.

Conceptualizing Professional Identity in Educational Leadership

Professional educators and leaders have been studied deeply regarding their roles, values, and contributions to the

profession (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Concerning school leadership, identity is not fixed; it undergoes constant erosion from a blend of social expectations and internal values as well as relational networks (Day et al., 2007). A leadership identity is formed through numerous professional interactions coupled with rigid policies and a prevailing school culture (Pletka & Tamir, 2009).

Under the frameworks of accountability Ball documented how success and professionalism are redefined (2003). In high-stakes environments, institutional actors transform their identities, actions, and even focus along regulated performance metrics inspection benchmarks (Kelchtermans, 2005). This is especially the case in the UAE where leadership discourse is largely determined by inspection frameworks as dominators of effective leadership

Educational Accountability and Inspection Frameworks

The global phenomenon of educational accountability has become one of the most important focuses of policy change. Governments have increasingly relied on school inspection systems as mechanisms for monitoring school performance and ensuring quality education (Perryman, 2006; Ehren & Visscher, 2008). In the UAE, the evaluation and supervision framework due to its international benchmarking is thorough. It assesses parenting with regard to improvement planning on teaching practices, learning outcomes, and active participant's role in instructional processes (KHDA, 2020).

The model has created challenges for school administrators who now have to deal with both technical aspects as well as people issues (Wilkins 2015). In this dual scenario, empowerment is experienced throughout, and sufficiency is suddenly prominent at every angle. Although clarity in structure may be present which informs purpose and objective setting

activities, at times it is possible that leadership devolves into little more than an identity enforcement exercise stripped of substance (Ball 2003).

Abu Dhabi principals are adaptive because they are flexible by design (Al Thehli 2023), meaning that they actively seek out opportunities to change their leadership style based on what they predict will garner positive appraisal during inspections leading them to alter their sense of professional self.

The UAE Inspection Context and Its Impact on Leadership

Global competitiveness and national development strategies have shaped the educational vision of the UAE (MOE, 2019). In this regard, inspection agencies ADEK and KHDA were formed to provide oversight with measurable compliance within set policies (Mourshed et al., 2010). These frameworks not only focus on institutional quality but drive impact on leadership culture (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017).

Through the distributed governance model, school leaders are expected to align their practices with inscribed framework standards prioritizing improvement metrics derivable from rigorous data analysis as well as broad-based stakeholder involvement (KHDA, 2020). Inspection frameworks are meant to evaluate learning processes as explored in Al Thehli's (2023) research on leader behaviour and infused desire to control outcomes. For many leaders, professional identity is shaped around appraisal benchmarks which become dominant signals against labelled competence indicators.

Human Relations, Scientific Management, and Critical Theory Perspectives

For this research, the professional identity of school leaders is approached from human relations theory, scientific management, and critical theory.

The application of scientific management principles, first articulated by Frederick Taylor in 1911, revolves around control and standardization. It reinforces pinpointed inspections as measurable outcomes within structured frameworks of leadership roles in the UAE context. School leaders are often burdened with having to manage operations to a set of pre-defined metrics (Wilkins, 2015).

As highlighted by Maslow (1954) and Argyris (1964), human relations theories attribute greater importance to motivation, interactions among people within an organization, work culture satisfaction levels. Many UAE school leaders seek to preserve this human-centred leadership despite the pressures of compliance. They describe efforts to maintain staff morale, support teacher development, and sustain collegiality during inspection cycles (Bush & Glover, 2014).

Critical theory provides a lens through which the power dynamics of inspection can be interrogated. It explores how systems of surveillance and control produce conformity and reduce professional autonomy (Apple, 2013). In the UAE, school leaders experience inspection as both a tool of validation and a mechanism of discipline. This dual role creates a tension in how leaders construct their identity—as both agents of change and subjects of regulation (Ball, 2003).

