



Litz, D. R. A., & Blaik, R. (2023). Incongruencies and detrimental effects of neoliberal education reform in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). *International Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 23(1), 236–259. <https://doi.org/10.29173/ijll39/>

## **Incongruencies and Detrimental Effects of Neoliberal Education Reform in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)**

*David Litz and Rida Blaik*

### **Abstract**

Charged with postcolonial educational planning and development activities over the last 50-70 years, the context and content of educational planning and policymaking have evolved considerably in most Arab countries. The methodologies of planning and policymaking have also changed to match changing milieus and national priorities. Despite some accomplishments, many have amassed a record of educational policy and reform undertakings that have been less successful. Moreover, many Arab countries have been shown to continually lag behind other regions with similar levels of development, such as Latin America and South Asia. However, a few regional countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have taken a leading role in educational change initiatives in the implementation of globalized neoliberal reforms. More precisely, they have promoted bilingual (English/Arabic) and imported curricula, the modernization of school systems, privatization, standardization, accountability, school choice, and assessment reform. This study examined the implementation of recent UAE neoliberal reforms utilizing a framework derived from postmodern (neo)institutional analysis. This study argues that many policy undertakings have included contradictions and harmful impacts impeding the achievement of intended goals. Furthermore, educational policymaking has been caught between global and centralized national prescriptions for education and its role in society and unique contextual demands, which have created administrative challenges, dissatisfaction, and public resentment.

**Keywords:** educational policy, educational reforms, institutionalism, neoliberalism, United Arab Emirates, UAE

## Introduction

Since gaining statehood in 1971, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has invested considerable portions of its GDP to neoliberal education reforms (Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2016, 2019; Samier, 2018). However, progress in meeting educational goals and achievements compared to other countries with similar investments continues to lag (Al Ahababi, 2019). The promises of neoliberal education reform have fallen far short of both expectations and promises. This chapter will utilize an extensive review of the current literature to examine and critique recent neoliberal education reform initiatives in the UAE, utilizing a framework derived from neo-institutionalism and postcolonial analysis. The UAE has been praised for its educational change initiatives and implementation of globalized neoliberal reforms that promote bilingual (English/Arabic) and imported curricula, the modernization of school systems, privatization, standardization, accountability, school choice, and assessment reform. However, this chapter argues that many policy undertakings have also included contradictions, inconsistencies, and inequitable elements impeding the achievement of intended goals. Furthermore, educational policymaking has been caught between global and centralized national prescriptions for education and its role in society in addition to unique contextual demands and constraints, resulting in administrative challenges, dissatisfaction, and ineffectiveness.

This chapter will briefly explain the theoretical framework used to analyze the literature and draw conclusions, followed by an overview of the relevant history of neoliberal educational reform in developing countries more broadly, and in the Middle East and the UAE specifically, to understand these policies' promises and intentions. It will then move on to four specific areas: the extension of colonial and postcolonial frameworks that undermine Emiratis' attempts to form a cohesive national identity, the inequities in access to education in the UAE that hinders marginalized communities from acquiring an equal education, the disempowerment of teachers that impedes progress in education, and the dissatisfaction expressed by those working in its education system and studying in the UAE. Finally, this chapter will present the analysis and proposed reforms before reaching a conclusion and suggesting future research areas. This chapter concludes that neoliberal education reforms have been ineffective in reaching their stated goals in the UAE. Considering the resulting harms, several modifications must be made to achieve those goals in the future.

## Theoretical Framework

This chapter is framed within the theories of neo-institutionalism and postcolonialism. Neo-institutionalism relies on both old and new approaches to understand how institutions influence behavior and how behavior influences institutions (Wu, 2009). The theory emerged in the 1980s following traditional theories of institutionalism, which focused on explaining social phenomena as influenced by institutions. For example, religion inspired theories of behaviorism, which focused on explaining human behavior resulting from human conditioning (Ishiyama, 2020). Neo-institutionalism's founders, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen sought to understand institutional influence and behavior in new ways (Wu, 2009). Their work focused on how norms, cultures, rules, and structures constrain choices and actions made by individuals involved in political institutions (Ishiyama, 2020). Farrell (2018) explains it as “an understanding of institutions as congregations of beliefs... [both as] a theory of institutional change and a theory of institutional effects” (p. 24). Theories of neo-institutionalism are often grounded in rational choice theory, a sociological approach that focuses particularly on the norms and identities embedded within institutions to account for the relationships between institutions and behavior (Schechter, 2016). In this study, cultural belief systems are assumed to influence choices made in government and education institutions, with actors within the institutions making choices influenced by culture and context; in this analysis, the culture both within and outside of the geographical area of the Middle East and the UAE specifically are assumed to influence the institutions.

Postcolonial theory aims to decolonize traditional cultural knowledge to critically analyze assumptions about the dominant culture and those deemed “Other.” The theory lays bare the limitations of “universal” notions of culture and history that incorporate dominant experiences and perceptions to form assumptions about people, traditions, beliefs, languages, and functions in postcolonial states and encourage assimilation by those who exist outside of the dominant culture (Arar et al., 2020; Blaik Hourani, 2010; Sperrazza, 2012). Sperrazza (2012) notes further that “postcolonial theory is concerned with questions of agency and how marginalized subjects are capable of resisting dominant discourses” (pp. 299-300). Agency, within that framework, is inherently connected to the ability of students placed in marginalized positions to challenge practices in education that further marginalize them and place them outside the dominant culture and discourse (Arar, 2020; Blaik Hourani, 2010; Sperrazza, 2012).

