



Research Article

# Dominant Discourses and Teachers' Comparative Sensemaking through Internationally Sited Professional Development Experience

## الخطابات السائدة وعلم المعلمين المقارن من خلال تجارب التطوير المهني الدولية

Emily W. Anderson

Corresponding Author:  
Emily W. Anderson

Florida International University, Miami, FL, United States

**ORCID:**

Emily W. Anderson: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5187-9604>

Submitted: January 1, 2021

Accepted: April 29, 2021

Published: 1 July 2021

Production and Hosting by  
Knowledge E

© Emily W. Anderson. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Managing Editor:  
Natasha Mansur

### Abstract

The United Arab Emirates' education policy agenda is focused on a singular goal: to be one of the top 20 countries in PISA 2022. The focus on PISA has become so robust in the UAE that it is now a central component of teachers' professional development. This article explores teachers' sensemaking of dominant education policy discourses through their experience in an internationally sited professional development program in Vietnam – a country whose 2015 PISA performance inspired the education policy reform in the UAE. The findings presented in this article highlight teachers' deficit framing of difference and their performative adoption of STREAM-focused practices to replicate Vietnam's 2015 PISA scores. This article concludes with recommendations for future research to better understand the ways in which dominant discourses inform teachers' professional development, and opportunities to expand teachers' roles in the policymaking process.

### الملخص

تتركز أجندة سياسة التعليم لدولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة على هدف واحد: أن تكون واحدة من أفضل ٢٠ دولة في اختبار بيسا ٢٠٢٢. أصبح التركيز على اختبار بيسا قوياً جداً في الإمارات العربية المتحدة لدرجة أنه أصبح الآن مكوناً رئيسياً في التطوير المهني للمعلمين. يستكشف هذا المقال إدراك المعلمين لخطابات سياسة التعليم المهيمنة من خلال تجربتهم في برنامج التطوير المهني الدولي في فيتنام - وهي دولة أدهم أداؤها في بيسا لعام ٢٠١٥ إصلاح سياسة التعليم في الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وتسلط النتائج المقدمة في هذه المقالة الضوء على تأطير معجز المعلمين عن الاختلاف واعتمادهم العملي لممارسات تركز على STREAM لتكرار نتائج بيسا الفيتنامية لعام ٢٠١٥. تختتم هذه المقالة بتوصيات للبحث المستقبلي من أجل فهم أفضل الطرق التي تُعلم بها الخطابات السائدة التطوير المهني للمعلمين، والفرص لتوسيع أدوار المعلمين في عملية صنع السياسات.

**Keywords:** *International exchange, Professional development, Dominant discourses, Teachers' sense-making, Comparative practices*

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التطوير المهني، الخطابات السائدة، صنع حواس المعلمين والممارسات المقارنة.

### OPEN ACCESS

## 1. Introduction

Hill (2012) describes a world-class education (WCE) as “cognizant of globalization and the need for an education whose perspective extends across national frontiers” (p. 342). Sizzec and Engle (2019) describe the global diffusion of dominant international education policy discourses as “often used but often underdeveloped concept(s)” that are “accompanied by other terms, such as internationalization, global competence, and global citizenship” (p. 493). As international testing regimes such as the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) have become tied to the WCE discourse in the UAE, teachers’ professional development has also become a site for diffusion of the WCE policy discourse. Despite the UAE’s policy focus on PISA, little is known about teachers’ sensemaking of policies that are framed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to be “world class” or/and those that were implemented through the curriculum changes that followed the PISA 2015 cycle. This study centers PISA as a conveyor of the WCE policy discourse (Hill, 2011) and Emirati teachers’ sensemaking of PISA-related policy goals in the UAE through their participation in an internationally sited professional program.

The research question investigated in this study asks, *how do teachers use comparison to make sense of the WCE during short-term international professional development experiences?* The analysis focuses on a group of educators from the UAE and their experiences during the Teacher Exchange Program (TEP) – a partnership between a UAE-based foundation and the MOE that aims to professionally develop educators through international and intercultural experiences. The TEP has led exchanges to Switzerland in 2012, Malaysia in 2015, and Vietnam in 2018 which is the focus of this study. And so, while this study is not about PISA itself, it is about how teachers make sense of dominant education policy discourses that are used to frame education policy and teachers’ professional development.

### 1.1. PISA in the UAE

The UAE first participated in PISA 2009 and has continued through the 2012, 2015, and 2018 tests with preparation well underway for 2022. PISA is an international achievement test that measures 15-year-olds’ performance in mathematics, science, and reading in over 88 countries worldwide (OECD, 2018). It is administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) every three years in high-income economies, with partner countries (OECD, 2020) selected as participants for each testing cycle. The next testing cycle was originally planned for 2021, but was postponed to 2022 due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Like the UAE, Vietnam is designated as a partner economy by the OECD. Vietnam has participated in the exam since 2012, but its 2015 scores shifted the ways that national policymakers in the UAE use comparison as a framework for reform. Vietnam’s subject aggregate average score for PISA 2015 was 535, which was above the OECD average (500) and in the top 20 of participating countries overall. The “shock” (Takayama, 2008; Xiaomin & Auld, 2020) of Vietnam’s PISA 2015 performance provided an alternative model for OECD

“partner economies” looking to improve their international standing in PISA because it showed that a non-OECD country can achieve an equivalent or better than the OECD average, and that its most economically disadvantaged students could compete on par with their same-aged peers regardless of their country’s income level (OECD, 2019).

