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Full Length Research Paper

Role of a School Leader for the Improvement of One of the Schools in Al-Ain, UAE.

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Corresponding Author:</i> Jassim AlQahtani</p> <p><i>Article history:</i> Received:10-11-2019 Revised: 15-11-2019 Accepted: 25-11-2019 Published: 29-11-2019</p> <p><i>Key words:</i> School, Improvement,Best Practices, School Principal.</p>	<p><i>The main objective of this study was to explore how the best practices of one of the school principals of Alain contributed to the improvement of his school. Data about the principal's best practices was collected by conducting an interview with the principal. The questions of the interview were mainly based on Kentucky's Standards and Indicators for School Improvement (SISI). Findings showed that there are three major elements, associated with the principals' best practices, largely contributed to the school improvement; effective communication, developing organizational citizenship behavior and emphasizing professional development. In fact, the findings of this study are limited to the case of one of the schools in Alain city and cannot be generalized to other schools or other cities. Finally, the evaluation of the best practices in this study was based on Irtiq'a report provided by a specific inspection team evaluating Abu Dhabi schools only. However, other schools in the UAE are given other types of reports from other inspection teams following different standards and indicators such as the KHDA school inspection report. Thus, there is a need to have a unified evaluation guide for all schools in the UAE. Without such unified evaluation, having more studies to guide leadership practices to achieve the desired change and improvement throughout UAE schools would be impossible. In fact, comparing specific evaluation report, such as Irtiq'a Report, to international standards such as Kentucky's SISI would be an important step towards developing an effective unified evaluation of schools in the UAE.</i></p>

Introduction

Evaluation is one of the most axial steps and cycle of the school management. Weiss (1989) argued that the process of evaluation should be formative and is meant to pave the avenue of enhancement the effectiveness of the school in terms of improvement and development. Weiss (1989) claimed that formative evaluation is relatively informal and is geared toward helping principals improve. However, it could be summative and be used as accountability tool that aims to take decisions like tenure or retention or promotion of the principal. Weiss (1989) also stated that summative evaluation is more structured. Its goal is to precisely evaluate performance, and it is often used to facilitate decisions overcompensation or tenure. In addition, the process of evaluation will be more effective when it is summative and formative as it draws a clear three-dimensional portrait. Evaluation can take different shapes and forms either internally or externally; it also needs standards.

What Standards Should Be Used?

Evaluations will have little impact unless the criteria are both substantive and relevant. Traditionally, principals have been evaluated against standards, such as those from the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) which provide a foundation for evaluation since they reflect a broad consensus on essential leadership skills. Glass (2003) stated

that there should the evaluation criteria be consistent with the ISLLC standards. He also added that the standards should be adapted to the needs of practitioners may take some work.

ADEC, The Abu Dhabi Education Council, currently known as ADEK Department of Education and Knowledge, initiated its own professional standards that are used to evaluate the principals; leading teaching and learning; leading the curriculum; leading the personnel; leading the organization; leading the local community. Regarding the internal evaluation, it can be self-evaluation by the principal himself as a life-long or continuous learner who focuses on the processes of leading the school. A principal has to be a reflective leader who reviews his action continuously.

Self-evaluation and Portfolio evaluation

The principal development can be self-monitored; the principal is seen as a life-long learner who focuses on the processes of leading the school. ADEC is sending the school a form called Self Evaluation Form and apart of this form is the effectiveness of leadership (Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008). As for portfolios, they are not mere instruments but "conceptual containers" into which principals can place a wide variety of artifacts documenting their achievements. Hackney (1999) described a typical process. After identifying a goal as the

focus, the principal then gathers evidence demonstrating progress toward the desired outcome.

Depending on the goal, relevant evidence might include items such as parent newsletters, meeting minutes, records of dropout rates, test scores, and handbooks. Portfolios are highly flexible and easily tailored to the needs of individuals. However, without careful structuring, that flexibility makes it easy for the portfolio to degenerate into an even more undisciplined version of the checklist. Hackney ensured that the value of the portfolio is the opportunity for personal reflection. "The emphasis must be on the individual's self-examination, the value of the artifacts that represent his or her work, the rationale used as defense of the product and the growth experienced as a result.". By themselves, portfolios do not align principal evaluation with the need to improve student achievement. However, when focused on instructional goals, they provide an evidence-oriented process that spurs school leaders to think more deeply about the impact they have on student performance. (Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008). External evaluation is carried out in which a principal is evaluated as a part of the whole school evaluation against the professional standards; it can also be done at the individual level through direct observation, peer evaluation and observation of simulated activities (Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008).

