



Research Article

Female Emirati Teachers' Perceptions of Postgraduate Degree Attainment in the UAE

تصورات المعلمات الإماراتيات عن حصولهن على درجة الدراسات العليا في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة

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Abstract

While the Emirati government continues to make great strides in encouraging female Emirati citizens to become public school teachers and educational leaders, the change process has been slow. According to the most recent data, there is a severe shortage of female Emirati postgraduates, especially in the education field, limiting qualified female Emirati leadership. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) government calls for more female leaders in all fields, including education. Despite the UAE's attempts to encourage women to obtain a secular graduate-level education and become educational leaders, the response has been minimal. Lack of female educational leadership both inside and outside of school walls may cause more stress on the country's education system because students may not receive adequate knowledge regarding Emirati culture and values in school. Participants felt that foreign teachers and educational leaders are unable to model or provide sufficient cultural awareness education to the students. This qualitative study was comprised of interviews with 13 female Emirati teachers who desire to obtain a postgraduate degree in education but have yet to complete the task. The study examined the female Emirati teachers' perceptions of the factors that inhibit them from obtaining a postgraduate degree in education in Abu Dhabi. The findings show that understandings of culture and religious obligations play a major role in the Emirati women's decision to go to graduate school and ultimately become leaders in the country. This finding is of major importance to Emirati social and education policy contexts for continued encouragement of Emirati women to get postgraduate degrees and become leaders in the UAE.

المخلص

بينما تواصل الحكومة الإماراتية اتخاذ خطوات كبيرة في مجال تشجيع المواطنين الإماراتيات على أن يصبحن معلمات في المدارس الحكومية وقائدات تربويات، فإن عملية التغيير لا تزال بطيئة. حيث تشير أحدث البيانات الإحصائية أن هناك نقص كبير في عدد الخريجات الإماراتيات خصوصاً في مجال التعليم، ما يحد من وجود القائدات الإماراتيات المؤهلة في هذا المجال. ولذلك تدعو حكومة دولة الإمارات لزيادة القيادات النسائية في جميع المجالات بما في ذلك التعليم. وعلى الرغم من محاولات الدولة تشجيع النساء على الحصول على تعليم عالي يصل لمستوى الدراسات العليا، إلا أن استجابة الإماراتيات لهذا الأمر لا تزال ضئيلة. إن النقص في القيادات التربوية النسائية سواء داخل أو خارج المدرسة يزيد الضغط على النظام التعليمي في الدولة، لأن الطلبة يمكن أن لا يتلقوا المعرفة الكافية حول الثقافة والقيم الإماراتية في المدرسة. وقد شعر المشاركون في هذه الدراسة أن المدرسين الأجانب والقادة التربويين غير قادرين على أن يكونوا نموذج ثقافي أو يقدموا توعية ثقافية للطلبة بشكل كافي. وقد تضمنت هذه الدراسة النوعية مقابلات مع 13 معلمة إماراتية رغبن في الحصول على درجة الدراسات العليا في التعليم لكنهن لم يكملن هذه المهمة حتى الآن. وبمخت الدراسة في تصورات المعلمات الإماراتيات للعوامل التي تمنعهن من الحصول على درجة الدراسات العليا في التربية في إمارة أبوظبي. وتظهر النتائج أن فهم الثقافة والواجبات الدينية يلعب دوراً رئيسياً في قرار المرأة الإماراتية بالذهاب إلى كلية الدراسات العليا التي تمكن النساء في نهاية المطاف من أن يصبحن قائدات في الدولة. وتعتبر هذه النتيجة مهمة جداً حيث تدفع باتجاه سياسات اجتماعية وتعليمية تهدف لتشجيع النساء الإماراتيات على مواصلة تعليمهن حتى حصولهن على شهادات عليا تساهم في أن يتبوأن مناصب قيادية في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة.

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Keywords: *Female teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Women in education, Emirati women and advanced degree attainment, Perceptions of barriers to degree attainment, Cultural, religious, and family connections to degree attainment*

الكلمات المفتاحية: *المعلمات في الإمارات العربية المتحدة، النساء في التعليم، النساء الإماراتيات والتعليم العالي المتقدم، تصورات حول الحواجز التي تحول دون التحصيل العلمي، الروابط الثقافية والدينية والعائلية وصولاً إلى التحصيل العلمي.*

1. Introduction

The impact of culture and religion on the perceptions of female Emirati teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in regard to pursuing graduate education and working as educational leaders is a key topic that needs attention. Education in the UAE has been a priority since the country was founded in 1971. One of the educational priorities addressed the need for female Emiratis to attend secular schools and obtain secular degrees, shifting from their traditional norms of solely receiving informal religious education (Ashour & Fatima, 2016; Kirk, 2006; United Arab Emirates Government, 2020a). The growth of higher education in the UAE has been fast paced over the years. Between 1977 and 1988, the only option for Emirati students to attend college in the UAE was at the UAE University. By 1990, there were five universities available. By 2013, Emirati students were able to choose from 71 different institutions in the UAE (UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research [MOEHS], 2015). Although the number of universities in the UAE increased rapidly, the first doctoral program did not become available until 2009 at the UAE University. After 2009, a few other doctoral programs became available. By 2013, 16 doctorate programs existed. Of the 77,397 Emirati college students in the fall of 2013, only 4684 were enrolled in master's degree programs and 296 in various doctoral programs. Moreover, of the 296 doctoral students that existed at the time, only 23 were enrolled in the doctor of education programs. While the numbers have increased, there still remains a need to increase the number of female Emirati postgraduates in the UAE (MOEHS, 2015).