Following Vietnam’s 2015 PISA success, in 2016, Her Highness Jameela Al Muhairi, Minister of State for Public Education, was quoted as having said that the UAE’s efforts to improve its PISA outcomes are “not connected to any specific curriculum,” but, instead, “aims at evaluating the readiness of students to be effective within the working life, through acquiring many life skills” in effort “to become effectual elements of society” (UAE Ministry of Education, 2016). A year later, His Excellency Hussain bin Ibrahim Al Hammadi, the then Minister of Public Education in the UAE, unveiled a partnership with McGraw-Hill – the global publishing powerhouse – to develop and implement “WCE” (p. 1) mathematics and science curriculum in the UAE over a seven-year period beginning in 2017. In the same press release, the then CEO and President of McGraw-Hill doubled down on the WEC discourse to frame the company’s partnership with the UAE by naming it as an “emerging global hub” for education-policy innovation in the GCC region (PR Newswire, 2016).

The timing of the MOE’s public–private partnership with McGraw-Hill corresponded with the roll out of the National Education Strategic Plan (2017–2022) – the UAE’s current education policy roadmap. These examples show that the policy language used to name and frame the UAE’s PISA strategy not only reflects OECD’s influence but also shows how the focus on international comparison informs the UAE’s overarching education policy agenda. The National Education Strategic Plan directly references the WCE discourse in defining success of the development of a national “innovative education system for a knowledge and global competitive society” (MOE, 2019). In the years following the National Education Strategic Plan’s unveiling in 2016, the UAE’s preparation for PISA 2022 has rapidly accelerated as evidenced by the ways in which the WCE discourse has permeated education policy talk since that time. And, as the background policies and initiatives overviewed in this section notes, education policy in the UAE has increasingly focused on PISA as a central tenant for reform.

## 2. Literature Review

This study considers how, and the extent to which, teachers’ engagement in internationalized professional development activities primes their comparative sensemaking of the dominant discourses used to frame education policy goals. I draw from the literature on education policy borrowing and teachers’ sensemaking to interrogate dominant discourse diffusion in internationally sited professional development models.

### 2.1. PISA as a conveyor of the WCE discourse

Policy borrowing between countries has been critiqued by scholars in international education policy and development as being historically unidirectional and privileging North-to-South transfer (Shields, 2013). You’s (2018) study of so-called “West-to-East”

policy borrowing suggests that Asian countries have become a model for transfer because of their PISA success. Takayama (2011), however, advances that international attention to East Asian countries as exemplars for PISA performance reflects more of a convergence of agendas than a unidirectional approach to policy adoption where global metrics are now the gold standard of what it means to be a WCE system.

The UAE's attention to global metrics also recalls Morgan's (2018) characterization of education policy borrowing as "a tendency to 'over-borrow' and 'over benchmark'" (p. 294), where "over-dependence on global tests" in practice,

[E]rodes their educational sovereignty and restricts their capacity as small states to develop and nurture alternative, indigenous and localised (sic) solutions for guiding educational reform in order to benefit their students, teachers and communities. (p. 301)

One of the ways that teachers are introduced to the WCE discourse is through their professional development activities at the local level. The localization of globalized policy discourses through teachers' professional development recalls what Larsson et al. (2010) discuss as "fabrications" of educational change, where "instead of concentrating on the process of learning, we busy ourselves with *fabrications*, signs and symbols enacted to assure our environments that everything is proceeding according to plan." (p. 183). And these "fabrications," as they relate to the UAE's PISA readiness, reflect and reify the WCE dominant policy discourse.

## 2.2. Teachers' comparative sensemaking through internationalized professional development

As Vavrus and Bartlett (2012) evidence through their work with teacher training and professional development in Tanzania, teachers' epistemological sensemaking is contextual. Their findings trouble the inferred efficacy of unidirectional, North–South curriculum transfer that undertheorizes teachers' sensemaking at the practice level. Muñiz (2020) posits that sensemaking is a "muddy" process wherein "individuals socially construct meanings of their surroundings, and these meanings form the frameworks and narratives of their reality (citing Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Weick, 1995 in text)." (p. 5). The "muddy" process, as described by Muñiz (2000, p. 5), also characterizes the challenges that teachers in the UAE face in the lead-up to PISA 2022. These challenges include balancing national policy reforms that privilege PISA preparation with the localized challenges they experience in their daily work that are often divorced from the MOE's focus on PISA.