## **UAE Reform Initiatives**

Neoliberal reforms in education, including policies aimed at privatization, standardization, accountability, school choice, and assessment reform, have been conducted worldwide. In some Middle Eastern countries, an influx of wealth owing to oil discoveries occurred when neoliberal educational reform was on the horizon as the next phase in the politicization of education (Brathwaite, 2017). These policies were promoted to raise standards and improve the quality of education for all groups but have often fallen short of those goals and exacerbated existing problems (Brathwaite, 2017). Today, educational systems in the Middle East are a result of the colonial and postcolonial eras of the 1940s to the 1960s, which have continued to develop within the agendas of national liberation movements that eventually turned into neoliberal structures, causing the development of new social, economic, and educational identities and realities (Blaik Hourani, 2010; Nicholls, 2010). The objectives behind neoliberal education reform are similar to those guiding economic and social welfare reforms. They include an expansion of the free market, reducing government responsibility for the social needs of the people they govern, and a reinforcement of competitive social mobility structures, lowered expectations for paths toward social mobility, and the “‘disciplining’ of culture and the body,” which popularizes a form of “social Darwinist thinking” (Apple, 2001, p. 410). These reforms have reinforced social inequalities in their efforts to reduce them, with an inconsistency in goals and outcomes that often render the reforms ineffective or incongruent to its goals.

Those who support neoliberal reforms argue that the deliverance of public goods and services is most effective in an arena in which providers compete for customers in a free market as they do in the private sector, turning the public into consumers and public health services into businesses (Brathwaite, 2017). In this way, markets are “made legitimate” by “a depoliticising strategy to be natural and neutral, and governed by effort and merit” (Apple, 2001, p. 413). The success of these reforms relies on “the efficiency of markets, rationality and consumer choice, the state and central planning” (Olssen, 1996, p. 337). Arguments against reforms based on other ideologies are characterized by proponents of neoliberal reforms as being opposed to such values as effort and merit. However, the results of neoliberal education reform can already be seen in many different countries. Privatization, or the transferring of public services such as education and healthcare to private control and ownership, has led to segregating education in many countries, including the United States (Feagin & Hohle, 2017). Similar effects can be observed in even more

extreme forms in developing countries (Mullen et al., 2012). Accountability and standardization goals provide incentives for educational institutions whose students fare well on standardized testing and other measures but leave struggling schools in less economically healthy areas without the hope of competing for those funds (Feagin & Hohle, 2017). Markets are “subject to political interference and the weight of bureaucratic procedures” (Apple, 2001, p. 413), and political leaders in several countries with low levels of democratic participation available often fail to introduce equitable policies sustained on institutional need rather than on personal gain (Oplatka & Arar, 2016). As a result of these realities, the free markets’ rewards for effort and merit, which are intended to produce neutral, yet positive, results” are still vulnerable to influence and interference, which contradicts the notion that the market is a neutral arbiter of quality based on effort and merit.

Under these reforms, schools are also required to increase testing by a predetermined number under threats of penalty or promises of reward based on student performance to compete for students. Moreover, the results of these tests are analyzed and high-performing schools are identified, enticing parents to choose those schools as the best institutions for educating their children (Brathwaite, 2017). Consequently, parents make the best choices in schools for their children instead of sending them to government (i.e., public) schools, which is a central idea within the neoliberal policy reforms in education (Brathwaite, 2017). Underperforming schools lose funding, and the expectation is that those schools will lose sufficient student body to shut down, eliminating schools of lesser accomplishments and leaving those with high-performance levels as the sole rational choice for parents (Feagin & Hohle, 2017). The selling point behind this is that students living in poor or marginalized neighborhoods and those in segregated schools are not doomed to attending underperforming schools in their own district, eliminating the inequalities in education seen today. However, these reforms are not focused on reducing inequality; instead neoliberalism “reassumes that when all schools are improved and all families have school choice, they will have a better system of schools to choose from and that they will choose the school that best suits their needs” (Brathwaite, 2017, p. 2). However, the reforms typically worsen conditions and intensify the inequality that initially created those underperforming schools. These inequalities are sometimes drastic in some areas, making the harms of neoliberal education policies much more consequential to the poorest communities (Brathwaite, 2017). In the UAE, such communities can

be found beyond the wealth and opulence of Dubai and Abu Dhabi and are typically comprised of less politically powerful tribes and Bedouin (former nomadic people) and Bedoon<sup>1</sup> populations.

In addition, neoliberalism constrains society by shaping the population into what the state deems valuable: a financially productive group of individuals who perform and contribute economically in a manner expected by those in power. Far from the promises of independence and freedom from government control under neoliberal policies, the result of these policies is the opposite. Olssen's (1996) criticism of neoliberalism describes the unintended consequences of these reforms.

In classical liberalism, the individual is characterised as having an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom. In neoliberalism, the state seeks to create an individual who is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur...In the shift from classical liberalism to neoliberalism, then, there is a further element added, for such a shift involves a change in subject position from 'homo economicus,' who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to 'manipulatable man,' who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be 'perpetually responsive.' It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with by the new ideals of 'neoliberalism,' but that in an age of universal welfare, the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, 'performance appraisal' and of forms of control generally. In this model, the state has taken it upon itself to keep us all up to the mark (p. 337).

Thus, the "choices" and "freedoms" promised by those supporting neoliberal reforms are undermined by these policies, leaving citizens of any state implementing neoliberal reforms in such traditionally public services as education and healthcare with fewer choices and tied financially to the definition of success created by the state. The contradictions within this theory make its "demise" more likely than not (Olssen, 1996, p. 337).

---

<sup>1</sup> Traditionally stateless people that lack the same rights as UAE citizens and access to many of the UAE's basic governmental services.