In encouraging female secular education, the government challenged female Emiratis' cultural norms, such as staying in their homes and being unseen. Understanding the importance of empowering female Emiratis and encouraging them to work outside of their homes, the UAE government placed a great deal of effort toward creating opportunities for women to work and contribute to the nation's workforce which, in

turn, would aid in building a progressive nation (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2018).

An understanding of the challenges that Emirati women face in the field of education, a relatively understudied topic in the Middle East-North Africa region (MENA), is vital in understanding their role in ongoing progress in the MENA and the UAE. The lack of Emirati women pursuing advanced degrees in education contributes to the shortage of female leaders in the UAE (Abdulla & Ridge, 2009; Auletto et al., 2017). This research examined female Emirati middle school teachers in the emirate of Abu Dhabi public schools holding a bachelor's degree in education and wishing to continue their education by obtaining master's and doctoral degrees in education. Through participant interviews, various challenges faced by Emirati women that inhibited them from obtaining postgraduate degrees in education emerged. How these challenges prevented them from becoming educational leaders were revealed. These challenges included lack of time to take courses after work and the need to fulfil household duties.

1.1. Promoting educational attainment

To ensure that the Emiratis can develop human capital and face the challenges associated with increased global competition, the UAE government has launched several educational reforms to increase literacy. Programs take on challenges including opening 21st-century grade schools and universities, hiring trained education leaders to create and guide quality educational initiatives, and setting up numerous opportunities for Emiratis to become teachers and educational leaders. These reforms were geared toward ensuring that Emiratis were encouraged to become educated and pursue work positions in the country, including teaching and leading in the education field as a profession (United Arab Emirates Government, 2020c).

The educational reforms are associated with the use of incentive structures and other financial and non-financial benefits such as collaborating with universities to provide support programs, creating accelerated teacher preparatory programs, and offering high stipends while students were in preparatory programs to promote Emiratization. Emiratization is a UAE government initiation to encourage and increase the number of Emirati nationals in public and private UAE workforces. The government created partnerships between various universities and the Ministry of Education (MOE) that provided teacher preparatory programs and courses for students majoring in education

to prepare to teach in the public schools immediately after graduation (Ahmed, 2012; Morley & Walsh, 1996).

A measure that the UAE government took to encourage Emirati teachers and future education leaders was creating the *Edaad* program, which means *preparation or training* in Arabic (Abu Dhabi Education Council [ADEC], 2015). The four-month intensive *Edaad* program encourages Emiratis holding bachelor's degrees to become teachers in Abu Dhabi public schools (ADEC, 2015). This training consisted of six weeks of theoretical learning, five weeks of student teaching inside the classroom, and five weeks of skill improvement based on the students' teaching needs that their mentor identified during the student teaching period. ADEC's rationale for putting these programs in place was to increase Emirati teachers' number in the Abu Dhabi public schools to 50% by 2018. ADEC (2016) estimated that they would meet that goal by the end of 2017 which they were able to achieve.

1.2. Conceptual framework

The most applicable theory to this research is cultural identity theory and its relationship to adult development. According to Vygotsky (1978), human development occurs through cultural activity starting from birth and is sculpted by values and attitudes depicted at home and in the community. Cultural identity and human development continuously interact to develop the human being (Clark & Caffarella, 2011). Culture defines people's identity and is responsible for how they see themselves and their identity group. Cultural identity consists of the values, beliefs, thinking patterns, and behavior learned and shared by a group of people. These characteristics become part of the group's identity (Urrieta & Noblit, 2018). These concepts apply to the teachers who participated in this study as well. Their perspectives and beliefs are clearly representative of their cultural beliefs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Educational status of Emiratis

In order to understand the educational perspectives of Emirati women, one should be aware of the educational status of Emiratis, because it may be a contributing factor toward Emiratis obtaining a postgraduate degree and/or having the intention to become schoolteachers in their professional life. By 2013, students who attended

higher education could choose from a variety of institutions in the UAE, such as the UAE University, Zayed University, and Al Ain University. According to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) (2015), Abu Dhabi had 4 government and 26 private institutions. Dubai had 2 government and 29 private institutions. Sharjah, Ajman, and Umm Al Quwain had no government institutions and six, four, and one private institution(s), respectively. Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah each had one government institution. RAK and Fujairah had three and two private institutions by 2013, respectively (MOHESR, 2015). Amongst these higher education institutions, 35 institutions offered 204 master's degree programs and only 8 offered 16 doctorate programs (MOHESR, 2015).

Additionally, a gap exists in comparing the number of higher education institutions that offer education as a major. For example, there were only seven master's degree programs in Abu Dhabi that offered education as a major, whereas there were 34 programs available for business administration and 24 available for engineering during the 2013–2014 school year. Similarly, there were only 6 master's degree programs in education available, whereas there were 44 master's degree programs available in business administration in Dubai. The number of master and doctoral degree programs in education was limited in the UAE during the 2013–2014 school year.

There is an even greater gap when comparing the students who majored in education and those who majored in other subjects (Mansour & Al-Shamrani, 2015). For example, of the 1862 female Emirati university students enrolled in a master's degree program in 2013–2014, only 158 specialized in education and of the 118 female Emirati university students enrolled in a doctorate program, only 28 specialized in education (MOHESR, 2015).