Teachers' sensemaking is further mediated by their exposure to education policies and teaching practices outside of their local and national contexts. Tan's (2019) study of stakeholders' sensemaking of education policy reform in Korea and China conceptualizes sensemaking as a "process where an individual assigns meanings to new information through an association with existing schemata or knowledge structures." Other scholars theorize teachers' professional development as sites for cognitive–emotional development (Twford et al., 2017) that promote social learning through the

“collegial construction of knowledge” (Gutierrez, 2019, p. 13). These contributions to the literature on teachers’ sensemaking suggest that it is not culturally fixed, but instead is filtered by cultural contexts (Coburn, 2001; Prabjandee, 2019; Spillane, et al., 2002) as it is a dialogic-relational process wherein individuals engage in constant comparison of their existing cognitive schema within an exposure event (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017).

Teachers’ participation in internationally focused professional development programs primes international comparison as sensemaking practice. However, not all internationalized professional development programs follow the same model. Figure 1 draws from the literature to characterize two approaches: *internationally sited* and *internationally situated* professional development.

**Figure 1**

*Comparing internationalized professional development models*

Characteristics	Internationally sited	Internationally situated
Duration	Short-term (days to weeks)	Short to longer-term (weeks to months)
Location	Abroad/outside teachers’ country of residence	Abroad/outside of teachers’ country of residence <i>and/or</i> technologically supported study-away; facilitated, virtual exchange
Activities	School site visits, classroom observations, cultural excursions, tourism, international cooperation, sharing goodwill	School site visits, classroom observations, cultural excursions <i>with</i> cultural and community embeddedness; relationship-building, practice sharing
Reflection	Difference; uniqueness	Sameness; sharedness
Comparison	Transfer	Contextualization

As outlined in Figure 1, *internationally sited* and *internationally situated* models of teachers’ professional development involve teacher’s exposure to their international counterparts, most often by physically traveling to another country. Their differences, however, help to explain how dominant discourses inform teachers’ sensemaking during and after international professional development experiences like the TEP. As teachers participate in internationally sited professional development programs, comparison can be directly or indirectly primed as a sensemaking practice. And as Engle and Sicez’s (2019) find, teachers’ sensemaking of global education discourses “can either constrain or enable teachers’ understanding of the policy and its implementation.” (p. 493). The TEP mirrors Rubin’s (2020) discussion of an acquisitional model of international professional development that privileges transfer without contextualization, which Johnstone (2006) and others (Bretag & van der Veen, 2017; Pennings et al., 2020; Roffee & Burns, 2020;) suggest is essential for sensemaking.

Where internationally sited professional development primes teachers' observation and transfer without contextualization, *internationally situated* professional development embeds opportunities for teachers to reflect on shared experiences. Johnstone (2006, p. 95) further contrasts what I refer to here as *internationally sited* from *internationally focused* professional development with the latter promoting "opportunities for teachers to experience the sociocultural and political issues facing people in those countries and serve to enhance participants' skills and discipline knowledge." The TEP provides a unique context to study comparison as a sensemaking practice because it centers teachers' engagement with dominant policy discourses through an international experience. In this view, comparison becomes a sensemaking practice that may prime teachers' attention to the interconnectedness of dominant policy discourses that have global reach and local importance.

### 3. Data and Methods

This policy discourse analysis applies qualitative methods (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Saldana, 2014) to uncover TEP teachers' sensemaking of the WCE dominant discourse used to frame the UAE's PISA goals and prospective gains. I apply post-structural (Bacchi, 2014, 2000; Bensimon & Marshall, 1997; Fairclough, 1995; Marshall, 2000; Smith, 2003; van Dijk, 1997) and critical policy discourse analysis (Author et al., 2020; Monkman, 2018; Monkman & Hoffman, 2014) as complementary methodologies in this study to highlight the interconnectedness of dominant education policy discourses in teachers' sensemaking during the TEP. Where poststructuralist perspectives on policy discourse focus on the process of problematization and rejection of a single truth or experience (Bacchi, 2012), critical approaches to policy discourse analysis center the social relationships between policy, its expression, and sensemaking (Fairclough, 2013). Together, they allow for and encourage a holistic questioning of how policy expression and experience are shaped within systems and by teachers through their professional development experiences (Kemper-Patrick & Ela, 2019; Spillane, et al., 2002).

**Table 1**

*Sources of evidence*

Evidence	Collection	Analytic unit
Participants' journals	March 2018	Sentences, phrases, drawings
Semi-structured interviews	October 2018	Audible responses, utterances; non-verbal cues/affections
Participant observations	October 2018 October 2019	Field notes, analytic memos; photographs

#### 3.1. Participants

I refer to the people who shared their experiences with me for this research project as "participants." I chose to use this general reference term instead of individualized

pseudonyms to reduce the potential for de-identification and to orient my role as researcher which, in this project, took the forms of observer, reader, and occasional interlocutor.