Principal evaluation as part of the whole school evaluation

The principal's performance is assessed alongside that of the school. Such evaluation is usually concerned more with academic results, ignoring other critical aspects of a school's life. However; Some researchers also argue that standardized tests cannot give a complete picture of learning because student achievement is not directly connected with the principal performance (Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008).

Direct observation, Peer evaluation and Observation of Simulated Activities

It is one method of evaluating principal's progress in real school setting and most principals in different countries are evaluated by superintendents annually through observing their performance in the school. The number and duration of visits are very important because it is not effective and significant to collect information to evaluate principals in few visits (Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008). Teachers, other school principals, and cluster managers can take the role of a peer or a friend, evaluating the principal's progress and provide him/her with critical feedback! They can help the principal become a reflective thinker and improve his/her performance. Many principals think that it's not really a good way because they are afraid that they might undermine her. It's very hard for principals to accept others to find weak points around her. It appears that the principal evaluation is almost a big secret where nobody should know about it inside the school (Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008). Observations of simulated activities means observing simulated practice and responding to case studies. Evaluation through simulated practice may not relate directly to actual everyday practice. However, it gives an overall idea of the knowledge he has (Lumby, Crow & Pashiardis, 2008).

Principal Evaluation Tools and Models of Principal Evaluation

Lindahl (1986) suggested using a mixture of survey questionnaires, self-evaluation, and evaluation teams. The teams consist of three people: the principal's supervisor, the

director of secondary or primary education, and a peer selected by the principal. Team evaluations tend to be more balanced than solitary ones. Principals are often cautious of peer evaluation (Anderson, 1989 & Duke and Stiggins 1985).

The evaluation material can be used in several ways. Summative assessments are concerned with pay and tenure, but they can also serve as an instrument for remedial professional development. Formative and summative evaluations alike can be part of an ongoing process, not just an annual one. Anderson (1989) advocated prompt post observation feedback conferences. Valentine (1987) points out that serious deficiencies should be identified at these conferences and growth plans constructed for remedying them. Hence a principal's year-end evaluation should contain few surprises. Ideal principal evaluation systems are cooperative and flexible. Principals in some American states work with their evaluators to establish individualized annual performance plans and goals (Redfern, 1986). Those plans are accompanied by the state's assessment instrument, a standardized list of thirty-eight items that describe the principals' major responsibilities.

Anderson (1989) claimed that the professional accountability program is for principals who have yet to complete three years in the district. Their evaluation instrument has eight job functions, each with several performance standards. The supervisor conducts at least three observations a year and provides narrative reports of each one. Principal-teacher conferences are also taped and reviewed. Those principals who do not meet performance standards are placed in a remedial cycle. North Clackamas's more experienced principals are in its professional development evaluation program. They establish personal goals for two to three years, and the district provides tuition, release time, and travel allowances to assist them (Anderson 1989). One principal designed a curricular mapping system to bring the district's testing and instructional programs into alignment. These principals receive summative evaluations every four years. North Clackamas School District uses formative, annual evaluations for its junior principals and employs surveys and frequent observations to measure performance in preselected areas. The formative evaluation for senior principals is less structured and encourages autonomous projects that will benefit all the stakeholders.