2.2. Obstacles Faced by Emirati Women

Although Tabari (2014) mentioned that teaching as determined by Islamic beliefs is a noble profession, its application and importance has been declining in recent decades, especially in the Gulf nations. Gulf countries such as the UAE have been undergoing numerous transitions in recent years in regard to educational reforms. For example, ADEC started a major educational reform by implementing the New School Model, which created a newly customized UAE grade school curriculum using the 21st-century skills and techniques by integrating best practices from Finland and Western countries for English, math, and science (Tabari, 2014). Furthermore, the government became stricter on the work requirements of Emirati teachers such as requiring teacher certification and

professional development courses. With all the rapid changes in the UAE's education system and education requirements for teachers, Emirati teachers face challenges associated with constant changes in the educational reforms, therefore they expressed high levels of displeasure toward their new job roles. As a result, many Emirati teachers left their teaching jobs (Tabari, 2014).

Another pertinent hindrance that Emirati women face in their teaching profession is the presence of unsupportive professional work surroundings. Women are culturally responsible for contributing their time toward performing household-related chores and hence are somewhat restricted from pursuing professional careers. This usually results in the development of an unsupportive work structure and lack of administrative provisions (Dickson et al., 2014). Although, the government has taken numerous steps toward ensuring that a higher number of Emirati women apply for jobs, it tends to have a minimal impact on increased admittance to the education sector despite the honor associated with the religious beliefs surrounding teaching (Tabari, 2014).

The Khaleej Times (2014) stated that Emirati teachers are facing high rates of attrition with respect to career aspects, economic developments, and personal factors along with sociocultural factors. Factors such as social background and lack of proper education at the schooling levels create a negative impact on selecting teaching as a profession (Khaleej Times, 2014). The lack of support with respect to negotiating with the administration is another important factor affecting the ability of Emirati women to teach in the UAE public schools because they are accustomed to negotiating for what they want. The existence of the negative relationship with peers and colleagues and engaging in consultations with parents are some of the other obstacles that Emirati women face in teaching. Additionally, another potential obstacle is their inability to implement the study programs as specified by the educational reforms (Khaleej Times, 2014).

Many factors contribute to a female Emirati's decision to become and remain a teacher in the UAE. Maintaining a proper balance between the personal and professional life is crucial for female Emirati teachers. A considerable decline in the number of teachers across the public schools of UAE has resulted in the creation of increased workloads on individual teachers, which hamper the ability of Emirati women to teach in schools (Khaleej Times, 2014). Furthermore, female Emirati teachers face challenges associated with their limited ability to compete with the foreign educators teaching in public schools across the UAE for reasons such as their limited command of the English language, time constraints, role conflicts, and limited support from family members. Additionally, female Emirati teachers have challenges associated with gender discrimination, sensitivity, cultural barriers, competition, and lack of opportunity (Khaleej Times, 2014).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

The following questions guided the study.

- (1) What were female Emirati teachers' perceptions of their personal and academic experiences as undergraduate students and teaching professionals?
- (2) What were female Emirati teachers' perceptions regarding the impact, if any, of religion and culture on attitudes toward women with postgraduate education and leadership roles?
- (3) What were female Emirati teachers' perceptions of increasing female Emirati teachers with postgraduate degrees in education?

3.2. Study sample

This study was conducted in the Abu Dhabi public schools located in the main city of Al Ain, an urban area. The research method used to obtain the data was semi-structured interviewing. First, a qualifying questionnaire asked potential participants various questions concerning nationality, age, grade school location, highest education level obtained, graduation date, profession, number of years teaching, religion, and goals for completing a postgraduate degree. This qualifying questionnaire was sent to five female middle and high schools in which a total of 124 female Emirati teachers worked. However, only 60 teachers completed the qualifying questionnaire. Of those 60, only 30 teachers were eligible for the study and, of those, 13 agreed to participate in an interview.

Participants were considered eligible if they expressed a desire to obtain a postgraduate degree in education but had not completed that goal and were 45 years of age or younger to rule out the teachers who were getting ready to retire from their profession, as the retirement age in the UAE is 49 years old (United Arab Emirates Government, 2020b). Additionally, the respondents were deemed eligible if they had grown up in the UAE, attending grade school in the country, and also graduated from universities in the UAE, allowing the research to focus on teachers who grew up strictly in Emirati culture. The purpose of this recruitment criteria was to ensure that the teacher grew up in a strictly Emirati culture to help increase the research's validity and trustworthiness by removing potential external variables including the effects of different cultures and

religions; this was also done to ensure only female teachers were recruited (Sargeant, 2012).

3.3. Data collection

Data were obtained through the interview process which was conducted in English because all of the interviewees were not only proficient in English but also taught English, math, or science in English. Therefore, understanding the basic interview questions in English was not an issue. All interviews were conducted in the teacher's private classroom of their Abu Dhabi school. Interviews were conducted at the end of the teacher's workday after the students went home for the day. The first two interview questions sought to understand what occurred when the participant went through her undergraduate degree to understand her educational history. The participant was asked to elaborate on the key factors that allowed her to succeed in her undergraduate degree, the religious and cultural barriers that she had to overcome (if any) to obtain the undergraduate degree, and how she overcame those barriers. The next set of questions asked the teacher about her current situation in terms of education, employment, and family status to understand what she was doing and if that influenced why she could not obtain her postgraduate education. The interview questions asked the teacher to explain her feelings and experiences toward teaching in public schools in the UAE and elaborate on the challenges that prevented her from obtaining a postgraduate degree in education. The final set of interview questions asked the teacher to explain her ideas about how her culture and religion played a role in obtaining a postgraduate degree regarding support or lack of support.

