Managing progress monitoring in United Arab Emirate schools

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Abstract
This paper examines managerial aspects of monitoring progress in United Arab Emirate state schools based on an empirical study carried out over five years in the Dubai Educational Zone. Such monitoring has been recognised as of importance to school effectiveness and improvement. It is of special concern in the UAE where drop-out, repetition of years, and underachievement are common, and there is in addition many “at risk” students. Work on this topic allows insight into wider aspects of school management locally. The project is part of a larger series of studies of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula education currently on-going at Exeter (Shaw et al., 1995)

Introduction
This paper is drawn from a five year project concerned with managerial and procedural aspects of monitoring progress of students in a group of elementary schools in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Western literature on school effectiveness mentions the importance of progress monitoring (e.g. Reynolds et al., 1996) and, as will appear, it is of special concern in the UAE where drop-out, repetition of years, and underachievement are common, and there are in addition many “at risk” students. Work on this topic allows insight into wider aspects of school management locally. The project is part of a larger series of studies of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula education currently on-going at Exeter (Shaw et al., 1995).

Studies of Gulf schools
Published material in English on most aspects of education in the Gulf region is largely official in origin or is descriptive. Sustained empirical work is much more rare, but increasing. The current low price of oil means that resources for supporting it are noticeably constrained. Although there is scope for detailed work on almost every aspect of how local schools are run, effort and resources are largely consumed by the immediate needs of the local schools and higher institutions to cope with student numbers. The exploitation of oil reserves produced enormous sums for investment in social services during the boom period, but affluence also produced a violent acceleration in cultural change. This is apparent in consumerism, the adoption of Western architecture, artifacts and general aspects of the infrastructure such as airports, docks and roads. The coastal cities are modern, in parts, ultra-modern. The social services, on the other hand, while not neglected, have not been so successfully implanted. This is in large part due to the acute shortage of skilled and experienced locals for administration (Jreisat, 1997), which is also true of education at all levels. States are forced to rely for staff very heavily on Arabic speaking expatriates from countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Yemen and Pakistan. In addition, the predominance of large families means that schools constantly struggle to keep up with births. Trying to maintain stability under many competing pressures is the obvious managerial priority. Quantity prevails over quality.

Unlike some other developing countries, in, say, Africa, the UAE population is almost wholly urbanised, often in tower blocks. But among these are areas of much poorer quality housing not so readily visible from the boulevards. A proportion of state school students come from families who live in these less desirable areas. Such families are usually quite traditional in outlook and among older women in particular, illiteracy is common. Modern education is not necessarily appreciated. All the ills that are to be found among city dwelling children, comfortably off as well as poor, in the rest of the world, also appear in the Gulf cities. Delinquency, smoking, substance addiction, drugs, vehicle-related offences, school absenteeism and the like, present teachers and school social workers with just as many problems as anywhere. Schools employ full-time social workers, with the rank of senior teacher, to handle the problems of the “at-risk” students.

Monitoring in UAE schools: the context
Shaw et al. (1995) and Badri (1998) have discussed a range of management and welfare issues in Dubai state schools whose achievements and problems are reasonably representative of schools in other Gulf States. The system is a 6-3-3 pattern of elementary,
intermediate and high schools organised by grades. Elementary schooling is now all-but-universal for both sexes among local citizens and retention in the intermediate schools is high. It falls drastically at the high schools which are not compulsory. Badri’s (1997) cohort study in detail, and many other references in passing, have drawn attention to the steady attrition of students, especially boys, through failure to pass the grade examinations, repetition of years, low achievement and drop out. Since the Gulf does not have many other resources than oil and the private sector of business is dominated by expatriates, usually from India and Pakistan, the labour market for locals is very seriously distorted. In the main they will only consider good, that is, supervisory or government jobs, and are in any case expensive to employ, hard to dismiss and less docile than contract staff from abroad. These expatriates can earn several times the salary that they could command at home and are easily controlled by threat of refusal to renew their short contracts. For many locals, on the other hand, employment is a form of welfare in the last resort. Since there are few or no direct taxes, state schooling is a gift from the rulers; recipients are not in a strong position to complain about standards.