Nineteen educators from two northern Emirates were selected to participate in the 2018 TEP. All 2018 TEP participants were employed as classroom teachers, school leaders, or Zone-level authorities in government schools. There were 16 women and 3 men in the participant group; all male participants held positions with the MOE and all but one of the women were employed as classroom teachers. Teacher participants were all secondary-level specialists in mathematics, science, and literacy – all subject areas assessed by PISA – and others like Arabic and Moral Education that are unique to the UAE context. Written consent was secured in Arabic from all participants by a Foundation employee before departure. Consent was requested using a script written in English and then translated into Arabic. In addition to reviewing the purpose of study and participants' roles, the script also detailed that participation in the study was optional, revocable, and not required as a condition of participation in the TEP. This person also translated participants' journal entries from Arabic to English and provided simultaneous translation for all fieldwork activities. Any errors or misrepresentations made through analysis are mine alone and not reflective of their labor to which I am indebted.

### 3.2. Reflective journals

Eight journal prompts were assigned in total. One to be completed each day beginning on the date of departure from the UAE, each of the six days in Vietnam, and a summative reflection to be completed no more than one week following participants' return to the UAE. Each day's prompt centered comparison as a framework for teachers' sensemaking of their experience in Vietnam using autoethnographic journaling practices (Harold & Stevenson, 2010; Stephenson et al., 2012) piloted in the UAE context. Participants were invited to respond in writing, through illustrations, or other creative approach. All daily journals were handwritten in Arabic and then scanned as digital files for translation to English and for analysis. The journals yielded a total of 152 unique entries completed over eight days and all but four were text-based. One was completed as a poem. The outlying four entries were completed as hand-drawn illustrations.

### 3.3. Semi-structured interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with a convenience subsample (Cresswell & Poth, 2016) of 10 TEP participants in the fall following the 2018 exchange to Vietnam. I was able to interview all three male TEP participants, along with six teachers and one school leader, all of whom were women. All interviews were conducted in person in schools where TEP alumni were employed and in the Foundation's headquarters through simultaneous Arabic-to-English translation. Interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes but most ran longer due to translation time. I took descriptive and verbatim notes during each interview and wrote summary memos at the end of each day to

identify themes and to question my own assumptions as they emerged through my own recollections and reflections. Later, I manually transcribed the audio recordings and used my notes to correct and contextualize the written transcripts.

### 3.4. Observations

In addition to analyzing teachers' reflected journals and the transcripts of our interview conversations, I visited the schools where TEP teachers work and observed them at work in their classrooms in 2018 and again in 2019. In 2018, my role was strictly observational. These notes were also incorporated into the end-of-day summary memos. In 2019, my role shifted to participant observer because I also facilitated the daily reflection sessions with the TEP cohort from Vietnam during the inbound reciprocal exchange. I took descriptive and verbatim notes using the same style as used during the semi-structured interviews. While my focus in the interview setting was narrowed to one person and their TEP experience, my focus was expanded through observation to explore the WCE discourse's diffusion through school and classroom artifacts.

## 4. Procedures

Teachers' reflective journals were translated from Arabic to English for analysis. I manually transcribed the audio recordings of all interviews where participants consented to be recorded. (Only one participant declined to be recorded.) After translation, the transcript corpus was saved as an Excel file and then uploaded to Dedoose, a qualitative data management software program [www.dedoose.com]. I applied *a priori* descriptive codes to the corpus to identify where and the extent to which the WCE policy discourse was brought up by teachers during their TEP experience. These *a priori* codes were sourced from the literature and from policy documents issued by the OECD, the MOE, and the Foundation sponsoring the TEP. First-round descriptive codes were then complimented by emergent codes. I also incorporated some of the same reflective journal questions into the semi-structured interview protocol used for both fieldwork trips to the UAE in 2018 and 2019, respectively, to compare individual participant's responses over time and to confirm my own understanding of the data in context and not exclusively through the translated artifacts. Once first- and second-round codes were applied to the corpus, I used a code collocation matrix to visualize intersections.

### 4.1. Trustworthiness

I applied the same codebook across the corpus and kept participants' writings or utterances together as analytical units. Following visualization and an iterative review and consolidation of first- and second-round codes, I grouped codes into thematic units to identify patterns and isolate individual participant's responses as explanatory cases (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Saldaña, 2015). This process involved my selection of participants' direct quotations to contextualize patterns in the data. These direct quotations are used in presentation of findings that follows in the next section.



## 4.2. Potential limitations

My fieldwork for this research project was limited to schools, universities, cultural sites, and government centers with few opportunities to informally engage with this study's research participants outside the contexts of their work. My choice to focus on teachers' sensemaking as it relates to their experiences in the program's formal activities undoubtedly limits my own understanding of the data and how comparison is undertaken as sensemaking practice. However, these limitations seemed less harmful than if I attempted to draw meaning from teachers' interactions with culture and in context without more targeted trust-building and time.

## 5. Findings

The presentation of findings that follows in this section is organized by two overarching themes: *difference as deficit* and *performative transfer*. Both themes engage teachers' sensemaking as primed through internationally sited professional development experiences like the TEP.