According to the Pew Research Center (2016), religious and cultural influences affect educational attainment. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to investigate the teachers' perceptions of the impact of culture and religion in achieving their goals. The seventh and last interview question asked the teacher to share her thoughts on possible ways that teachers, administrators, and the government can help teachers like her to obtain postgraduate degrees in education

4. Results

As I analyzed each response data, I identified the repeated concepts that were pertinent to the research purpose. The frequency of the concepts indicated that a pattern or theme existed. Manual categorization of the raw data using the inductive coding approach

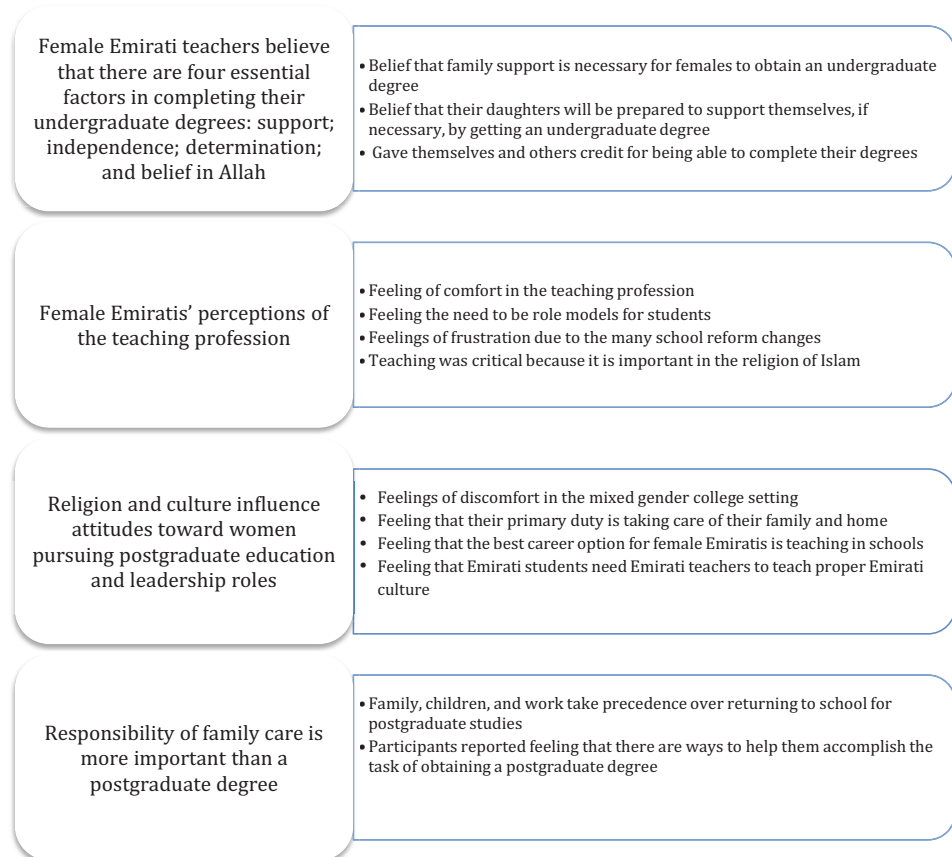
identified repeated themes. Once the data were organized and coded, I interpreted them and created theories and models that included a report of the findings. The research employed the hermeneutic or interpretive approach, which focuses on how the respondent makes sense of the research phenomenon concerning the study's context to analyze the data (Chan et al., 2013). Analysis was based on the correct interpretation of the respondents' perspectives by validating the results to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Results were validated by returning to each of the respondents after the interview and confirming that the results and data aligned with the respondents' experiences and thoughts through the member checking process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In turn, the study's trustworthiness was increased through these steps (Chan et al., 2013).

The semi-structured interviews produced four significant themes that aided in better understanding how female Emirati teachers perceive obtaining postgraduate degrees. The experiences of the study participants are represented in the following themes and sub-themes. Theme one describes the participants' experiences that contributed to their success as an undergraduate. Theme two represents the participants' perceptions of being a teaching professional in public schools. Theme three focuses on the impact of religion and culture on women's postgraduate education attitudes. Lastly, theme four explains the participants' perceptions regarding postgraduate degrees.

Female Emirati teachers believe that there are four essential factors in completing their undergraduate degrees: support; independence; determination; and belief in Allah. This theme assesses the participants' experiences while they were working on their bachelor's degrees. The sub-themes that were developed were based on support and credit to those who have contributed to their educational success. The participants did not mention the instruction's quality, the challenges of the academic tasks, or other similar academic topics.

Female Emirati teachers believe that family support is necessary for females obtaining an undergraduate degree

Of the 13 participants, 12 women reported that family support, primarily from their parents, was the primary reason for obtaining an undergraduate degree. Additionally, 12 participants reported that their parents felt that education was necessary, which is why they encouraged their children to obtain a college degree. Two participants also gave credit to their husbands for being an indispensable source of support for them.