Nevertheless, developing human capacity, creating human resources, must be a primary task for the Gulf States, however tempting it is in the short term to import skilled labour instead. In the developing world economy an area for competition is likely to be for favourable sites. The Gulf has ample flat coastal sites, well supplied with access by air, road and sea, and with, at present, cheap sources of energy in local oil and gas. By continuing to import labour from low wage countries, at all levels of skill and with knowledge of English and Arabic, as they do already, Gulf States could provide many products and services cheaply and profitably. An example of this is the very large and profitable Dubai Port Authority and the adjoining free zone industrial area. However, as this example shows, employment for locals would be restricted to a small group at the top of the hierarchy, since below that level, locals will not compete at the salaries offered even if they have the skills. In addition, there are all the problems associated with the employment of women in Islamic cultures. Girls outperform boys in education. They can, in effect, only be employed in a few areas such as teaching and nursing and where they are not brought into contact with men from outside the family. This is changing, though slowly.

It is an obvious strategy to seek indigenisation of the workforce and reduce the strain of expatriated resources on the treasury. This means providing incentives to locals to train and join the local workforce in the private sector, as happens more obviously in Saudi Arabia. After all, despite their image, these “oil-rich” countries, as the price of oil is now, are in reality middle income countries. To move in this direction, however, means building a high-quality and effective educational system, orientated to world market conditions, as has been the case in those East Asian economies which, until recently, have prospered. This has not been lost on the rulers. In the UAE their response has been to invest heavily in higher education, notably in the huge campus at Sharjah which houses three universities and two higher colleges of technology, and there are at least seven other higher education institutions, and many smaller and specialised private colleges offering degree level courses. But the flow of well prepared students from the state sector of schooling is absolutely crucial to filling this great supply of places with locals. Badri’s (1997) study having cleared the ground, more specifically focussed empirical work can now be undertaken. This study of pupil progress monitoring and its contribution to school effectiveness is one example. Others might be classroom management, assessment, or staff development.

Management and monitoring: the wider issues

Over the last decade a literature on school improvement has developed alongside the existing body of work on school effectiveness. As Reynolds et al. (1996) have argued throughout their book, school effectiveness research has largely been an issue of measurement. It tends to centre around students’ cognitive achievements in tests and examinations and normally uses positivistic approaches to data collection, counting scores and pass rates. School improvement research, on the other hand, is more a matter of studying changes in school processes, often by case studies and more qualitative methodologies. So far, the regulations and requirements of the Ministry of Education in the Emirates (and no doubt elsewhere in the Gulf) for information returns from schools suggest that the authorities are still firmly rooted in a school effectiveness outlook. Over the period of this research (1993 to date) more sophisticated approaches prepared to countenance change and complexity and

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... makes sense to bring the people back in, so that in a situation of some complexity, which is not public, the various parties concerned can be offered some more systematic insights into how each makes sense of the situation, or at any rate claims to do so. Qualitative methods aim not at statistical or experimental demonstration, but at enabling a concerned and experienced insider, with a prepared mind (hopefully open, but through study of the literature with clear ideas of what to look for – not just “trawling around”) to learn as much as possible in a structured way about one aspect of social reality. “Thick description”, judgements, illuminations, and even recommendations can be made with the aid of which management decisions can be explained, justified and even improved. This is all the more important where procedures and understandings that have been rather fully developed in one context (the West) are in the process of being imitated, adopted and acclimatised to different conditions in another (modernising and developing societies such as the Middle East). Development cannot be bought-in no matter how much foreign exchange is available. It has to be learned, partly as a form of technology transfer. In studying this complex process, the deepest concern is with system performance at all levels as it, in this case the state schools system in the UAE, approaches maturity but still experiences important pressures to adapt its purposes. The latest of these is insertion into the world capitalist system and the global market. Much of the learning at early stages is “blind”, uncritical. The empathy and awareness fostered by qualitative studies, especially where they overlap with professional experience, may help to combat this, to make it more self-aware.