### 5.1. Difference as deficit

TEP teachers extended the deficit framing of Vietnam's PISA success to legitimate its selection as a destination for the exchange. An MOE official said plainly that "being in Vietnam as a delegation from the UAE proves its legitimacy" as a model for policy borrowing, and that its results were replicable and comparable as a model for the UAE. In this official's view, the reason that Vietnam warranted the UAE's attention is that "the whole society supports the educational system and they aim for the best in spite [of] the challenge of the shortage of resources." Teachers' perspectives on Vietnam's PISA "success" were similar to those shared by MOE officials with one teacher describing the Vietnamese education system as "simple educational system but with high educational outcomes."

Teachers minimized the infrastructural and funding challenges experienced by the teachers they met in Vietnam and in schools where they were observed during the TEP. These constraints included limited financial and physical resources to support teachers or to sustain their PISA 2015 gains. Instead of priming their own reflections on the ways in which their practices are constrained or enabled by resources at home, teachers touted what they perceived to be Vietnam's "no excuses" approach to PISA preparedness. And, overall, teachers relied on a deficit understanding of difference to make sense of Vietnam as context for comparison and policy transfer.

The relationship between a country's PISA's ranking and its economic and social development status was troubled by TEP teachers in ways that show how comparative sensemaking defaults to a deficit view of difference. One TEP teacher's journal entry from early on in the Exchange reflected that "education is the main focus of interest of both the government and the people of Vietnam" and that "the success and development of Vietnamese education form the success and rise of the Vietnamese

Republic.” Here, another TEP teacher uses deficit framing as a comparative sensemaking practice:

I saw the respect exchanged between teachers and students, the keenness the teachers have for teaching in spite of low salaries, the existence of students’ motivation towards learning in spite of crowded classrooms and the limited resources. In spite of these difficulties, Vietnam ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in international assessments.

TEP participants’ sensemaking also involved placemaking the UAE as a comparatively more advanced system. An MOE official wrote in their reflective journal that, “[p]overty and weak infrastructure do not mean the end” for Vietnam because, as a nation, they were able to overcome its prior occupations by the French, the war with the United States, and current economic constraints to become a PISA leader. Another MOE official who participated in the TEP recalled the group’s confusion when they first learned that they’d be traveling to Vietnam, writing that “we knew Vietnam ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in PISA assessment in 2015, which means it has a hidden secret.” And, as teachers would share in their journals and in conversation with me later on, they hoped that learning the “hidden secret” as an outcome of the TEP might propel the UAE’s education system toward its goal of being “world class” in the same ways that Vietnam achieved in 2015.

## 5.2. Performative adoption

This section introduces a second thematic finding driven primarily from my conversations with and observations of teachers in their schools at 6- and 18-months following the TEP. In 2018, I observed TEP teachers practicing co-teaching and interdisciplinary approaches to content instruction across their curricular areas of expertise; however, in 2019, I observed TEP teachers’ less discriminatory use of STREAM-focused strategies through whole and small-group instruction. My fieldwork notes express this shift, explicitly, with the reflection that TEP teachers were “pulling out all the stops” to show how they sustained their changes to their teaching practice following the TEP. Teachers’ focus on transfer without contextualization shows how exposure events like the TEP can lead to teachers’ performative adoption of practices that they believe are expected of them and that will yield results expected by policymakers. To ground this finding in the data, I draw from observations and interviews with TEP alums to explore performative adoption at the school- and classroom-levels.

The WCE discourse is also diffused at the school level through posters and signage that are used to communicate the UAE’s PISA goals. Through my observations at schools where TEP teachers work, I noticed PISA-related postings in the forms of league-table lists and graphs noting the OECD average (500), aspirant country rankings, and promoting the UAE’s goal to make the league table top-20 in the next PISA cycle which was, at the time, nearly three years away. I observed the same signage in the MOE and local administration buildings where teachers receive professional development. These artifacts were part of the MOE’s public information campaign for PISA readiness that was launched as part of the National Education Strategic Plan but were never referenced

by TEP teachers. And further, none of the TEP's participants related their own exposure to the WCE discourse with a similar communication strategy in use in Vietnam. They noted the public information campaign in their reflective journals, but without making connections to their own school contexts.

In both the UAE and Vietnam, PISA preparation has been undertaken as a national priority with a tenor of importance and visibility not often afforded to education policy reforms. All TEP teachers in this study discussed the ways in which the MOE's focus on PISA has expanded over time and accelerated in the years in between testing cycles. Although education policymakers in the UAE first resisted curricular narrowing in service to PISA preparation (MOE, 2018), TEP teachers reported on the ways that they are expected to make space for PISA-prep as part of the implemented curriculum even though it was not mandated by the MOE. One TEP teacher explained that PISA-prep had also been integrated as part of content instruction during the regular school day, and also over weekends for students whose pre-testing performance lagged behind the benchmarks set by the MOE. TEP teachers shared that the reason they amplified their adoption of the strategies that they observed in Vietnam was to replicate Vietnam's PISA 2015 performance. These specific practices included the uses of differentiated instruction and assessment practices and the incorporation of STEM and STREAM (Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) strategies. Contrarily, teachers reflected that they were already using some, if not all, of the STEM strategies that they observed through the TEP experience.