## **UAE Efforts Toward Educational Improvement: History and Political Challenges**

In the Middle East, constant political upheaval has impacted several different countries through occupation, sectarian regimes, “militarized” public systems, internal strife and civil wars, and corruption (Sleiman, 2021). Moreover, they reflect a range of foreign interests from trade and oil resources to so-called ‘civilizing programs,’ although economic, political, military, and cultural ties to the former imperial powers still exist or have been transferred to the United States. Meanwhile, public educational systems often struggle with slow development and deficits in funding, management, and training (Sleiman, 2021). Owing to the discovery of oil in the UAE in the 1950s and the 1960s, rapid development has taken place. Today, Samier (2018) categorizes the UAE as “[one of] those countries undergoing rapid modernization and multiculturalism that are relatively stable, in which nation-building is well under way” (p. 18). Following a Western model, government leaders in the UAE have adopted a platform of neoliberalism in social services, including adopting neoliberal reform policies in public education (Mullen, Samier, Brindley, English, & Carr, 2012). In recent years, national spending on education in the Middle East has been highest in the UAE, at 27% of the total annual spending (Samier, 2018). Not only does higher education in the UAE has a significant level of government support, but evidence of that support is also “tangible” (Chapman et al., 2014, p. 132). The number of post-secondary schools has expanded, a significant number of universities have been created, and the number of students participating in all levels of education in the country has increased. Moreover, the number of educational staff and teachers working in classrooms and other areas of education administration has grown (Chapman et al., 2014, p. 132). In addition, leaders in the government and the field of education have indicated their goals of further increasing the quality of education, specifically intending to improve instruction quality and research opportunities in higher education institutions (Chapman et al., 2014, p. 130).

With increased opportunities for education expansion, goals have been set at high levels. In Abu Dhabi, for example, schools are “striving to attain the ambitious targets of being among the 20 highest performing countries in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)” (Al Ahababi, 2019, p. 114). They also intend to ensure that 90% of all students in the UAE complete their secondary education and that 90% of grade nine students “develop high skills in the Arabic language in the UAE National Assessment Programme (NAP) assessment” (Al Ahababi, 2019, p. 114). Equal importance

is placed on these goals to ensure that all public schools have high-performing leadership, that 95% of primary-school-age children receive an education, and that most schools can retain quality teaching staff (Al Ahbabi, 2019).

Moreover, new bilingual (English/Arabic) curriculum models have been introduced to emphasize inquiry-based methods of instruction and integrate technology within the classroom and in teaching-learning practices (Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2016, 2019). In addition, the principles for overseeing the new transformative and innovative role of schools have been embedded in new professional performance standards for teachers and school leaders (Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2016, 2019). According to Litz and Blaik Hourani (2016, 2019), performance standards have been designed to reshape the roles of teachers and school leaders as reflective practitioners and to guide teachers and school leaders within the context of immense educational upheaval and train them to strengthen collaborative organizational capacities. Additionally, they are perceived as fundamental to implementing school improvement initiatives and educational changes in line with governmental planning priorities (Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2016, 2019). In short, the rapid modernization of the UAE offers new opportunities for Emirati citizens that can only be achieved through effective education expansion.

Nevertheless, despite these investments and the planning for high achievement goals, UAE universities rank lower than those of other nations who invest similarly in the growth of education, never reaching the top three hundred in the world (Chapman et al., 2014). Reports have consistently shown that the “overall quality of education [in the UAE] is poor and student learning is disappointing, both by national and international standards” (Sleiman, 2021, p. 31). The neoliberal reforms popularized in Western countries in the 1960s have failed to achieve the goals set by government leaders and stakeholders in education programs.

### **Colonization and Current Educational Reforms**

Due to increased global migration, people living in the UAE have been exposed to several different languages, beliefs, and cultural practices (Sperrazza, 2012). Approximately 10% of the total population of the UAE are Emirati, whereas the rest are immigrants (Sperrazza, 2012). As a result of this, and the recency of the country officially declared a state just fifty years ago, the nation of the UAE is struggling to form a cultural identity. According to scholars, the fast-changing transformation of the UAE from a developing country to one potentially competing financially and



technologically in the global arena has deeply affected students' ability, particularly to define their cultural identity (Sperrazza, 2012). Cultural identity is defined by Sperrazza (2012) as "a continuously fluid concept that depends on the individual's linguistic connection to a particular language or languages, which also includes the personal experiences involved with those languages" (p. 298). Requirements in educational institutions to master both Arabic and English are meant to help students compete globally. Still, the Arabic language has been less prioritized and become marginalized (Blaik et al., 2022).

Colonization shaped by its postcolonial aftermath is "not only the imposition of political and military power, but also the cultural shaping of ideas and imagination," which means that "globalization through education carries with it a recolonizing effect" (Samier, 2018, p. 177). In the Middle East, English is now by definition the "native language," as it is the "main school language" of a rapidly expanding predominantly Muslim population (Sperrazza, 2012, p. 298). Neoliberal education reforms have promised to promote bilingual education practices. However, Sperrazza (2012) notes that these policies "have supported colonial norms that prioritize English and discard Arabic as a lesser language of importance, complicating the navigation of cultural identities in the modern UAE classroom" (p. 299). According to Sperrazza (2012), our perception of other cultures is "only what we have been conditioned to see by our own culture" (p. 298). Emiratis are undergoing systemic assimilation that enhances the perception of Western culture, including Western notions about the purpose of education, as the ideal culture, and their own culture as peripheral.

Strong traditional values and norms may also account for barriers to the growth of education in much of the Middle East (Oplatka & Arar, 2016). The terms are all more nuanced than any perception of a dichotomy can explain. However, there is a sense in rapidly developing countries in the Middle East of modern versus traditional cultures. This includes the concepts of the Eastern culture of collectivism as the opposite side of Western individualism, cultural notions of the superiority of ascribed versus achieved status, Eastern autocracy versus Western democracy, and those who promote maintenance within the culture as opposed to those who promote the importance of change and innovation (Oplatka & Arar, 2016). Religious and cultural beliefs also complicate the shift toward Western philosophies of education, creating the perception of a dichotomy between stagnation and progress. More precisely, they are reflected in the structure and priorities in educational institutions; traditional societies and cultural practices are perceived as

being less than the new, more Western ideologies. The conflict between the two sets of cultural perspectives creates a quandary for those wishing to preserve their own cultural identities (Blaik et al., 2022; Oplatka & Arar, 2016; Said, 1993).