Figure 1*Themes and sub-themes*

Moreover, 12 participants reported that their parents felt that education was necessary, which is why they encouraged their children to obtain a college degree.

Female Emirati teachers believe that their daughters will be prepared to support themselves, if necessary, by getting an undergraduate degree. Participants explained that families believe that education is a way for upward social and economic mobility. These data showed that parents had a practical rationale for supporting their daughters throughout their time in college. This study showed that 92% of the participants mentioned that parents saw the benefit in supporting their undergraduate educational journey.

Female Emirati teachers gave themselves and others credit for being able to complete their degree

Four participants gave themselves credit for their accomplishments. They recognized that they could only complete their college education by their effort and willingness to study hard despite any personal challenges that they experienced. Two participants also gave credit to their husbands. Both were not married when they first began their college experience but they experienced a conflict between home responsibilities and wanting to finish college once married. One participant had a child in addition to getting married and she almost quit her undergraduate college. However, both of their husbands encouraged them to continue school, study hard, and get their degrees. Even with their spouse's support and encouragement to continue with school, the women discussed their desire and goal to earn their degree as a significant reason for their success.

All 13 participants gave Allah credit for their success and were thankful that they could pray and ask Allah for help and strength to get through their college experiences and challenges. This thankfulness helped them to stay focused on completing their studies. They felt Allah allowed them to succeed in their education since education is an essential component of Islam; this was also true regarding praying about their work and balancing their family and work.

Female Emiratis' perceptions of the teaching profession is the theme developed from the second research question focusing on the impact of religion and culture on the participants' decision to be teachers. It was clear that the women felt that teaching was a good profession and that Islam and Emirati culture supported women. It was also evident that teachers were frustrated with the continual change occurring in Emirati schools over a short time such as the increased amount of testing and other record-keeping documents required by each student's teachers. However, teachers also recognized that changes were needed because students needed to increase their academic achievement, especially in English language learning.

Female Emirati teachers feel comfort in the teaching profession

One apparent theme is that teaching is comfortable for the participants. During the interviews, nine women expressed the importance of being comfortable in their current work situation because of males' absence. In schools, there is usually an all-female group of teachers. Therefore, there is little concern about having to work with non-familial men.

Female Emirati teachers reported feeling the need to be role models for students

A second sub-theme showed that the participants want to help students by giving them knowledge and acting as role models. All of the participants stated that they have a religious duty to teach and be a role model for students so that new generations will know about the Emirati way of life. Two participants explained that they enjoy teaching because it allows them to be role models as they have completed their studies to the point where they can contribute to society. Additionally, they believe that they can encourage other females to finish school and have a career.

Female Emirati teachers reported feeling frustrated by the many school reform changes

Only one participant expressed being proud to be a teacher. While this same participant also expressed frustration over the rule changes made from the department of education's administrative offices and the amount of paperwork, she had to complete every week, she was still proud to be a teacher. Another teacher also had positive thoughts about teaching, despite expressing frustrations about the job. The presence and continual changing of rules was a concern for 100% of the participants. Another teacher called the students rude. A different teacher blamed the many changes in the number of people who obtain roles as educational leaders within the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge or the Abu Dhabi Education Council. It was also reported that the changes led to insecurity in terms of being a good teacher. Four of the thirteen participants did not like teaching because of the extra paperwork and rules, reporting that they had previously enjoyed teaching. Of the 13 participants, 11 shared thoughts regarding the challenge of working in schools and taking care of the family. One hundred percent of respondents discussed not having enough time to fulfill their responsibilities and pursue an advanced degree.

Female Emirati teachers reported that teaching was critical because it is important in the Islamic religion

Besides being happy or unhappy with their teaching jobs, all participants reported that the Islamic religion holds teaching and learning in high regard. One participant mentioned that she used the Islamic religion to gain support from her husband and family to accept her as a career woman. Her family and husband were not overly

supportive of her working as a teacher but since Islam valued and encouraged teaching, she demonstrated that she was following what the religion said; therefore, she gained more support from her family.

The third theme was how religion and culture influences attitudes toward women pursuing postgraduate education and leadership roles.

Female Emirati teachers reported feeling uncomfortable in the mixed-gender college setting

In terms of studying in the company of male classmates, participants used words such as “uncomfortable,” “not wanting to be there,” “shy,” and “new.” One participant discussed that the instructor understood that having a male teacher was a new experience for women. He made the woman feel comfortable in the classroom by avoiding unnecessary eye contact and keeping a comfortable distance from her so she could feel comfortable sharing her thoughts and ideas. However, this participant was not looking forward to this experience again.

Participants reported feeling that their primary duty is caring for their families and homes

All of the participants expressed concern that their culture believes that women have the primary duty of taking care of the children and household. One participant mentioned that her aunts and uncles thought that at 21 years old, getting married should be her priority. However, this same participant’s parents supported her and gave the rationale that if something happened to her husband in the future, she would be able to take care of herself and her children.

Female Emirati teachers reported feeling that the best career option for female Emirati is teaching

A participant talked about this idea and explained that because the public schools are not coeducational and have all-female staff, she could wear whatever she liked when teaching, including makeup and perfume. Additionally, she mentioned that males in Emirati families liked women to be teachers because they worked with other women only and teaching is perceived as a gender-appropriate profession for women. All the participants support this sentiment regarding teaching as being an excellent option for UAE women. Two different participants referred to Sheikh Zayed, the UAE’s founding

ruler, who promoted education for women to make the country better, which has led to teaching being a good career choice in terms of salary and benefits. Other interview responses revolved around the idea that the government spent plenty of money to ensure students have a good education in the UAE and were comfortable making teaching a high-quality career choice.