In sum, increasing the effectiveness of Gulf schooling by developing awareness of the working of its real processes, their maintenance and improvement by skilled management, is a crucial preliminary to building a culture of improvement. In the end this has to be done by locals. At present, from the outside, what is happening in the Dubai zone, administratively, looks like crisis management – reactive moves to keep the total set-up in some sort of stability. Qualitative methods are still unusual in empirical work on the Gulf. They involve observation, participation, and especially interviewing stakeholders in the processes, collating accounts of a common situation from different viewing points about perceptions, procedures, activities, decisions and outcomes. The accounts have to be treated as texts to be interpreted by an experienced insider with serious theoretical preparation. The method is thus “unashamedly subjective”, but careful and...
systematic. An important test is whether the informed reader finds the final product intuitively convincing. It cannot be tested; only partially overlapping replications can build up a more general theory. In management writing, as in social science generally, continuous redescriptions of fairly familiar aspects of social reality and human experience allow of up-dating and deepening interpretations in the professional field. Its results are directed to a critical audience, which includes researchers who have been practitioners, as well as active managers and policy-makers in the system.

The study

Eight elementary schools and heads were involved including 30 teachers, 12 social workers, 30 pupils, and key respondents in the administration all from the Dubai educational zone (= district or division) where the first author, a citizen, had been employed for over a decade as a social worker.

Teachers readily mentioned the predictable range of sources of data for monitoring progress – testing, marking, examinations, questioning, records and so on. There was, however, a good deal of variation in emphases, with teachers of Arabic (basic linguistic skills) not surprisingly emerging as the most active in their efforts to establish base-lines of knowledge levels and ability. Grasp of the language of instruction is obviously basic to future learning. Much English is spoken in some families. Many children spend a lot of time in the company of foreign maids who do not speak much accurate Arabic. A good linguistic foundation cannot always be counted on. This is even more important given the role of Arabic in the pervasive religious culture of Islam and also its important role as the basis of Arab identity. It is clear that a schoolwide, planned and conscious policy for monitoring progress is lacking. Monitoring is seen as a routine activity – not to say chore – a matter of filling up the columns on the record sheets, rather than a professional concern that might influence the teaching in more subtle ways than simply selecting failing students for extra classes in school or privately at home. It quickly became apparent that little systematic use was made of the data collected. The ministry requires collection and recording of data on pupil progress. The sheets of results are readily provided for visitors as proof that monitoring is being carried out. The research showed that the inspectorate regard their availability as a high priority, if not, indeed, after examination results, as the priority. It is one of the simplest forms of control and accountability, one of the key points at which the administrative/bureaucratic and the institutional level systems intersect. But the quality of the data – hand-written lists of scores in cognitive achievement – is open to serious question. It is clearly in the interest of contract staff to put the best face on the evidence of students’ achievement, especially as this is so salient a concern of the ministry.

One headteacher revealingly said that the inspectors came to “negotiate” the students’ achievement scores so that they should be in line with the ministry expectations. Given the pressures, and as is often said of teacher-based assessment elsewhere, its objectivity is somewhat compromised. In American terminology, “teacher-assisted cheating” is not unknown nor confined to developing countries. In any case, few would deny that experienced teachers would not wish to reduce the motivation and morale of a class they were to meet throughout the year by setting a stiff test at an early stage, leading to markedly negative feedback to the students and a consequently hostile class.

Three consequences stand out. First, the only data regarded as of serious significance by the ministry are those relating to cognitive achievement, that is, simple, raw scores in tests and examinations. As in many developing countries, this entirely dominates monitoring and assessment procedures and shapes the expectations of all parties. Other useful information is not regarded as so important; teachers attention is diverted from it. It may in some cases be recorded, notably by social workers, but it is rarely regarded as worthy of official notice. Second, this emphasis on an explicitly assessment-led approach means that teaching to the test (where much of the testing is wholly in the hands of the individual teacher) is regarded as normal and natural from the earliest stage. The textbook is the syllabus. Classes are large. Resources are few. There are many pressures. Inevitably teachers are constrained towards a distinctly restricted view of the curriculum and their teaching approach. This is rarely other than directly transmissive and authoritarian, as much research by Middle Eastern writers (e.g. Tibi, 1998, 1990; Anabtawi, 1993) shows, right up to post-graduate level. A final, third, aspect of the institutional culture of the schools is that the teachers tend to be “privatised” in their mode of commitment. They look out for their own advantage, occasionally that of their own ethnic group among the contract staff, and see little to be gained by cooperation. Hence data are not shared, even with social
workers. School wide policies are at a grave disadvantage. School management will face a rather heroic task in wreaking changes on this culture.