We are told by neoliberals that only by turning our schools, teachers, and children over to the competitive market will we find a solution. We are told by neo-conservatives that the only way out is to return to ‘real knowledge.’ Popular knowledge, knowledge that is connected to and organised around the lives of the most disadvantaged members of our communities, is not legitimate (Apple, 2001, p. 409)

This divide can be seen in other countries in the region and other areas of the world, and what has been proven is that “decades of neoliberal economy and political instability lead to fragmented societies that are not only impoverished but politically alienated with no form of democratic participation and no hope in reform...” (Sleiman, 2021, p. 32). Governments implement neoliberal reforms to tighten control over the education system, including its curriculum, teaching, and students. They impose the idea that only through “making education more disciplined and competitive as they are certain it was in the past,” can schools become effective institutions for meeting goals (Apple, 2001, p. 412).

These rapid expansions in advancement by developing nations suddenly propelled toward opportunities for modernization are often more likely to “preserve and not eradicate” differences between Western, industrialized countries and developing countries. They are “characterized, largely, by lower per capita income, a higher poverty rate, lower life expectancy, less access to immigration, and a peripheral position in the global economy” (Oplatka & Arar, 2016, p. 353). Moreover, Mullen et al. (2013), emphasize neoliberalism “as affecting identity and culture in an extreme form, resulting in ‘ethnocide’” (p. 215). Neoliberal reforms that promise “advancements” in education in the UAE are uniquely constrained by cultural estrangement and the country’s history, culture, and beliefs, struggling to escape eradication in a nation striving to define its cultural identity while preserving its past (Blaik et al., 2022). Further complicating the context of neoliberal educational reforms in the UAE are large-scale waves of migration from Western countries for employment opportunities, Eastern European migration due to perceived life improvements, and Arab expatriates who have either moved for employment or as expatriates with

residency visas. This has produced a massive cross-cultural complexity (and plurality) that has led to polarization, conflicts, and tensions over ideas and practices about how educational organizations and systems should be structured, administered, and function (Samier, 2018).

### **Inequalities in Access and Outcomes**

Worldwide, neoliberal educational policies have proven to “not only fail to reduce inequality but also exacerbate and reproduce existing class and race inequalities in schooling” (Brathwaite, 2017, p. 1). For example, in the United States, neoliberal education reforms have led to further segregated schools and gaps in funding for schools struggling to advance (Brathwaite, 2017). In England, they have resulted in the intentional recruitment of students whose test scores and abilities can increase funding for schools.

The coupling of markets with the demand for and publication of performance indicators such as examination league tables in England has meant that schools are increasingly looking for ways to attract ‘motivated’ parents with ‘able’ children. In this way, schools are able to enhance their relative position in local systems of competition. This represents a subtle, but crucial shift in emphasis—one that is not openly discussed as often as it should be from student needs to student performance and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school (Apple, 2001, p. 413).

The same can be said of the UAE and other countries in the region. Despite a series of reforms, the region has thus far remained stagnant with poor outcomes compared to average international rates. Arab education systems have been described as “tenuous” and “stuck in low attainment levels” (Sleiman, 2021, p. 28). This disparity has become apparent in the COVID-19 pandemic because “only a limited number of schools in the region might have responded adequately by transferring their academic programmes into online platforms through fast-paced solutions and an effective communication process” (Sleiman, 2021, p. 29). The communities associated with the schools that can offer consistent participation in educational programs have been disproportionately middle- and upper-class families. They can accommodate their children’s needs for spaces in which to work and the tools, including internet services and devices to connect to them (Sleiman, 2021).

Prioritizing one group of students over another is common, and institutional power arrangements and practices undoubtedly favor some groups. According to Sleiman (2021),

economic and social status has often proven to be a common predictor of students receiving a higher quality of education in the UAE. Sleiman (2021) also describes three distinct tiers of the student body: “those from middle-to-upper-class families who attend for-profit private schools, impoverished students who attend public schools, and hundreds of thousands of refugee students who attend special programs in public schools separated from the main student body due to xenophobia and racism” (Sleiman, 2021, pp. 29-30).

Gender is a predictor of educational and career outcomes in the region, which has been particularly noticeable with the changing roles and opportunities for women in the global arena. Although educational opportunities have opened to women, less progress toward equity in outcomes can be seen. The UAE has high unemployment rates among Emiratis; thus, women, who are at a disadvantage, must compete with men for jobs that are becoming increasingly scarce. As such, female students are often less valued in education institutions in the Middle East and are less prioritized (Samier, 2018).

The competition between schools to attract high-achieving students to raise test scores and, thereby, receive increased funding has resulted in a lack of educational support for students with disabilities, particularly learning and developmental disabilities. Resources to assist such student populations and make education more equitable and accessible are often shifted from relevant programs and toward activities such as marketing and public relations to reach the parents of the higher-achieving student population. A common view that “‘special needs’ students are not only expensive but deflate test scores on those all-important league tables” led to limited opportunities in education for marginalized students (Apple, 2001, p. 415).