These observations suggest that teachers' participation in internationally sited professional development may prime comparative sensemaking to support transfer, but exposure alone does not significantly or positively alter teachers' long-term practices. Because TEP teachers were already using the strategies they referenced as having been inspired by the teachers whose practices they observed in Vietnam, it seems that their "real" takeaways from the Exchange experience were that their own classroom practices were legitimated as being *world class*. And, further, because their practices were now affirmed by their own professional development experience in the Exchange and valued by the MOE as being *world class*, it is reasonable to see how doing more could be understood as doing better.

Vietnam 2015 PISA performance was not only lauded by policymakers in the UAE, but also framed as an anomalous exception. This framing reinforced Vietnam's attractiveness as an alternative, legitimate model for borrowing. It is unclear if Vietnam has sustained its 2015 gains because according to the OECD, the "international comparability" of Vietnam's 2018 PISA scores could not be validated. As a result, Vietnam's 2018 combined subject aggregate scores have not (yet) been made public (OECD, 2021). Even without the data to suggest that Vietnam's 2015 scores were sustained over time, education policy workers in the UAE continue to look at it as an aspirant example of how to "win" at PISA. My analysis of TEP teachers' journals and interviews and observations suggest that internationally sited professional development programs like the TEP may reinforce teachers' performative adoption of teaching practices that they believe are expected of them to yield an expected result, but without promoting intercultural pedagogical exchange.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has evidenced teachers' comparative sensemaking of dominant discourses through internationally sited professional development experiences. The research question that guided this study asked, "*how do teachers use comparison to make sense of the WCE discourse through an international professional development experience?*" Comparative sensemaking was primed in this study's procedures through the reflective journal prompts assigned during the trip and through interviews and observations that asked teachers to consider both similarities and differences in what they observed in Vietnam with their own professional experiences in the UAE.

Although teachers' adoption of STEM- and STREAM-focused strategies was accelerated, the TEP did not transform their everyday practices. The challenge for these teachers, as they expressed to me in writing and in interviews, was to transfer what they learned through the TEP back into their classrooms knowing that so-called "world class" practices come and go with each testing cycle's league table leader. In this way, teachers' performative adoption recalls Morgan's (2018, p. 294) suggestion of UAE's "over-borrow, over-benchmark" approach to policy transfer but at the classroom and school-building levels. Teachers' *taken-for-granted-ness* of the WCE discourse is not surprising given its widespread diffusion through policy documents and policy talk. These findings show how discourses *become* normative through internationalized professional development experiences. Performative adoption is one way that teachers diffuse dominant discourses to legitimate their existing practices as being "world class." And, overall, this article evidence that teachers may benefit more from *internationally situated* professional development opportunities that allow for greater engagement with culture through interaction with diverse policy stakeholders. Further research is needed to explore how dominant policy discourses inform teachers' comparative sensemaking in internationalized professional development experiences, and specifically in the GCC-regional context.

Expecting the expected rarely plays out in practice. And the expectation that policy borrowing will unilaterally lead to the same outcomes is "muddy" in the way that Muñiz (2020) discusses sensemaking itself. As Berkovich and Benoliel (2020) suggest, teachers "are visible yet silenced" in shaping dominant discourses (p. 497) because they are not often part of the processes that shape policy change. Instead, teachers, like the participants in this study, are most often positioned as passive receivers of policy discourse instead of sensemakers of the discourses that inform their working lives. This conceptualization is not only incorrect, but it also keeps teachers out of policymaking spaces. Perhaps the most effective way to ensure that teachers' diverse sensemaking is considered in the policy processes that shape their professional development is to include teachers. Because the UAE maintains formal school segregation based on sex, bringing teacher voice into decision-making processes means having more Emirati women at the policy-making table. The UAE is making strides toward greater gender inclusion and representation at the ministry level, as evidenced by the recent appointments of several women cabinet members including H.H. Al Muhairi's appointment to the Minister of State for Public Education in 2017 (Day, 2018). The inclusion of more

women in policy positions will help ensure that more women teachers are included in making the policies that shape their professional development and the contexts of student learning which ultimately inform PISA outcomes.

## Author's Biography

Emily Anderson is an Assistant Professor of Educational Policy Studies at Florida International University where she specializes in International and Intercultural Education.

## Funding Acknowledgement

The author thanks the Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research for their financial and strategic support of this study. In particular, the author thanks Ms. Caitrin Mullan, Ms. Hannadi Mohammad, Dr. Elisabeth Wilson, and Dr. Natasha Ridge for their encouragement and guidance. Any errors presented in this article are mine alone. The author also thanks the teachers and leaders whom participated in this research project. And, most of all, the author thanks the Program Assistant credited in text, but blinded so as to protect their anonymity as a participant-facilitator in the program under study in this article.