Framing Leadership Identity Under External Pressure

Studies have demonstrated that leaders in high-accountability settings often adopt hybrid professional identities, blending compliance with innovation (Mockler, 2011). In the UAE, this hybridity is particularly visible. Leaders frame themselves as transformational while ensuring they do not deviate from the expectations of the inspection body (Day et al., 2007).

traditions and policies, as well as international benchmarks. It has been shown recently that Abu Dhabi's leadership displays a somewhat contradictory mixture of identity-related pride and anxiety (Al Thehli, 2023). Their perception-making involves attempts to position themselves regarded as moral visionaries, while simultaneously feeling caged in a monolithic, reductive framing. Indispensably, this tension produces relentless identity work systems where professional ethics are measured against organizational expectations.

Conclusion

In the context of school leadership, the professional identity has received considerable scholarly attention in contexts such as the UAE where it is shaped by high stakes factors. High-stakes environments usually focus on improvement; however, in these scenarios, 'Accountability' often overshadows its intended purpose and starts to redefine the meaning of leadership. It can be observed that through scientific management theory, human relations theory, and even critical theory, one can conclude that leadership identity is highly contingent upon policy, inspection and self-commitment, thus making it an intersectional negotiated space. This research further narrows this discussion with studying the scope-through lived experience framework- of all these interacting forces in case of a school leader in UAE.

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology of the study, including how school leaders in Abu Dhabi were examined within the context of educational accountability and school inspections. This is a qualitative study conducted within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm which assumes that identity and leadership are multidimensional and socially

constructed within a given context. The scope of research included government schools in Abu Dhabi bounded by all levels from kindergarten to Grade 12.

As the focus was on lived experiences, sense-making concerning leadership roles, and negotiation of professional identities, qualitative inquiry was most appropriate for capturing the intricacies of perspectives held by leaders functioning within imposed frameworks of school inspections. This chapter details the research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, ethical considerations, and the analytical procedures adopted.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design to provide an in-depth, contextualized exploration of how school leaders perceive and construct their professional identity within the UAE's school inspection environment. Case studies allow researchers to examine bounded systems in real-life contexts and are especially useful when investigating phenomena that are complex, multi-dimensional, and embedded in their settings.

In this research, each participating school leader served as an individual case, enabling cross-case analysis while respecting the uniqueness of each leader's journey, perception, and professional stance. The study was not designed to generalize findings but to illuminate the inner workings of leadership identity within the specific cultural and policy context of Abu Dhabi government schools.

Research Paradigm

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm informed the entire research process. This worldview holds that reality is socially constructed and that individuals make meaning based on their experiences, interactions, and internal frameworks. Professional identity — especially under the influence of

inspection, accountability, and performance metrics — is not static. It evolves as leaders negotiate external expectations with their internal values and leadership philosophies.

By situating the study in this paradigm, the researcher positioned herself as a co-constructor of meaning, engaging with participants through interviews and dialogue to uncover how their identities are shaped and reshaped in the face of inspection.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to recruit school leaders (principals and vice principals) from government schools across various regions in Abu Dhabi. The sampling was strategic and intentional, aiming to include participants with rich experiences in leadership and direct exposure to inspection cycles under the UAE framework.

The final sample consisted of 6 leaders representing different school levels (KG, primary, middle, and secondary), genders, and school contexts. This diversity added depth to the study and allowed for multiple perspectives on professional identity construction.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. These interviews allowed participants to reflect on their experiences, articulate their leadership philosophy, and describe how inspection processes influenced their self-concept and professional conduct.

Interview questions focused on:

- How school leaders describe their leadership roles.
- The impact of inspection on their day-to-day practices.
- How accountability measures align or conflict with their personal values.
- Moments where professional identity was challenged, reshaped, or affirmed.