### **Disempowering Teachers**

One of the stated goals of education reform in the UAE is to provide strong leaders in the classroom and school administration (Litz & Blaik Hourani, 2016, 2019; Litz & Scott, 2017). However, teachers have been disempowered by neoliberal education reforms. Scholars have noted that teachers and educational professionals in the UAE report “unclear and conflicting missions and goals related to problems and discrepancies in study programs and curricula, inappropriate methods of teaching and learning, and inflexible curricula and programs which lead to high drop-out rates and long duration of studies” (Thorne, 2011, p. 193). Teaching as a profession has also been affected significantly by neoliberal education policies, limiting and disempowering them by

“censoring or restricting their unions, if they ever existed” (Sleiman, 2021, p. 33). Privatization policies and other neoliberal reforms have “aligned with the impoverishment of the public sector and insignificant public accountability systems, as well as poor democratic infrastructure, fragile laws, low income and minimal professional development”(Sleiman, 2021, p. 33). Sleiman (2021) states that “the same neoliberal discourse governing the private sector made teachers economically insecure, exposed to harsh management decisions, performative work styles, payment cuts, overworking, or being randomly dismissed.” It is “particularly dangerous in countries where social welfare systems are absent, and political accountability is missing” (Sleiman, 2021, p. 33).

One result of these reforms is the cultural decontextualization of the teaching profession, in addition to teacher shortages. It has been dismissed as a concern by many neoliberal policymakers and others who posit that licensure and professional preparation programs are unnecessary. Therefore, it allows for less qualified and inadequately trained teachers to be hired at lower and lower salary costs (Mullen et al., 2013). This thought process allows for “a denial of the entire field of educational leadership preparation, for example, and a negation of its legitimacy” (Mullen et al., 2013, p. 182). In addition to reducing the amount of private and government funding for education, some researchers believe that due to the notions and implications of a knowledge-based economy, “neoliberal foundations and think tanks have worked to deprofessionalize leadership and teacher preparation for political gain” (Mullen et al., 2013, p. 182). Further, conservative groups have been resistant to teaching and curriculum innovations, often insisting that educational institutions fire teachers who disrupt education reforms (Thorne, 2011). While the response to teacher shortages have differed in the Middle East, “common strategies have included hiring less-qualified instructional staff (which has put downward pressure on education quality), allowing student: teacher ratios to increase (which has eroded teacher satisfaction), and greater use of expatriate instructors” (Chapman et al., 2014, p. 131).

Curriculum development is subject to the government’s education and neoliberal reforms. Accountability and standardization efforts have led to teachers being required to teach students to pass tests that will enable them to earn a higher social status rather than developing critical thinking skills or developing a social identity. Accordingly, conformity and compliance are typically required by instructors in public schools (Sleiman, 2021). Despite the recently publicized reform objectives, such as transitioning from rote learning to active teaching approaches, subjects related to important tests, including math, science, and language, are prioritized and continue to be taught

through methods that involve rote memorization rather than critical thinking. In contrast, subjects that do not appear on large-scale, standardized, international tests are often eliminated from curricula (Al Ahbabi, 2019, p. 114). These practices and goals are antithetical to an education aiming to teach students how to participate in society effectively and critically evaluate their world because “education that does not promote critical social consciousness is eventually harmful because it transforms people into subjects rather than agents,” and “the more critical part is subjectivising teachers and leaders, deprofessionalising them, and denying their social agency” (Sleiman, 2021, p. 33). Central to the success of educational reforms is “the need for the introduction of intensive language and pedagogical training for teachers to enable them to cope with the demands of the new curriculum;” instead, the UAE government is still not doing enough to promote the professionalization of teachers (Thorne, 2011, p. 182). Thorne (2011, p. 182) also posits

Formal preparation of teachers for their professional role has until recently been a noticeable omission in the educational reform plans and this must be addressed systematically if the reforms are to have any chance of success. Locally based teacher education programmes need to be established and supported to encourage young Emiratis to enter the profession. Teachers already in schools need to be given continuous professional development opportunities and a clear career track needs to be established in order to professionalize the workforce.

Teachers’ education is deprioritized by governments implementing neoliberal education reforms. Therefore, teachers will remain constrained to teaching through ineffective and harmful methods, or without the necessary skills to promote critical thinking or offer new perspectives on effective teaching will grow in number, undermining the quality of education sought through these reforms.

### **Dissatisfaction and Malaise**

Adopting Western norms and culture, the inequities in access to education, and the disempowerment of teachers owing to neoliberal education reform has resulted in dissatisfied teachers, principals, students, parents, and other stakeholders in the UAE. Thorne (2011) notes that “it has become commonplace to read in both the Arabic- and English-language press, stinging criticisms of the public school system and lengthy reports about planned and ongoing educational

reforms” (p. 173). In addition to the criticisms regarding the above issues, ongoing reports outlining the countries’ huge investments in education reform have resulted in lagging performance in comparison to European schools. Such a trend indicates that the reforms have failed to fulfill promises to stakeholders as “they fell short at fostering a child-centered learning environment, developing Arabic and English-language abilities, critical thinking skills, cultural and national identity, and standardizing the curriculum, pedagogy, resources, and support” (Al Ahababi, 2019, p. 114). Furthermore, Al Ahababi (2019) found that most of the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) School Performance Auditing Reports issued from 2012 to 2016 highlighted various dysfunctions and areas of under-achievement, including weak school leadership; and that “the educational system was ‘plagued by many problems’ namely, the wide gap between school experiences and the realities of the job market” (Al Ahababi, 2019, p. 114). Stakeholders reported their ongoing concerns about the education system’s insistence on continuing methods of rote memorization as the primary learning strategy, as well as the outdated curriculum and the failure to hire and support teachers who are competent, educated, and qualified to teach students in a new, advancing society (Al Ahababi, 2019, p. 114).