Head teachers are similarly constrained in their roles. They all referred to the ministry as the source of instructions and pictured themselves as followers of such instructions. As managers and leaders their role is thus shrivelled and ritualised, at any rate by Western standards. In an atmosphere of mistrust, lack of horizontal cooperation and in the face of difficulties in coordination when seeking to implement policy, head-teachers can offer little in the way of staff development opportunities. One said “I have 40 teachers and seven nationalities. Many of them want to be satisfied at the expense of the others”. Much time and energy is thus spent by heads in arbitrating during squabbles about the allocation of preferred students and other resources, so that some respondents used the phrase “a culture of conflict”. No doubt the intensity of this varies among schools, but it is not difficult to see the ways in which the structures predispose to less-than-harmonious relationships.

“At the end of the year” said a teacher “my report (i.e. appraisal for renewal of contract) depends on the number of students passed or succeeded”. Students, especially repeaters who are very weak in basics, are distributed at times very unequally among the classes. According to some teachers this depends on individual relationships with the headteacher. Hence, for the teachers very real issues are at stake, but they are very often less to do with the students’ effective learning than with the teachers’ private concern for the renewal of their contract. Heads are willy-nilly put into a position where they issue instructions rather than listening, consulting with staff and seeking school-wide policies based on degrees of consent.

Only a few hours a year are set aside for meetings, which rarely last longer than 30 minutes. They appear to be dominated by complaints and instructions. Team building and coordination of effort are rare or absent. Time is a scarce resource, and the generally reported view is that exchange of information about students, if it occurs, often takes place at brief, chance meetings in the corridors among the staff. Anything that might delay the progress of a class through the curriculum units is counted against teachers and may influence the chance of renewing their contract. Hence individualisation of the learning, attempts to make the material more meaningful and capable of application outside the classroom and examinations, tend to be disregarded and a class lock-step prevails.

Managing changes successfully in these circumstances will present many difficulties. Most of the levers of power are in the control of the ministry, rather than the headteachers. In these conditions it seems wisest to change a number of small things and hope that the movement gradually builds up to a visible change in the culture of the institutions, rather than seek a big imposed change from the centre. Fortunately, this strategy is in line with a good deal of the thinking in the West, which underpins this article.

While oil prices remain low there will be few resources to spare for large central initiatives, nor is it apparent that the system as a whole is ready for them. Rather the general direction lies in efforts to find ways of moving on from the predominantly school effectiveness orientated ways of thinking at all levels (but retaining the valuable central core values of that movement) towards a more school improvement orientated culture within the institutions, if possible with ministry backing.

At the heart of the problem lies the teaching force. A greater local element would be a step forward. The Saudi-Arabian experience has shown that this can be achieved. As things are, there is little hope of much change in this direction in boys’ schools. The Gulf war led to the loss of many Jordanian teachers, many very experienced and by general agreement some of the best trained in the region. They were replaced by Egyptians, often younger and less experienced. They are even more likely to be concerned about the renewal of their contracts. They do not always settle down easily in the Gulf, and are likely to be tempted by some of the less desirable practices of the expatriates such as supplementing earnings by home tutoring after hours. One of the chief characteristics of the school improvement writing has been its attention to the attitudes, morale, and beliefs of the teachers, their commitment and not just their skills and competencies. This is of cardinal importance in the Gulf. It draws attention to the need for support for the teaching staff as well as appraising and supervising them.

In the Dubai zone centralisation has increased in recent years. The system has expanded and will continue to grow, but there have not been corresponding increases in intermediate staff, the supervisors who work with the schools and are soon to be redesignated as “coaches”. They provide the links between the schools and the ministry and oversee administration as well as teaching. More than 90 per cent are non-nationals. They would be critical for school improvement since they are permanent and receive
most of what significant training is available. Although educational expenditure is 14.6 per cent of all government expenditure, it is only 1.6 per cent of Emirates gross domestic product. It is overwhelmingly spent on staffing costs; resources and equipment have been underprovided for a long time. This is very evident in the lack of computers in schools. Perhaps most serious is that there appears to be no coordinated, state-wide policy for schooling, so that the rigidly centralised decision-making is very short term and reactive. Budgeting is historic rather than needs related. There is little sign at present that any significant centrally directed reforms are intended despite signs of dissatisfaction among parents and a flight to the private sector by those who can afford the fees.