Problems and Benefits of Principal Evaluation

Lindahl (1986) found that principals who have enjoyed high reputations often resist a more systematic program of evaluation, apparently fearing that they have little to gain and much to lose by the process. Ambitious assessment programs can also cost time and money. Hence, Peters and Stephens & Bagenstos (1988) suggest that school districts define precisely what they hope to gain by principal evaluation and that they resist the urge to overstep that definition. On the other hand, principal evaluation brings many benefits. For example, it encourages communication within organizations, facilitates mutual goal setting by principals and superintendents, sensitizes evaluators to principals' needs, and motivates principals to improve (Weiss, 1989). In addition, the principal performance evaluation process will serve as a guide for principals as they reflect upon and improve their effectiveness as school leaders. It also informs higher education programs in developing the content and requirements of professional development programs that prepare principals pre-service and in service. Besides, it serves as a tool in developing coaching and mentoring programs for principals. In fact, evaluation can

be formative and summative. Formative evaluation is relatively informal and is geared toward helping principals improve. Summative evaluation is more structured, and it is often used to facilitate decisions overcompensation or tenure (Weiss, 1989).

Effective Evaluation and Kentucky (SISI)

Leithwood, Paul & Bradley (1999) recommend that evaluation systems include preparation; data collection; and follow up. Reeves (2002) emphasizes that productive evaluation processes are anchored in explicit standards that make the expectations clear to the district as well as the principal, and that also distinguish levels of proficiency. He suggests four categories: "exemplary," "proficient," "progressing," and "not meeting standards." The distinctions are important because each level implies a different kind of follow up. Progressing principals may benefit from coaching on specific skills. Reeves ascertained in involving the principal as an active partner who helps determine evaluation criteria and craft an appropriate professional growth plan. Finally, he says that evaluation process should be both honest and challenging. For example, "proficient" principals should understand that proficient is acceptable-but is not the same as exemplary.

Theodore & Thomas (2009) argued that the framework of Kentucky Standards and Indicators for School Improvement (SISI) is appropriate for whole-school improvement at all P-12 levels. The nine standards of (SISI) have three categories; "(a) academic performance (i.e., curriculum, classroom evaluation and assessment, instruction); (b) learning environment (i.e., school culture, external support system, professional development and evaluation), and (c) efficiency (i.e., leadership, organizational structure and resource allocation, comprehensive and effective planning)" (p. 403).

Research Question

This case study was conducted on Ali Bin Abi Taleb’s school principal who has succeeded in improving his school according to Irtiq’a Report. The study aims to examine the following question: What are the best practices done by the school leader that led to the school’s improvement?

Methodology

A qualitative study approach was adopted in this study through conducting a semi-structured interview based on Kentucky’s

(SISI).The interview was used to collect data regarding the principal’s actions that might have led to the school improvement.

Case Selection

The principal who participated in this study was selected using *convenient sampling*. In fact, through previous acquaintance of the school principal being an experienced principal who was transferred to Ali Bin Abi Taleb School to improve its performance after getting a low grade by Irtiq’a inspection team. The study was meant to explore how the practices of the school principal led to school improvement.

Data Collection

After gaining permission from the school principal who agreed to participate in the study, the interview was conducted in Arabic language through asking the principal a group of questions based on Kentucky Standards and Indicators for School Improvement (SISI). Based on the three categories of (SISI) showed earlier; academic performance, learning environment and efficacy, the following three main open questions were directed to the school principal to obtain the best practices that contributed to school improvement as reported by Irtiq’a Inspection team. (1) What are the strategies, measures or plans conducted to bring about improvement in *students’ academic performance* that were introduced to the school and were highlighted by Irtiq’a Report? (2) What are the strategies; measures or plans conducted to bring about improvement in the *school culture and environment* that were introduced to the school and were highlighted by Irtiq’a Report? (3) What are other strategies, measures or plans conducted that you found *efficient* and were highlighted by Irtiq’a Report?

Case Background

Ali Bin Abi Taleb School is a government school in Alain following. In fact, government schools represent 56% of schools in the three main cities of the emirate of Abu Dhabi, (Abu Dhabi Statistics Center, 2017, p 6).