All interviews were conducted in person or via secure online platforms, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six-step process involved:

1. Familiarization with the data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the final report.

Themes were developed both inductively (emerging from the data) and deductively (based on the conceptual framework of leadership, identity, and inspection).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed:

- **Member checking:** Participants were invited to review interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations.
- **Peer debriefing:** Research discussions with colleagues helped challenge assumptions and ensure depth.
- **Triangulation:** While interviews were the main source, reflective journals and school documents were also reviewed where available.
- **Thick description:** Detailed context and quotations were used to enrich the narrative and help readers understand the complexity of identity construction.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from [insert institution or authority], and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through

pseudonyms, secure storage of data, and ethical handling of personal disclosures.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and that participation was entirely voluntary.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the qualitative methodological framework used to examine how school leaders in Abu Dhabi navigate, interpret, and construct their professional identities in response to school inspection pressures. The next chapter will present the findings, structured around key themes that emerged from the data.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings derived from the in-depth interviews with school leaders across government schools in Abu Dhabi. It examines the case of school leaders shaping and negotiating their personal professional identity concerning the inspection system of the UAE. The case analysis attempts to synthesize persistent themes, conflicts, as well as controversies related to accountability in inspections within leadership insights and practices.

Identity Under Pressure: Leadership in an Age of Inspection

A central issue that came up in the interviews was how educators imagine the school leaders' narrative identity is, at times, constructed because of the winding paths taken towards inspections. Most of them spoke about their experiences in perpetuity, feeling like they were simply “performing” and unshackling their authentic selves. They had to showcase a version of themselves that aligned with what the inspection protocols required.

This notion was captured very well by one of Cycle 2's vice principals who commented:

“Often lessons are not taught in a certain manner because they have been decidedly thought out. More often than not, it is to avoid scrutiny.”

The theme of performance – modifying facets of one’s professional self to fit the role shape received – surfaced everywhere regardless of leadership or school level. It was common for most leaders to consider themselves as being caught between two worlds, straddling between educational values as “navigators” and an overwhelming bulk of compliance labelled as checklist inspections.

Accountability as a Double-Edged Sword

As we have found, respondents have an intricate connection with accountability. As much as people wanted to acknowledge its existence, they described how it shrunk their leadership identity to just the technical part of execution and adherence to standards. A number of leaders voiced, especially those who have spent decades in the field, a profound sense of loss – of artistic expression, self-direction, and innovative zeal.

“I used to start new initiatives driven by my students’ needs. Now I ask: will this pass the inspection approval?”

— Principal, KG–Grade 5 School

This demonstrated a move from pedagogical leadership towards strategic compliance — where ‘inspection’ not only serves as a form of measurement but incessantly shapes professional identity through a die that is constantly imposed.

4.3 Constructing Identity Through Language and Documentation
This inquiry reveals how the inspection terminologies, their documents, and strategies shape the way in which leaders narrate their practice—and themselves. Terms such as “SEF” (School Evaluation Form), “action plans,” or “judgment rubrics” were more than instruments; they shaped the frameworks through which leaders expressed their aims and hurdles.

One leader explained: “Once you have completed SEFs for five years, which is how your structure your staff dialogues even during staff discussions.”

In this manner identity is narrative – systemically documented and constructed not through professional ethos or imagination.

Emotional Labor and Ethical Dissonance

Less observable yet potent was the additional dimension that surfaced to emotional labour. There was narrative about stress, fatigue, and ethical dissonance. Some shared snapshots of their inner conflicts where they had to uphold or endorse something in sharp contrast with their deeply held beliefs. While several of them self-justified these situations, an equal number candidly mentioned imbuing internal dilemmas. It is a common occurrence, and it is throughout teaching that “a teacher has to revise instruction for x lesson - not because it was bad, but because evaluators expected certain elements”. “That is unethical”.

— Vice Principal, Cycle 3

This exemplifies the balance between being a morally sound educator versus enact as a symbolic rather than authentic leader.

Redefining Leadership Through Inspection

With all the challenges present, a few leaders were able to change how they empowered people within their sphere of influence. Several participants reported that as a result of auditing, they became more reflective thinkers, implemented data utilization in decision-making processes, and at times became more collaborative in approach.