## References

- [1] Anderson, E., Khurshid, A., Monkman, K. and Shah, P. (2020), "Using Ethnographic and Discourse Methods in Gender-Focused Comparative and International Education Research", Wiseman, A.W. (Ed.) *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education 2019 (International Perspectives on Education and Society, Vol. 39)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 153-168.
- [2] Allan, E. J. (2008). *Policy Discourses, Gender, and Education: Constructing Women's Status* (Vol. 11). Routledge.
- [3] Aslam, F., Adefila, A., & Bagiya, Y. (2018). STEM outreach activities: An approach to teachers' professional development. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 44*(1), 58–70.
- [4] Bacchi, C. (2012). Why study problematizations? Making politics visible. *Open Journal of Political Science, 2*(01), 1.
- [5] Bensimon, E. M., & Marshall, C. (Ed.). (1997). Policy analysis for postsecondary education: Feminist and critical perspectives. In *Feminist Critical Policy Analysis II* (pp. 1–22). Routledge.
- [6] Berkovich, I., & Benoliel, P. (2020). Marketing teacher quality: Critical discourse analysis of OECD documents on effective teaching and TALIS. *Critical Studies in Education, 61*(4), 496–511.
- [7] Bretag, T., & van der Veen, R. (2017). 'Pushing the boundaries': Participant motivation and self-reported benefits of short-term international study tours. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International, 54*(3), 175–183.
- [8] Coburn, C. E. (2001). Collective sensemaking about reading: How teachers mediate reading policy in their professional communities. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 23*(2), 145–170.
- [9] Corsaro, W. A., & Molinari, L. (2005). *I Compagni: Understanding Children's Transition from Preschool to Elementary School*. Teacher College Press.
- [10] Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- [11] Cunliffe, A. L., & Scaratti, G. (2017). Embedding impact in engaged research: Developing socially useful knowledge through dialogical sensemaking. *British Journal of Management, 28*(1), 29–44.
- [12] Day, E. (2018). "Meet the nine female ministers in UAE's current cabinet". *Emirates Woman*. Retrieved from <https://emirateswoman.com/meet-the-nine-female-ministers-in-the-uaes-current-cabinet>
- [13] Fairclough, N. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In A. McHoul & M. Rapley (Eds.), *How to Analyze Talk in Institutional Settings: A Casebook of Methods* (pp. 25–38). Continuum.

- [14] Fox, R. K., Dodman, S., & Holincheck, N. (2019). Moving beyond reflection in a hall of mirrors: Developing critical reflective capacity in teachers and teacher educators. *Reflective Practice, 20*(3), 367–382.
- [15] Gutierrez, S. B. (2019). Teacher-practitioner research inquiry and sense making of their reflections on scaffolded collaborative lesson planning experience. *Asia-Pacific Science Education, 5*(1), 1–15.
- [16] Harold, B., & Stephenson, L. (2010). Researcher development in UAE classrooms: Becoming teacher-leaders. *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues, 3*(3), 231–243.
- [17] Hill, I. (2012). An international model of world-class education: The International Baccalaureate. *Prospects, 42*(3), 341–359.
- [18] Johnstone, P. R. (2006). Linking study tours of India and China to the primary classroom in multicultural Australia. *International Journal of Learning, 13*(5), 93–97.
- [19] Marshall, C. (2000). Policy discourse analysis: Negotiating gender equity. *Journal of Education Policy, 15*(2), 125–156.
- [20] McDonnell, L. M., & Elmore, R. F. (1987). Getting the job done: Alternative policy instruments. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 9*(2), 133–152.
- [21] Ministry of Education introduces new world-class curriculum to enhance UAE's education system. (2016, October 6). PR Newswire. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/ministry-of-education-introduces-new-world-class-curriculum-to-enhance-uaes-education-system-300340499.html>
- [22] GALE. (n.d.). *Gale in Context: Biography*. Retrieved from <https://www.gale.com/c/in-context-biography>
- [23] Morgan, C. (2018). The spectacle of global tests in the Arabian Gulf: A comparison of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. *Comparative Education, 54*(3), 285–308.
- [24] Monkman, K. (2011). Framing gender, education and empowerment. *Research in Comparative and International Education, 6*(1), 1–13.
- [25] Monkman, K., & Hoffman, L. (2013). Girls' education: The power of policy discourse. *Theory and Research in Education, 11*(1), 63–84.
- [26] Muñiz, R. (2020). Muddy sensemaking: Making sense of socio-emotional skills amidst a vague policy context. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 28*(114).
- [27] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2014). *PISA 2012 Results in Focus: What 15-Year-olds Know and What They Can Do with What They Know*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf>
- [28] OECD. (2018). *PISA 2015 Results in Focus*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>
- [29] Patrick, S. K., & Joshi, E. (2019). "Set in Stone" or "Willing to Grow"? Teacher sensemaking during a growth mindset initiative. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 83*, 156–167.
- [30] Prabjandee, D. (2019). Unwelcome truths of the professional learning community policy in Thailand: Teacher's sensemaking. *Issues in Educational Research, 29*(1), 223–242.
- [31] Pennings, M. W., Cushing, D. F., Gomez, R., & Dyson, C. (2020). Making the intangible, tangible: Assessment design that fosters curiosity, confidence and collaboration during international short-term study tours for Australian students. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 60*(1), 113–137.
- [32] Preves, S., & Stephenson, D. (2009). The classroom as stage: Impression management in collaborative teaching. *Teaching Sociology, 37*(3), 245–256.
- [33] Roffee, J. A., & Burns, K. (2020). International student mobility & study tours as a tool for social justice. *Teaching in Higher Education, 1–16*.
- [34] Rosen, L. (2009). Rhetoric and symbolic action in the policy process. In G. Sykes, B. Schneider, D. N. Plank, & T. G. Ford (Eds.), *Handbook of Education Policy Research* (pp. 267–285). Routledge.
- [35] Saito, E., & Atencio, M. (2013). A conceptual discussion of lesson study from a micro-political perspective: Implications for teacher development and pupil learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 31*, 87–95.
- [36] Saldaña, J. (2013). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: SAGE.
- [37] Schoepp, K. W. (2011). The path to development: Expatriate faculty retention in the UAE. *International Education, 40*(2), 58–75.
- [38] Siltaoja, M., Juusola, K., & Kivijarvi, M. (2019). World-class fantasies: A neocolonial analysis of international branch campuses. *Organization, 26*(1), 75–97.
- [39] Sharif, T., Upadhyay, D., & Ahmed, E. (2016). Motivational factors influencing teaching (FIT) as a career: An empirical study of the expatriate teachers in the Emirates. *The Journal of Developing Areas, 50*(6), 209–225.
- [40] Shields, R. (2013). *Globalization and International Education*. London: Continuum.
- [41] Siczek, M. M., & Engel, L. C. (2019). Teachers' cognitive interpretation of U.S. global education initiatives. *Educational Policy, 33*(3), 486–515.
- [42] Smith, C. S. (2003). *Modes of Discourse: The local Structure of Texts* (Vol. 103). Cambridge University Press.