Female Emirati teachers reported that Emirati students need Emirati teachers to teach proper Emirati culture

A participant expressed a different rationale for teaching. She mentioned that there are currently too many foreigners teaching the UAE's children and that UAE students needed native teachers. A participant also mentioned that women, not men, went into teaching because men had the responsibility of supporting the family and teaching does not pay enough money to do that. However, it was also mentioned that the Emirati government was encouraging more men to be teachers to model and teach young Emirati males cultural and academic knowledge.

When answering the interview questions, all participants mentioned their culture regarding women taking responsibility for the children and household, including teaching and passing on the culture. Additionally, they talked about the importance of the separation of men and women and agreed that both their families and the government supported the idea that teaching was culturally acceptable and comfortable for women; it was primarily a woman's career. This was the primary perspective of the participants in this study and demonstrated their strong religious and cultural connection.

These comments demonstrate a disconnect between the changes that the government is making and the culture. Not one participant mentioned any of the changes that the government has implemented. However, 100% of the women referred to their responsibility of taking care of their house, children, and husband. They did not discuss taking a leadership role and creating a more stable curriculum and student-centered educational system. The participants were accepting of what the government and the educational system provided for them.

The last theme concerns participants' feelings of family's importance over a post-graduate degree. Education and learning are valued in Islam and Emirati culture; this was made clear by the theme of *culture* and *Islam* appearing in almost every answer given by participants. However, 85% of the participants stated that caring for family is more important. Women felt more obligated to put most of their effort into the

family and the household than to go back to school. According to the interview data, 100% of the women expressed that Islam and the focus on teaching and learning is justification to pursue a university degree and 85% of these women added that this is the case only when it does not interfere with caring for their husband and children.

Participants reported feeling that family, children, and work take precedence over returning to school for postgraduate studies

Only five participants felt that they would be able to return to school to continue their education. One common reason was that their children were their priority; they cannot return to school for themselves. Time was another issue brought up by all the participants. The women enjoyed working, although they also expressed that they were not happy with their teaching jobs. They did not want to quit teaching so they could return to college. They explained that they did not have the time to devote to their jobs, husband, and children while going to school. One participant expressed her strong desire to earn an advanced degree and researched online options but ultimately decided that along with preparing for her teaching job, her children and duties at home would keep her from finding the time to devote to her studies. She stated that when her children were older, she would hopefully be able to return to school. Two teachers had a different perspective and rationale for not getting their advanced degree at the time but did have very high hopes to obtain it soon. One mentioned that she had limited time to study because she had to learn the new curriculum and adjust to the many changes that she needed to apply within her teaching job. The other participant echoed this perspective by stating that the continually changing curricula make her job extremely challenging because of the large amount of time needed to understand each new curriculum and prepare new resources.

Participants reported feeling that there are ways to help them obtain a postgraduate degree

The participants were also asked how teachers, administrators, and the country's government can minimize or prevent the challenges that keep them from getting an advanced degree. One participant suggested that the government should approach obtaining a higher education degree the same way that Emirati teachers obtained and passed the International English Language Testing System test (IELTS). For this,

public school Emirati teachers who did not pass the IELTS test were given a year off work to study while still getting their full salary. The participant stated that if teachers were allowed this time off to earn an advanced degree while still getting their salary, more teachers would get their higher-level degrees. The other teachers supported the fact that they needed time to get their postgraduate degree and could not do it while working and having a family.

Additionally, five of the thirteen participants (38%) desired shorter work hours, allowing them to continue their jobs and have time for their families and study. The participants who made this suggestion did not mention any details regarding loss of income or the need to receive their full salary. Another idea that a participant shared was for the government to offer online classes that would lead to an advanced degree. It should be set up so that teachers could meet their home and work obligations during work time. One participant was clear that many things can be done in the policy context to make it more possible for female teachers to return to school for an advanced degree.

5. Discussion

This study contributed to the concepts found in the cultural identity theory literature, which stated that cultural identity shapes a person's behavior and psychological well-being (Stryker, 2008). In this study, the teachers' cultural identity and beliefs were a major factor in their decision to become a teacher and in their decision to postpone their graduate education. The data in this study found that culture, including aspects of religious beliefs, was directly responsible for female teachers not pursuing a postgraduate degree. Emirati women's cultural identity in the study was such that they have the same priorities and beliefs that both steered them into teaching and kept them from obtaining an advanced degree.

Women's experiences are essential in the educational sector of the UAE because 89% of college undergraduates are women (Pennington, 2017). As of 2017, 63% of undergraduate students were women at technological colleges where men were once the majority (Pennington, 2017). Having many women as classmates helped reduce negative experiences, such as being around non-related men while obtaining an undergraduate degree. They did not have to concern themselves much with male students, only male teachers as expressed in the participants' responses. These experiences were crucial to know and understand because they may have helped understand why many female Emirati women did not obtain postgraduate degrees (United Arab

Emirates Regional Statistics, 2013). Female Emirati teachers believe that family support is necessary for females obtaining an undergraduate degree. According to Halawah (2006), parental support and motivation are associated with Emirati students' higher educational levels. Female Emirati teachers also believe that their daughters will be better prepared to support themselves, if necessary, by getting an undergraduate degree. Research has found that Emirati parents often encourage their daughters to be self-sufficient professionals by seeking education and career opportunities, especially if their father is educated (Kemp & Zhao, 2016). The teachers also believed that if their daughters have an education, it improves their likelihood of supporting their families if needed (Kemp & Zhao, 2016).