However, the concerns of stakeholders often go unaddressed in the pursuit of neoliberal education structures and goals (Al Ahababi, 2019). Teachers, for instance, report that their opportunities for participative decision making are often limited by gender, nationality and school type, and teachers’ job satisfaction also differs significantly by gender and nationality (Al Nuaimi et al., 2015). Teacher job satisfaction is key to success in an educational system, because teachers who reported high levels of job satisfaction are more engaged, more committed to student success, and students in classrooms with dedicated teachers consistently show higher performance levels (Adams, 2010; Shann, 1998). Male teachers, according to these studies, are more involved in decision making, particularly managerial decisions, and “private-school teachers reported higher satisfaction about their career future and community relationship than their public-school peers” (Al Nuaimi et al., 2015, p. 656). The authors also suggested that the most critical area for reform in UAE education has involved “increasing teachers’ engagement, especially that of female teachers, in both instructional and managerial decisions, and greater awareness by the schools’ leadership of the benefit of teachers’ opportunities for participative decision making” (p. 656). Increasing levels of stakeholder satisfaction will ultimately involve implementing a number of new reforms in order to mitigate the harm caused by neoliberal education reforms in the UAE.

## **Suggested Reforms and Barriers**

Neoliberal education reforms, which promised the prioritization of bilingual education, equity in access to education, and strong leadership in the classroom have resulted in dissatisfaction from stakeholders and failing performance reports. Apple (2009) determined that “rather than leading to curriculum responsiveness and diversification, the competitive market has not created much that is different from the traditional models so firmly entrenched in schools today. Nor has it radically altered the relations of inequality that characteristic schooling” (p. 425). Instead, the reforms have reinforced a colonial narrative of the production of workers as the primary aim of education and Western culture as superior to that of Eastern culture (Blaik et al., 2022). A failure to develop pedagogic practices promoting critical and innovative thinking skills has diminished student achievement. Furthermore, stakeholders report that teachers are unable to dismiss ineffective methods of teaching to conform to demands. Thus, several reforms can be instituted to address concerns about the future of UAE educational quality and increase student performance to prepare them for the workforce and globalized economy.

Administrators must work toward generating models, theories, and practices that address “the conditions that postcolonial developing states face, including identity formation, values, role construction, and institutional arrangements” (Apple, 2001, p. 25). The unique cultural identity of the UAE demands that educational institutions consider the identities of their students and decolonize their education to create a more educated and equitable population. Sleiman (2021) explains that “the neoliberalisation of education has been widely normalised among most social groups whereas conversations of the broad picture of educational goals and outcomes have been ignored” (p. 31). Moreover, Sleiman (2021) notes that “the notions of good education for a better quality of life, democracy, and social wellbeing seem to be domineered by sermons of education for employability and social status” (p. 31). Classrooms in countries in a postcolonial and decolonization state bear a unique responsibility to their students that “require an authentic representation of cultures and countries with very different societal systems, whose histories have to varying degrees been silenced or distorted” (Samier, 2017, p. 15). Solutions geared toward reaching these goals require a full understanding of the decolonization process and how an educational system can inadvertently reinforce colonial norms and ideologies in order to undo them.



This is a complex process: it involves instilling a national identity over tribal structures; modernising and technologising while retaining Islam; ensuring a high level of security while allowing for a liberal and relatively free society; preserving culture while building one of the largest and most multicultural societies, albeit mostly expatriate; and providing one of the safest countries in the Arab world for women (Samier, 2015, p. 239).

Nevertheless, failure to enact policies that address concerns about prioritizing Western norms ignores the diverse population of students and stakeholders, including Emiratis whose cultural identities are silenced and undermined in the current structure of educational curricula.

Strategies for educational reform that address stakeholder concerns reflect participative rational leadership and shared ambitious vision. They also promote healthy learning environments, uphold high expectations for success, and foster differentiated and inclusive instructional strategies (Al Ahbabi, 2019). Discarding outmoded educational methods that have proven ineffective and adopting innovation in educational practices that have proven successful in countries with highly ranked institutions of learning are necessary steps toward increasing stakeholder satisfaction. Additionally, it is essential to empower instructors in the UAE, as their job satisfaction is critical to increasing student engagement and success.

The barriers to implementing new strategies to correct the adverse effects of neoliberal reforms are substantial. Apple (2001) states that in the Middle East, “in a number of countries a ‘new’ set of compromises, a new alliance, and new power bloc has been formed that has increasing influence in education and all things social” (p. 410), complicating the process of advocating for new educational reforms. Having created a vision of neoliberalism as an “epistemic framework,” a populist strategy meant to “engage in the creative destruction of institutional frameworks and powers,” to suggest reforming those policies advocates a return to a system in which liberal institutions once again hold power over the individual. However, the current system of neoliberal reform achieves this goal more fully (Mullen, Samier, Brindley, English, & Carr, 2013, p. 187). Apple’s (2001) assessment of the new power bloc created by the implementation of neoliberal reforms is of particular significance for consideration in any discussion of suggested reforms in a neoliberal state such as the UAE.

The power bloc combines multiple fractions of capital who are committed to neoliberal marketised solutions to educational problems, neo-conservative intellectuals who want a 'return' to higher standards and a 'common culture,' authoritarian populist religious conservatives who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular fractions of the professionally and managerially oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and the 'new managerialism' (Apple, 2001, p. 410).

A shift toward more classical liberalism, which holds a negative view of state power and interventions, is crucial for a widespread change in education policy, because it constrains stakeholders' efforts to institute any significant reforms and policy changes (Apple, 2001, p. 217). No discussion of educational reforms in the UAE can begin without examining the possibilities for reform by stakeholders under the UAE government, and "the seemingly contradictory discourse of competition, markets, and choice on the one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing, and national curriculum on the other...[While these elements] embody different tendencies, they actually oddly reinforce each other and help cement conservative educational positions into our daily lives" (Apple, 2001, p. 411). While strategy and policy innovations are necessary to improve the quality of education in the UAE, existing structures have created powerful barriers to achieving this.