**Conclusions**

Right at the heart of issues facing management both at the school and at ministry level is human resources development. When the system was set up, around 30 years ago, it was designed for a very simple, and at that time doubtless necessary, form of school effectiveness. It used very crude, raw data about students’ achievements as the central performance indicator, with the appraisal of contract staff and headteachers very much in mind. This approach came to dominate monitoring student progress so that, along with other factors in the culture and organisation of schools, its use as supportive feedback and for more sophisticated diagnosis of weaknesses, as well as to be an element in guiding school-wide activities and policies, was seriously neglected. The activity consumed, both school staffs and the ministry agree, disproportionate amounts of time and effort that ought to have been directed to teaching. Beyond its bureaucratic purposes, it served as a control mechanism which would keep teachers, school leadership and administrators on their toes, concerned about their scores, promotion prospects, renewal of contracts and general reputation with the ministry. It appears to have been rarely used to improve learning and teaching, certainly not in planned and systematic ways. On the contrary, along with other features of the teaching and organisation, it contributed to perpetuating acceptance of a significant amount of grade repetition and drop out among students. It did little to help, though it publicly identified various categories of “at-risk” students. All the signs are that it reduced morale, misdirected effort, gave rise to stress tensions and discontent throughout those involved. Like policy making and budgeting, monitoring looks like a rather primitive survival from an earlier simpler stage of the system of public education in the UAE. Training and sensitising teachers for a more thoughtful form of monitoring might well be one of the best and least controversial ways of beginning the move to a more school-improvement orientation locally, especially if the procedures were simplified and computerised.

Along with other aspects of the infrastructure of the state, public education in the UAE has matured as a structure, though still under much pressure, and rather unevenly. The world in which the UAE came into being has changed. The economy has grown, flourished, diversified, and been inserted into the global economy. Many commentators (Reich, 1993; Krugman, 1994; Avis, 1996 among many others) have emphasised the need to develop a high quality educational system in modernising countries; the UAE is capital rich enough, still, to build one. It would continue the tasks of creating among the population commitment to the purposes and tasks of the modern state. In any such undertaking the resolve to have careful and sophisticated measurement of outcomes, good public appraisal of educational institutions, is beyond doubt. This is a lasting achievement of the school effectiveness movement. Given the characteristics of the UAE public educational system, monitoring for effectiveness remains a priority, though there is a need for modernisation of procedures. But in the conditions of today, more is needed than a rather static system, which harbours conflict and misuses energy.

Since there is little likelihood of major reforms from the central authorities, the obvious alternative is to work to bring about modifications in the culture of schools within existing constraints. One of the central themes of school improvement writing has been change. UAE schools could well cultivate a more open attitude to change, recognising what is happening in the local economy and the diversification of employment that is taking place in the coastal conurbations. The emphasis needs to be on improving school processes, of which monitoring pupil progress is one. Some modest costs for computerisation would certainly be incurred, but the real change has to come about in attitudes and the school culture. The tendency in recent years to reduce the discretion of school leadership and transfer initiative to the ministry does not help to bring this about.

One final note is worth making. In all this, Western writing, Western research, Western
teaching approaches are overtly or tacitly in play. All modernising countries borrow, adopt and domesticate procedures and to some extent even purposes from overseas. These are, even in schooling and educational management, a special form of technology transfer. If they are introduced piecemeal, as is usually the case, it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that they generally call not just for changes in the skill-mix of those involved, but also changes in organisation and in management techniques, which affect commitment, perceptions, motivations, incentives, and support for the people involved. That these will be attended to cannot be taken for granted in the light of the above account of the UAE system. Without such concerns the “technologies” adopted or imitated are likely to be distorted, imperfectly understood, and operated not particularly conscientiously. Management both at the school and the ministry level must expect to have to change itself if changes are to stick in the general organisation of schools and the commitments (not merely the skills) of teachers so that school improvement may take root. Such transfer involves much more than learning how to operate the techniques adopted. For at least some involved the training needs to be such as to lead to development and improvements of the techniques in the local context. This means that training of selected, permanent personnel, in research, project management, design and realisation skills including application of information technology, distance learning methods, resource allocation, cooperation among schools, assessment methods and staff support skills, will be required. Not simply welfare but longer term economic success may depend on it.

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