Female Emirati teachers reported feeling that teaching is the best career option for female Emiratis. Religion and culture influenced Emirati people's beliefs about why teaching was often seen as a female profession in the Arab world (Asbag et al., 2014). According to the *Khaleej Times* (2017), the Abu Dhabi government built new schools and made many changes to improve student and teacher learning and comfort levels. Additionally, Pennington (2015) noted that the Abu Dhabi government had initiated several incentives to attract and keep Emirati teachers, including free college tuition.

While physical comfort is important, they also expressed their need to feel comfortable in other aspects, such as culturally and religiously. Female Emirati teachers who felt comfort in the teaching profession owed it to the low likelihood of encountering male coworkers; this is a concern for the teachers because they prefer not to interact with men who are not related to them. According to Abdul-Wahid (2015), Islam and the Emirati culture discourage and limit interactions between non-related men and women as much as possible to avoid and reduce inappropriate attraction and relationships outside of marriage. The teachers view cultural separation, such as separate rooms or lines for women and men, to minimize indecent behaviors between unmarried men and women, not to discriminate, which has a negative connotation.

Women are significantly valued in UAE society that in many ways encourages gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels (United Arab Emirates Government, 2020a). In addition to feeling comfortable working in schools, female Emirati teachers reported feeling the need to be role models for their students and to show them that having a career is achievable for them. Therefore, they work in the schools where there is a high percentage of female youth. The UAE government agrees with this perception because they are trying to encourage women to be more active in society and be role models through several UAE initiatives that promote and encourage both youth and adult female leadership in the UAE.

The government focuses on developing leadership skills in various areas and providing Emirati women with opportunities to work and participate in all sectors such as the politics, the corporate world, and the academia (International and Private School Education Forum, n.d.). The UAE government has been targeting youth by educating them on leadership skills at a young age by creating programs such as the collaboration with the Emirates Youth Council to create the UAE government leader's program (Baroudi & Arulraj, 2020). While two of the teachers in this study referred to themselves as role models by showing female students that they can earn a college degree, they have the capability of working with female students to encourage them to strive for leadership roles in a career of their choice.

In addition to being role models, female Emirati teachers reported that Emirati students need Emirati teachers to teach proper Emirati culture. The UAE emphasizes the cultural preservation of the Emirati and the UAE (United Arab Emirates Government, 2019); this is evident in that the government has a Minister of Culture, Youth, and Community Development (MCYCD). This office is responsible for preserving the country's identity, focusing on the younger generations (Nazzal, 2012); this is another example of how the government is a significant part of Emirati culture. However, the Emirati government has been making significant changes to laws in the UAE and encouraging more women to expand their outlook and perspectives to take on more leadership and public roles such as working as pilots and entering the police force.

However, the culture is slow in adapting to those changes (Gargani et al., 2012). In April 2018, the Cabinet passed a law requiring equal pay for equal work for men and women (Duncan, 2018). Before that, the government created *The Gender Balance Guide: Actions for UAE Organizations* that both private and public organizations adopted (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2017). In 2015, the government created the UAE Council for Gender Balance, intending to become a world leader in gender balance (United Arab Emirates Gender Balance Council, 2020). Additionally, in 2016, the Federal Authority for Government Resources (2016) published an amendment to the UAE maternity law allowing three-month maternity leave, and a daily 2-hr nursing leave upon returning to work. These actions signal that the UAE is trying to give women equal rights in educational and career opportunities. Although the interviewees expressed their frustration, they did not have any interest in leading any change; this relates directly to Alisha Hamdoon Al Naqbi's call for leadership role models for young Emirati women (Swan, 2013).

These women's perspectives are thought-provoking because the UAE government and successful business organizations have a strong female presence (Allagui & Al-Najjar, 2018). The government requires female board members in every company and government agency (United Arab Emirates Government, 2019). For example, the UAE Cabinet has nine women members. Women hold two-thirds of the government's public sector jobs (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2018). Women comprise 20% of the diplomatic corps (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2018). In addition to female fighter pilots, there are female judges and public attorneys. Moreover, 19 Emirati women were listed on Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen in 2017 (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2018). In a country with a progressive government and a goal to be a gender-equality leader, this was not reflected in the interviews with these female Emirati teacher participants.

The teachers reported that religion and culture influence women pursuing postgraduate education and leadership roles in the UAE. According to Crabtree (2007), Islam values education for women as a part of their ascent to womanhood. As established within the previous themes, religion and culture are an integral part of the decisions the participants made to pursue teaching as their career. Although Islam played a significant role in the participants' success in obtaining an undergraduate degree, it did not affect their choice to obtain a postgraduate degree. Eleven participants explained that the more significant role in determining whether to pursue a postgraduate education was pursuing that education in addition to the participants' responsibility to their families.