### **Conclusion**

The incongruencies of neoliberal policies have led to lagging progress and have achieved the opposite of the stated goals. Far from being the neutral arbitrator of policies, reliance on market solutions to improve education and other social institutions has benefited the powerful and marginalized the least powerful. The intention behind allowing the market to determine which schools are quality providers of education, offering a "choice" for parents and students, has resulted in schools actively recruiting students who can perform at high levels to improve specific school ratings and funding. Because of this economically incentivized practice, female students have suffered less equitable outcomes than their male peers, and programs for students who require assistance due to disabilities have been defunded in addition to funds reallocated to marketing and recruitment of higher-achieving students.

What is evident from the implementation of neoliberal policies in education reform is that state interference in the classroom can prove ineffective and harmful to students and stakeholders. Because institutions reflect the societies in which they operate, societal norms related to culture and language undergird perceptions of some cultures as superior to others. The unique makeup of the Emirati population, in which native Emiratis are a small percentage and a variety of diverse nationalities and backgrounds are represented, the importance of the preservation of native cultures and norms cannot be overstated. Drawing on his analysis of the clash of cultural identities and diversity in UAE schools, Sperrazzo (2012) argues that “engaging in difference and struggling toward an understanding of other cultures is ...necessary for today’s heterogeneous students so that they can learn to accept themselves and those around them” (p. 304). Reframing the perceptions of students in relation to other cultures is, after all, the result of what they are taught about their culture and the cultures of those around them.

Neoliberal reforms have proven largely ineffective in meeting the goals for improving education in countries worldwide due to various adverse effects on students, teachers, and other stakeholders. Progress toward undoing the harms created by these reforms will prove difficult. Despite stakeholder dissatisfaction and a shortage of qualified teachers to turn policy goals into successful outcomes, the UAE has persisted in preserving these reforms as a result of the new power structures created by them. With the continued practice of neoliberal education policies such as privatization, standardization, accountability, and assessment, students will continue to struggle with the lasting effects of colonization, marginalized students will continue to find their access to education restricted, teachers will continue to be disempowered and replaced by less qualified instructors, and the resulting dissatisfaction and failure to meet educational goals will persist. As populations of students graduate with a lack of critical thinking skills or encouragement to analyze methods of improving their quality of life, the stated goals of neoliberal education reform will continue to deliver the opposite results. Consequently, instead of propelling the UAE toward modernization and allowing Emiratis to compete on a global stage, progress will stall.

To reach these intended goals in the future, a shift toward democratization of institutional policy and prioritization of individuals’ attributes and unique learning interests is necessary, rather than just the knowledge-based economy. Providing students in the UAE with an understanding of their government and the power structures that govern institutions such as education systems will enable critical analysis of policies, efforts toward change in the future, and the ability of the youth

to improve the world around them. For teachers, democratization also encourages that purposeful teachers' voices are heard regarding educational transformation and trajectories of school reforms. This process can occur through creating unions that protect them from state interference that disempowers them and maintains education and qualification standards or through summits where their pedagogical, curricular, and strategic planning perspectives are genuinely considered for praxis and policy implementation. For staff and faculty, unionization and democratization also focuses on ensuring equal opportunity for participative decision making for women, teachers from the public rather than private schools, and teachers of diverse nationalities and backgrounds. For parents and other stakeholders, democratization would allow them to voice their children's education and the future of their communities. It should include diverse voices, including Bedoon and economically disadvantaged and marginalized communities who have historically had the least access to education. Doing so would increase satisfaction and create communities of dedicated teachers, engaged student bodies, and satisfied stakeholders in education.

Future research directions on neoliberal education policies and methods of reversing these adverse effects through reform in the UAE are varied. There are gaps in the literature related to how the existing power structures in the UAE benefit from the continuation of neoliberal policies within the country and through alliances with other countries. It is essential to understand how to dismantle these structures and achieve genuine reform. Nevertheless, the implications of these studies on the future of education reform and the potential benefits of democratizing the UAE government are absent. However, democratization and the representation of all voices are key to the success of any efforts toward improving educational reforms.

Further study of the unique educational needs of the UAE's indigenous population and how best to accommodate those needs based on the voices of the people most affected by neoliberal education reforms are necessary to decolonize education. This is also an area in which analysis would benefit researchers exploring the possibilities of positive reform in the education systems in the Middle East, which embodies peripheral nations, minority groups, and oppressed people. Finally, future research should examine how equitable outcomes in education according to gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, and ability might be achieved in the UAE.

## References

- Adams, C. (2010). How satisfied are you? *Instructor*, 119(4), 44-47.
- Al Ahabbi, N. M. (2019). Key stakeholders' perceptions about school improvement strategies in UAE. *Improving Schools*, 22(2), 113-129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480218817983>
- Al Nuaimi, S. A., Chowdhury, H., Eleftheriou, K., & Katsioloudes, M. I. (2015). Participative decision-making and job satisfaction for teachers in the UAE. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29(5), 645-665. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-07-2014-0090>
- Apple, M. W. (2001). Comparing neo-liberal projects and inequality in education. *Comparative Education*, 37(4), 409-423.
- Apple, M. W. (2009). Producing difference: Neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and the politics of educational reform. In M. Simons, M. Olssen, & M. A. Peters (Eds.), *Re-reading education policies: A handbook studying the policy Agenda of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (pp. 625-649). Sense.
- Arar, K., Örüçü, D., & Wilkinson, J. (2020). A call to explore and map the educational challenges under neoliberalism across the globe. In K. Arar, D. Örüçü, & J. Wilkinson (Eds.), *Neoliberalism and education systems in conflict* (pp. 1-10). Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429345135>
- Blaik Hourani, R. (2010). *What Palestine do we teach? The history curriculum for Palestinian Arabs, 1861-1999*. Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Blaik, R., Litz, D., & Ali, N. (2023). UAE school reforms and leadership: What can be learned from Muslim scholars' perspectives and contemporary insights. In K. Arar, R. Sawalhi, A. DeCuir, & T. Amatullah (Eds.), *Islamic-Based Educational Leadership, Administration and Management: Challenging Expectations through Global Critical Insight*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003360070>
- Brathwaite, J. (2017). Neoliberal education reform and the perpetuation of inequality. *Critical Sociology*, 43(3), 429-448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920516649418>
- Chapman, D., Austin, A., Farah, S., Wilson, E., & Ridge, N. (2014). Academic staff in the UAE: Unsettled journey. *Higher Education Policy*, 27(1), 131-151. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2013.19>