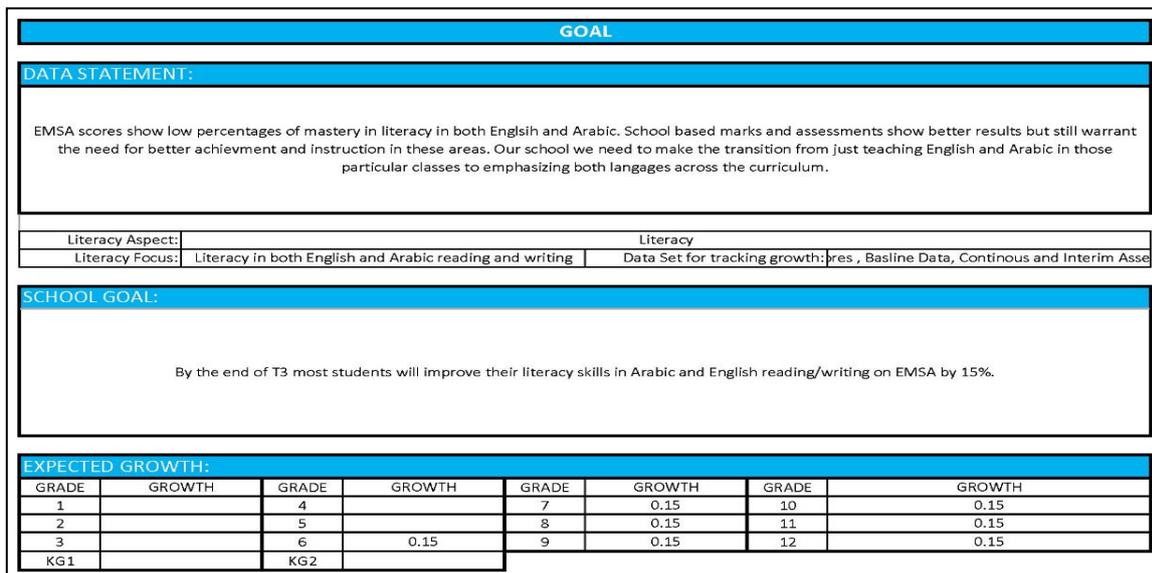


Fig 1. School improvement plan.
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Analysis

The analysis of the interviews and evidence from the school improvement plan (SIP), see figure 1, show the strategies, measures or plans conducted to bring about improvement in the

school culture and environment. In addition, Irtiqa'a report highlighted effective changes made by the school principal, see figure 2,