"I believe inspection improved my leadership skills. I changed for the better because I had to find rational justifications for my decisions. "This self-shaping dynamic identity reveals a

complex leadership approach which allows adaptability while providing some degree of submission to the system.

Discussion

The final chapter integrates the ideas presented earlier to examine how school leaders in government schools in Abu Dhabi shape their professional identity concerning the inspection framework. Based on the evidence discussed, this chapter responds to the research gaps and conceptual framework, highlighting relationships between scrutinized policies of accountability, leadership theory, as well as individual sense-making systems and their impact on actual leadership practice.

Reframing Professional Identity Through the Lens of Inspection

According to the results, it appears that educational leaders in the UAE have started to embrace alignment of the inspection framework as part of their identity. Quite a few of them talked about being “data-driven,” “results-oriented,” and “inspection-ready.” This indicates that there is a change in perception towards their position. They no longer see themselves only as administrators or educators, but as guardians of institutional performance.

Nevertheless, this shift is not something that happens automatically. Changes are not made simply for the sake of conforming to outside expectations; there is interpretation and negotiation taking place regarding these pressures. Their professional identity becomes a site inflected with antagonism and innovation – merging pedagogical creativity with bureaucratic submission. As several participants emphasized, they do “not want to lose the human side of leadership.” This implies that professional identity is both shaped by and pushes back against inspection logic.

Accountability as a Constructive and Constraining Force

Accountability was often brought up in interviews as either a motivator or a source of stress. For some, the inspection framework provided a very specific expectation that helped to structure improvement plans and sharpen focus on critical initiatives. Others felt their creative freedom was stifled; many leadership actions seemed to boil down to “what will the inspection see.”

This duality aligns with the theoretical framework. In this regard, the blending of scientific management and human relations theory serves as a good example. The inspection framework has a distinctly more managerial or measurement-oriented take on leadership. School leaders, in contrast, interwove into their narratives concepts such as emotional labour, team dynamics, and relational trust as central to their leadership. These socially unacknowledged ideas are not recorded by inspectors; however, they are crucial for leaders in defining their identity.

The Emotional Landscape of Leadership under Inspection

What was equally striking and important was how the cycles of inspection caused emotional distress. Many school leaders reported experiencing anxiety, stress, and in some uncommon instances, even disenchantment. The periods leading up to inspections were often characterized by excessive working hours, strict supervision over staff activities, and harsh judgmental examination.

Similarly, leaders took pride in seeking recognition whenever results were positive. These inspections served as public verdicts which schools used to bolster their identities as “effective” or “distinguished” leaders. This illustrates the critical theory aspect of the framework by showing how systems

of power and appraisal shape an individual's identity especially in rigid hierarchical socio-institutional contexts.

Redefining Leadership Success

Defining success in the context of leadership is perhaps one of the more complex dialogues that came up in the discussions. While inspections could be considered an outcome measure, a good number of leaders did not subscribe to the idea that successful leadership could be condensed to ratings. They mentioned retention rates of teachers and their engagement with students along with the overall climate in the school as measures of impact.

This relates to a broader self-project which attempts to depict work-life balance system provisions alongside personal values and belief systems. It is clear that these community-centred leaders were trying to make sense of ethical and community obligations instead attempting to ignore 'the system.'

Navigating the UAE-Specific Context

With regards to the rapid reform initiatives undertaken by the UAE, as well as its multicultural workforce and centralized inspection model, the country's education system is heavily burdened. While administrators strive to keep up with global standards, they also need to balance compliance with local expectations. This has given rise to an amalgamated identity which integrates a strategist agent-policy implementer and cultural translator.

While demonstrating adaptability in overcoming these challenges, leaders voiced additional concerns regarding sustainability and burnout alongside unlocalized leadership development initiatives. Their evolving identities are shaped within a context laden with scrutiny control through evaluative frameworks that impose rigid structures. This raises important

questions around what adaptive leadership frameworks promote well-being in the UAE aimed at sustained growth.



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