- Farrell, H. (2018). The shared challenges of institutional theories: Rational choice, historical institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism. In J. Gluckler, R. Suddaby, & R. Lenz (Eds.), *Knowledge and institutions, Vol. 13* (pp. 23-44). Springer Open.
- Feagin, J. R., & Hohle, R. (2017). *Racism in the neoliberal era: A meta history of elite white power*. Routledge-Taylor & Francis.
- Ishiyama, J. T. (2020). *Neoinstitutionalism*.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoinstitutionalism>.
- Litz, D., & Blaik Hourani, R. (2016). Developing educational capital in times of change: The experience of Abu Dhabi. In I. R. Haslem, & M. S. Khine (Eds.), *Leveraging social capital in systemic education reform* (pp. 115-141). Sense. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-651-4>
- Litz, D., & Blaik Hourani, R. (2019). Diagnosing the Abu Dhabi education system: Past achievements, current strengths, and future challenges. In *Proceedings of symposium: developing UAE education – keeping pace with the times* (pp. 92-121). Abu Dhabi: Sultan bin Zayed Culture and Media Centre.
- Litz, D., & Scott, S. (2017). Transformational leadership in the education system of the United Arab Emirates. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(4), 566-587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216636112>
- Mullen, C. A., English, F. W., Brindley, S., Ehrich, L., & Samier, E. A. (2013). Neoliberal issues in public education. *Interchange*, 43(3), 181-186. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-013-9175-1>
- Mullen, C. A., Samier, E. A., Brindley, S., English, F. W., & Carr, N. K. (2013). An epistemic frame analysis of neoliberal culture and politics in the US, UK, and the UAE. *Interchange*, 43(3), 187-228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-013-9176-0>
- Nicholls, S. I. (2010). *Structuring the bounds of the possible: Neoliberalism and the discursive hegemony of neoclassical economics* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/61632/8/02whole.pdf>.
- Olssen, M. (1996). In defense of the welfare state and publicly provided education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 11(1), 337-362.

- Oplatka, I., & Arar, K. H. (2016). Leadership for social justice and the characteristics of traditional societies: Ponderings on the application of western-grounded models. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 19(3), 352-369.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2015.1028464>
- Said, E. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.
- Samier, E. A. (2015). Emirati women's higher educational leadership formation under globalisation: Culture, religion, politics, and the dialectics of modernisation. *Gender and Education*, 27(3), 239-254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1028901>
- Samier, E. A. (2017). Towards a postcolonial and decolonising educational administration history. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 49(4), 264-282.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2017.1343288>
- Samier, E. A. (2018). The politics of educational change in the Middle East: Nation-building, postcolonial reconstruction, destabilized states, societal disintegration, and the dispossessed. In K. J. Saltman, & A. Means (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of global education reform* (pp. 173-198). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Schechter, S. L. (2016). *American governance*. Macmillan Reference USA.
- Shann, M. H. (1998). Professional commitment and satisfaction among teachers in urban middle schools. *Journal of Educational Research*, 92(2), 67-73.
- Sleiman, N. A. (2021). Manifestations of neo-liberalised and politically incapacitated societies: Educational response to the pandemic in the Arab region. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 49(1), 28-35.
- Sperrazza, L. (2012). A clash of cultural identities in the UAE. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 5(7), 297-306.
- Thorne, C. (2011). The impact of educational reforms on the work of the school principal in the United Arab Emirates. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 39(2), 172-185.
- Wu, Y. (2009). New institutionalism politics: Integration of old institutionalism and other methodologies. *Asian Social Science*, 5(9), 105-108.

## **Biography**

### **Dr. David R. A. Litz – Corresponding author**

School of Education, University of Northern British Columbia, British Columbia, Canada.

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7893-133X

Email: davidralitz@yahoo.com / david.litz@unbc.ca

**Dr. David Litz** is presently working as an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the University of Northern British Columbia, where he teaches several courses in the Bachelor of Education and Master of Education (Leadership) programs. He was previously an Assistant Professor and Division Head of the Assessment and School Evaluation Division at Emirates College for Advanced Education (ECAE). He has also previously taught in South Korea and Ontario, Canada. He holds an EdD from the University of Calgary and has several publications; his research interests include comparative education, educational administration and leadership, social justice, as well as educational policy.

### **Dr. Rida Blaik**

Independent Educational Researcher and Consultant, Larnaca, Republic of Cyprus

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0410-2760

Email: ridablaikhournai@gmail.com

**Dr. Rida Blaik** earned her Ph.D. in Policy and Management from The University of Melbourne. Dr. Blaik has worked at many higher education institutions in the Middle East and Australia. She has extensive experience in school and higher education praxis and development. In addition to her administrative positions, she lectures courses within the realm of education leadership, school management, school evaluation, curriculum and instruction, peace studies, school reforms, capacity building, cultural studies, and sociology of education. Dr. Blaik has numerous publications; her research focuses on policy and leadership, school reforms and innovation, sociology of education, and social justice.