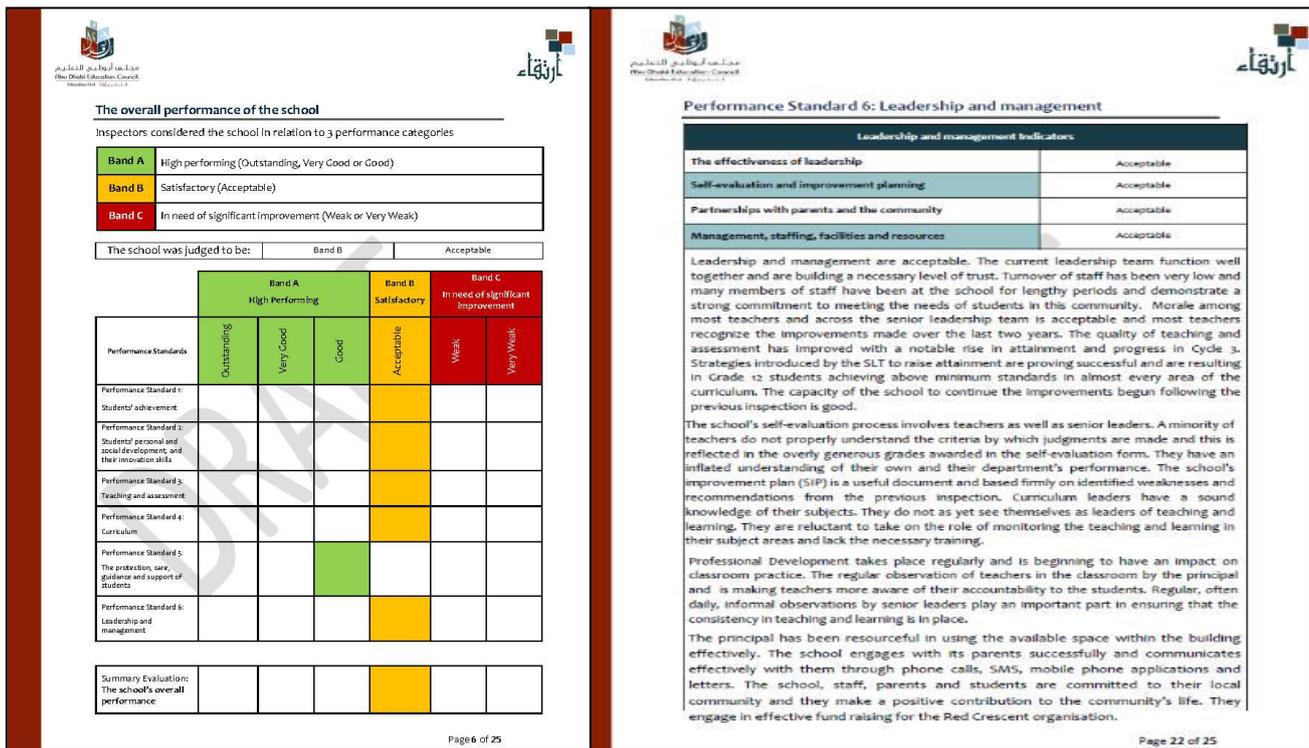


Fig 2. Irtiqa report

The goal defined by the principal and inculcated in the school culture shown in SIP, in addition to Irtiqa'a report show the commitment of the school leader. A professional leader is committed to the shared values and beliefs that guide the teaching learning process side by side with staff members. A professional leader is committed to the creation and the implementation of the school vision and mission as well as all staff members. Hord & Sommers (2008) argue that he has to start his work by initiating his vision that inspires his work and behavior to realize where to go and what to do. A professional leader is dominated with the idea of changing the learning community into an organized entity that supports powerful teaching and learning. Wald (2000) emphasizes that he also has to direct this change to enhance the performance of the working staff member and learners. In addition, a professional leader prepares workers and learners to deal with the changes, motivates them and provides them what they need to cope with these changes.

A professional leader facilitates and encourages upgrading the capacities of teachers and other workers and to enhance performance by encouraging all PLC members to participate in professional development programs and by motivating all working members and learners to do their best to attain success and achieve the desired goals. A professional leader uses surveys, interviews, observations and different research procedures to explore the needs and interests of workers and learners and to overcome field obstacles. Moreover, Hord & Sommers (2008) state that a professional leader has to encourage and facilitate collaborative work through building a sound climate that enables all the people in the PLC share knowledge, experiences and expertise. Copland (2006) argues that he should build strong relationships among working members based in mutual trust and constructive criticism that

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facilitates honest reflection. Wald (2000) recommends that he has to spare no effort to enhance and improve the school infrastructure to allow workers use their full capacities and enhance performance.

A professional leader establishes good communication with the local community to get proper feedback and support. Copland (2006) argues that a professional leader is to work hard to overcome cultural barriers that hinder learning. A professional leader is always collaborative. He leads, initiates change and creates another generation of leaders Shirley. A professional leader works as an open-minded coach to help, train and guide other workers and facilitates fruitful practices. Hord & Sommers (2008) spotted that a professional leader is characterized by being a courageous person who makes and takes the right decisions and works hard for their implementation. He confesses errors and works hard to adjust procedures.

A professional leader is patient and tolerant. He enjoys the ability to endure all hard circumstances especially in the case of conflict or resistance of change at school. He/she uses the policy of persuasion instead of obligation as the best way to manage such situations. He can also engage those people in every tiny piece of work. He implements a follow-up strategy to check the school progress, the implementation of decision, evaluate the school's activities and record urgent circumstances and events. A professional school leader also roots for the success of every working member at his school. Crossley & Corbyn (2007) argue that he has to count for improving the learning outcomes of learners as the main core of the educational process. Change was initiated at a school when a new open-minded leader was appointed to lead it and replace a conventional principal. The new leader is a very hard working

one. He studied the situation of the school well and decided to transform it into a professional learning community with the co-operation of all staff members. He put a strategic plan to create that change and an agenda to implement it. He held intensive meetings with all working staff members in all sections and departments to explain his philosophy and strategy and to get everyone involved in the process of change willingly. He addressed all the issues of interests during meetings. He spared no effort to make everyone believe in change and work hard to reach it. He held meetings and interviews and started discussions to create and implement a school vision. The first thing he focused on was to gather all working staff members to have one unified and shared vision. That step paved the way for the development of a proper atmosphere that allowed workers and teachers to work probably towards reaching the desired objectives through adopting a shared mission. That was the outstanding step in unifying all efforts in one direction to cause and foster the improvement of the school situation. The school vision is not kept as an isolated slogan. It is reinforced by the leader and teachers to create a PLC.