Islam is a religion that has always encouraged teaching and learning in general and as a profession (Stringer et al., 2014). According to Majah (1952), Anas ibn Maalik in his book of Hadith reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim." The teachers reported feeling that their primary duty is caring for their families and homes, which is another example of their commitment to religion and culture over obtaining a higher degree. According to Dickson (2013), Muslim women's primary responsibility is to maintain their family and household before any other responsibilities outside of the home. For 85% of the participants in this study, it became more important to follow cultural and religious expectations of caring for their family; Emirati women's primary religious and cultural obligations are to care for the family and household (Dickson, 2013). However, there is no problem if they decide to take on secondary responsibilities such as careers if they can adequately manage the challenge of their first obligation in the home (Dickson, 2013).

The teachers reported feeling that family, children, and work take precedence over returning to school for postgraduate studies. All the participants expressed satisfaction with the degree that they had already obtained. While all of them had a desire to continue their education, some felt it was not a priority and others had no vision of accomplishing their goal of getting an advanced degree. Based on these responses, the women's beliefs are in accordance with the Hadith that states that real success is embracing and being content with what Allah has provided and being patient with their Lord's decree (Hasan, 1993).

The teachers reported feeling that there are ways to help them accomplish obtaining a postgraduate degree. The UAE government is involved in and concerned with their educational system. The women in this study expressed their frustrations over the many changes occurring during the reform. One change the government is making is to require teachers to have a bachelor's degree and have passed the IELTS test (Ahmed, 2012). The government school reform law states that with the new standards that have been set, those without a bachelor's degree are not qualified to teach (United Arab Emirates Government, 2019).

5.1. Implications for practice

Three significant implications for practice emerge from this study. Firstly, Emirati women are steadfast in adhering to their culture's beliefs. They are satisfied with their bachelor's degree and focusing on their children and other household expectations, despite the circumstance that they have not completed their goal of becoming postgraduates. They are socialized to put family before all other duties and their religion taught them to be content with whatever situations in which they find themselves. They may want a graduate degree but believe they must take care of their family instead. With this being the belief of and priority for female Emirati teachers, there will continue to be few that will strive to become educational leaders unless changes are made.

Secondly, there is a need for educational leaders, policy-makers, and families to facilitate meaningful dialogue about the importance of female Emirati teachers going beyond the bachelor's degree and becoming leaders while appropriately caring for their families. Ways to accomplish both must be the primary topic of these conversations until it becomes a reality. Based on these data, the governments that promote Emirati women's leadership and educational leaders should consider creating initiatives geared toward family friendly postgraduate degrees for Emirati women.

Thirdly, teachers expressed discomfort with having coeducational classes. According to this finding, educational leaders may wish to create postgraduate programs that are not coeducational and designed for the Emirati working mother. Additionally, the government may wish to provide working mothers with training that focuses on strategies and techniques that teach balance between family, work, and school to relieve women's time and stress. Recent research suggests that finding a balance between work and home life requires initiative, effort, and planning (Vliagoftis, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This study's results revealed that while Emirati women were eager to earn their undergraduate teaching degrees and had family support to do so, they were not convinced that they should forego their traditional roles as mothers and wives to obtain that degree. Firm convictions exist that maternal roles take priority over the role of a postgraduate student. They had many reasons for obtaining their first degree, such as family support. It was culturally acceptable to be a teacher. They wanted to be a role model and their religion supported it. These same reasons did not contribute as actively to the teachers' decision to acquire a postgraduate degree. Although Emirati law supports female leaders and teachers within the UAE, the female teachers' mindset still supports traditional gender roles. Although women in the country are present in nontraditional roles such as government, science, technology, and medicine, they remain a visible minority.

Although frustrated with the UAE educational system's changing expectations in some respects, the study participants did not display general or overall negativity toward the system or the culture. These actions are not only in agreement with their cultural and religious belief system that encourages women to be content with their degree, but it also shows their loyalty to the ways of their culture. Although they wanted to obtain their postgraduate degree, they were also satisfied with their undergraduate degree, with only a small percentage stating that maybe after their children grow up, they would go back for another degree. Reasons for not going back to school for graduate education such as their husbands not approving of them working toward an advanced degree were not stated. Their rationale was that they were expected to care for their families or that society would look poorly upon them were also not included.

The women were happy with their decision to teach and not pursue another degree but rather focus on the family as that is what they have seen their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters do all their lives. This dedication to the family could explain

why the culture is not rapidly changing in terms of the number of teachers with advanced degrees and the low number of male teachers. Culture and religion play an important role in why Emirati women choose to be teachers and why they have not pursued an advanced degree to become educational leaders, although they had intentions to do so. However, women are confident and happy with these choices and do not blame their culture or society for determining these choices for them. Although the women are content with their educational choices, there is still a need for UAE educational policy-makers to keep this issue at the forefront and work diligently to create solutions for female Emirati teachers so that they can comfortably obtain postgraduate degrees while working and caring for their families. More research in this matter is required so that solutions can be put in place and the government can successfully reach the goal of having more female Emirati women in leading roles in education and other sectors of the UAE.

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Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author Biography

Dr Khabirah Yahya, born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, is an international educational leader, principal, and adjunct professor with almost two decades of experience in the field of education. Her experience expands both in the United States and internationally. Dr Yahya's educational background includes a bachelor's degree in biology from Boston College, a master's degree in science education from Cambridge College, and a doctoral degree in educational leadership and supervision from the American International College in Massachusetts. She has many research interests including educational leadership, international education, and curriculum development.

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