- [43] Spillane, J. P., Reiser, B. J., & Reimer, T. (2002). Policy implementation and cognition: Reframing and refocusing implementation research. *Review of Educational Research, 72*(3), 387–431.
- [44] Stephenson, L., Dada, R., & Harold, B. (2012). Challenging the traditional idea of leadership in UAE schools. *On the Horizon, 20*(1), 54–63.
- [45] Stewart, V. (2012). *A World-class Education: Learning from International Models of Excellence and Innovation*. ASCD.
- [46] Takayama, K. (2008). The politics of international league tables: PISA in Japan's achievement crisis debate. *Comparative Education, 44*(4), 387–407.
- [47] Tan, C. (2019). Sensemaking and sensegiving in schooling reform: South Korea and China. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 17*(4), 536–547.
- [48] Twyford, K., Le Fevre, D., & Timperley, H. (2017). The influence of risk and uncertainty on teachers' responses to professional learning and development. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 2*(2), 86–100.
- [49] United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education. (2016). *The UAE Ranks First among Arab Countries in the PISA 2015 Assessment*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.ae/En/MediaCenter/News/Pages/PISA2015.aspx>
- [50] United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education. (2018). *Ministry of Education Strategic Plan 2017–2021*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.ae/En/AboutTheMinistry/Pages/MinistryStrategy.aspx>
- [51] United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education. (2019). *Quality Education: Education as a National Priority*. Retrieved from <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/leaving-no-one-behind/4qualityeducation>
- [52] United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *PISA Brochure*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.ae/En/ImportantLinks/InternationalAssessments/Documents/PISA/Brochure.pdf>
- [53] United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education. (2020). *About the Ministry*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.ae/En/AboutTheMinistry/Pages/OrgChart.aspx>
- [54] Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). What is political discourse analysis. *Belgian Journal of Linguistics, 11*(1), 11–52.
- [55] Vavrus, F., & Bartlett, L. (2012). Comparative pedagogies and epistemological diversity: Social and materials contexts of teaching in Tanzania. *Comparative Education Review, 56*(4), 634–658.
- [56] Xiaomin, L., & Auld, E. (2020). A historical perspective on the OECD's 'humanitarian turn': PISA for Development and the Learning Framework 2030. *Comparative Education, 56*(4), 503–521.
- [57] Wiseman, A. W., & Anderson, E. (2012). ICT-integrated education and national innovation systems in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. *Computers & Education, 59*(2), 607–618.
- [58] Wiseman, A. W., & Anderson, E. (2015). A cross-national comparison of ICT resources and science teachers' professional development in and use of ICT in the gulf cooperation council countries. In *Science education in the arab gulf states* (pp. 137-152). Brill Sense.