Recently, the new leader participates effectively in the creation of proper and reasonable school goals and objectives and shared beliefs. In addition, the leader discusses with teachers the best strategies, procedures, techniques and policies that can enable staff members achieve these goals and objectives. The school leader initiates the process of proper strategic planning depending upon the shared vision and the common goals and objectives of the school. This is a crucial step in order to improve the learning outcomes and to enhance the teaching learning process. He discusses these plans with every working member in all school departments to check their concordance with the school vision and goals. He initiates intensive applied and action researches to help him and other staff members plan well and overcome field obstacles in order to reach the desired learning outcomes

The school leader supports the creation of an effective professional development program for all staff members including him. He contacts and consults experts, professionals and supervisors from the educational zone and the Ministry of Education to set the suitable program and implement it successfully. He encourages teachers to enhance their teaching skills, enrich their content knowledge and visit each other at work to discuss their visits with each other concentrating on the advantages and disadvantages of their teaching procedures. Intensive training programs are held at school to help teachers enhance their work and use modern technology especially computers while teaching. Teachers attend workshops and conferences to develop their teaching skills. The leader focuses on improving the quality of teaching and concentrates on having more pupil-centered lessons. He makes everyone believe in the necessity of collaborative work to break isolation. He makes all teachers work as one team to get the work done properly. He doesn't ignore the exploration of individual talents and capacities.

The leader is reinforcing the co-ordination between the educational zone and the school. The principal and all staff members hold regular meetings with the supervisors and consultants to discuss the implementation of the plans of the Ministry of Education and the creation of the school's own plans, regulations and laws. Moreover, the school leader is initiating the process of improving the infrastructure of the

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school. Some aspects of this process were accomplished like enlarging small classrooms, replacing old chairs, tables and desks, maintaining A/Cs properly, enriching the school library by supplying it with more books, magazines, stories and periodicals and installing computers in classrooms to be used by teachers. The school leader is planning to have more computer and science labs at the school and to build a swimming pool, too. The school principal is reinforcing communication with the local community. Several meetings are held with other schools to enhance performance. Other meetings are held with parents to involve them in the educational process effectively.

The school leader does his best to encourage pupils' positive behavior and good performance. Prizes and certificates are delivered and awarded to pupils in special festivals as well as in the morning assembly to motivate them. In addition, the school principal is extremely emphasizing perfect social ties and relationships among staff members. These relationships encourage teachers and other working members to co-operate with each other and share knowledge in a way based on mutual respect and trust as the school leader plans. The school principal encourages shared authority and the participation in decision making by every working member. Every teacher should act as a leader. This shared authority facilitates harmonious work and overcoming field problems smoothly. He, successfully, creates the second generation of leaders. His policy encourages every working member to hold the responsibility in decision making and taking. Positive and constructive criticism is facilitated and encouraged by him. Furthermore, the school leader is encouraging and motivating the participation of different types of competitions. Classes compete with other classes. The school competes with other schools in all activities like culture, sports and traditions. He spares no effort to activate the school in all dimensions.

The school leader works as a coach of all practices. He guides, trains and gives the proper feedback concerning work accomplishment and further practices. He does not observe and criticize only without giving proper directions. He supports his position with clear judgments that are convincing. He takes into consideration others' point of view and exchanges ideas with them. He initiates strategic school projects which are considered as very essential in improving the learning outcomes at school. The school is implementing a school project that helps slow-learners overcome their academic problems and increase their achievement. In addition, the school is implementing another project to increase the abilities of gifted pupils to enrich their talents and skills. He personally supervises the process of work concerning the two projects and holds interviews with teachers, pupils, parents and supervisors to evaluate and assess the achievements properly. The educational zone and the Ministry of Education praise these projects and ask the school leader to help other school leaders implement such projects. The school leader enjoys a friendly personality. He is liked by all staff members and learners. Everyone feels free to contact him and discuss with him issues of interest. There are no barriers that hinder or prevent communicating him. The way he acts with other teachers, pupils and visitors make him a remarkable leader. He is greatly appreciated by other school leaders and considered as a good model of a professional leader. One of his best strategies is to strengthen ties with the educational magazines and journals. Reporters visit the school regularly to report the educational practices at it. As a result, the school receives feedback from

different local communities and educational establishments concerning its performance and achievements.

Now, the school leader evidently reinforces the use of modern technology. Most messages are e-mailed. Teachers' parents' communication can be conducted through the internet. Teachers' recommendations and homework are wired upon the request of the school leader. The school leader strengthens and reinforces self-confidence in all staff members. This is a great step that enables working members to explore their potential capacities well and use them adequately. In addition, this policy is necessary to persuade hesitant and reluctant staff members work hard and become involved actively in the teaching learning process. He is very courageous. He asks working members and other experts to evaluate his performance and the performance of every staff member regularly and discusses that evaluation with staff members, supervisors, experts and the ministry officials in order to enhance work and minimize faults. The school leader uses a wise strategy in managing conflict at school when it occurs. He has the ability to convince people to think of the positive aspects of the decisions before rejecting them. He holds meetings to discuss all matters with the opponents and change resistors to reach proper solutions for all problems. He is a practical person. He personally attends classes and checks all the school sections and departments to make sure that work is carried out perfectly and the school's condition is adequate. He is never trapped in his office. He wanders around observing, helping and receiving feedback about work. He is known as being a cooperative leader.

Yet, there are some obstacles that the school leader needs to tackle. First, he still needs to convince some reluctant teachers and administrators to update their computing and English language skills by having ICDL, IELTS and INTEL certificates as the Ministry of Education demands. Next, the school leader is working hard with the science and math teachers as well as the supervisors of these two subjects and parents to teach them in English instead of Arabic upon the request of Abu Dhabi Educational Council. In addition, the school leader is working very actively with the social worker, the vice principal and parents to put adequate solutions for pupils' absence and late morning arrival. Moreover, the school leader is doing his best to convince the officials of the educational zone to expand the school building to have more computer and science labs, a gymnasium and a theatre to facilitate sport and cultural activities.

Findings and Discussions

A variety of lessons can be obtained from this study. The first one is that a professional leader needs to have his own educational philosophy and vision in order to set up a proper strategic plan for leading school improvement. This vision is discussed in advance and during work with staff members. The second lesson is that the leader is the one who initiates change at school and sets up an agenda of a mission and implementation with full co-operation of all working staff members to join him in the process of change. Keeping the vision alive in the minds of the working staff members is another lesson we can learn from this study.

The responsibility of the leader is to make everyone work hard to implement the school vision to get the best learning outcomes and to create a PLC. Another lesson is that the open-minded leader makes sure that the relationships among workers

are excellent to facilitate good co-operation among them and to enhance performance. Providing the proper atmosphere at school is another lesson we can learn. Teachers can teach better when the school infrastructure is suitable and adequate. Learners participate actively when all the needed school facilities are available because they can learn in a relaxed atmosphere and good school environment.

Conclusion

This study was meant to track the effect of the best practices done by a school leader which contributed to the improvement of the school. The school leader great experience, about 30 years, was fruitful in bringing about the desired change in a short time. In fact, the strategies, plans and ideas demonstrated earlier proved to be successful in transforming the overall performance of the school from low to acceptable within two years. However, the development was not evident in the following year since the report gave the school the same grade C, acceptable. In fact, further investigations should be made to come to grips of the reasons behind the inability of the school to continue its improvement. It may be assumed that the shift of curriculum from ADEC to MOE was the reason behind interrupting the continuity of improvement of the school. Finally, it can be inferred that experience is effective in solving problems and achieving a moderate change or improvement. However, more leadership effective practices are needed to pursue the process of improvement especially within the context of increased ambitions and aspirations in the field of education.

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