



**UAE Learning
Network**

Perceptions of Professional Learning from Teachers

in the United Arab Emirates

www.uaeln.ae

Executive Summary

As teacher licensing becomes a reality within the education sector, the nature of professional learning will inevitably shift with it. The existing landscape of professional learning (PL) within the United Arab Emirates is complex. Professional learning doesn't happen in a vacuum and teachers across the United Arab Emirates experience the country's diversity, its different regulations, school settings and local challenges on a daily basis. The vast majority of teachers in the public and private sector are expatriates, employed on two-year contracts. International schools have a short period of time to invest in new staff and they must remain ahead of the game to retain their top talent. Teachers are a hot commodity and the global shortage of high quality teachers is understated.

Within the education sector, it is common to see phrases such as “We are committed to professional development” or “We are committed to developing people” across international teaching adverts, as a token message to signal commitment to teachers' professional growth. Up until now, this has never been explored on a national level with teachers across the sector, of all curricular and all levels.

We know that professional learning is an implicit responsibility within today's evolving education sector. Teachers must be committed learners and school leaders must be invested in their learning to retain them and harness their expertise. International schools are under pressure to recruit the best teachers and retain them to develop their communities, build continuity and ultimately retain parents.

This report summarises the findings of the first national UAE teacher professional learning survey. It explores what teachers think about themselves situated within their schools, and how they perceive their learning as professionals, working to improve the lives of the children they care for. The report compares teachers in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the two largest private school markets in the UAE, and teachers teaching in UK and US curriculum schools. The UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda emphasizes the development of a first-rate education system, which will require a complete transformation of the current education system and teaching methods. Teacher growth is central to this, as the teachers that build professional knowledge within this context will be valuable assets as the education market matures.

Executive Summary

One of the significant findings of this survey was the impact of collaborative professional learning. This particular type of professional learning is known to have the greatest impact on teachers, children and wider stakeholders, and based on this survey, it is prevalent in the teachers' practice within the UAE. 76% of teachers said that they collaborated with their colleagues in school. 64% of teachers said that their school allocated time within the time-table to allow this collaboration to happen. 61% of teachers said that their professional learning had improved since moving to the United Arab Emirates. The findings are extremely promising and indicate that professional learning, whether intentional or unintentional is a real strength of the sector.

Professional learning needs to be more than a bolt on, more than activity; it should be part of the DNA of the school and driven by the students and teachers working collaboratively to improve classroom practice. This report shines a light on what the teachers think and attempts to address the much bigger question: what should professional learning look like for an international school teacher in 2017?

Context



Huge amounts of resources are spent every year to recruit teachers but also to research, support and improve professional learning.

There are multiple training providers, accreditation bodies, consultancies, associations, review bodies, publishers and wider initiatives all working within the professional learning space. The United Arab Emirates is known for its diversity and the educator sector is no different.

Schools often dictate the nature of teachers' professional learning and it is often tied to wider school improvement, performance appraisal, inspection ratings, and governmental initiatives. In other cases, teachers select professional learning opportunities based on their interest and needs.

For some individuals, staying on top of the latest initiatives back in their home-country is a high priority to ensure that re-entry is seamless.

High quality, qualified teachers committed to international education demand more than token offerings of CPD and career growth. In the UAE, teachers need to be remunerated so that they remain in the country and settle here. Teachers need to live in accommodation that is attractive and close to popular transport links and leisure facilities.

We sought to explore all of these angles with teachers to gain an insight into their perception of professional learning.

Within the field of education, there are five commonly accepted models of professional learning. Schools often adopt one or more of these models with specific intentions in mind whilst others adopt certain models unknowingly.

Context

Professional learning is situated in context, and contexts often have their own micro-nuances that invoke specific solutions. Each school has its own set of social and cultural norms, and professional learning takes place within this, both formally and informally, planned and incidental. For the purposes of this paper, we define professional learning as a broad term that encompasses all different types of learning for teachers. This learning may happen as a result of certain professional development activities.

Schools are often very process driven, and processes require teachers to work within specific parameters. Professional learning is sometimes framed within these processes for the school to operate on a day to day basis. Also, teachers are accountable, to themselves, their leadership teams and to the children they support.

The nature of getting teachers engaged, reflective and focussed on their professional learning must be understood within the context, system, conditions and environment they operate within. The five commonly accepted models of professional learning may hinder or support teachers and awareness of them is critical to understanding the data within this report.

About UAE Learning Network

The UAE Learning Network is one of the largest online network of educators in the country. The UAE Learning Network enables educators to build and grow their own communities organically to support their professional learning and development.

Thought partners

KDSL Global

KDSL Global is a leading learning organization focused on empowering educators and education businesses globally. At KDSL Global we partner with education investors, provide professional learning, and promote education companies.

<http://www.kdslglobal.com/>

Teaching Talent

Teaching Talent enables teachers to view all of the world's teaching jobs in one place. International school teachers are high in demand. Qualified teachers have a passport to travel and this app allows teachers to view and apply for teaching jobs around the world.

www.teachingtalent.ae

The Education Intelligence Group

The Education Intelligence Group is a partnership of industry professionals who impart their knowledge and expertise to a rapidly growing UAE education sector. At the time of their formation many new schools were being built often on the back of the flimsiest of data. EIG has made it its mission to offer its clients market leading data and analysis so they can avoid the pitfalls of their peers.

<http://www.educationintelligencegroup.com/>

Models of Professional Learning

Professional learning can be structured and organised in various ways for different purposes. Whilst most intended learning could be seen as a way of introducing new knowledge or skills, it is not just the knowledge or skills that is important, but also the context of how it was acquired and impact thereafter. Some approaches to learning trigger others and vice versa.

The Training Model

The most common and popular 'delivery' model is the training model. This type of professional learning activity is defined as 'technocratic' by Kennedy (2005) and Webster-Wright (2012). Within this model, teachers attend training sessions to update their skills in order to demonstrate their competence. Kennedy (2005) argued that this model is "universally recognizable" (Little, 1994; Kelly & McDiarmid, 2002; Kennedy, 2005:2). This model implies that learning is 'delivered' to teachers by a specialist or 'expert' in that subject or area. Schools often employ training providers to focus their efforts in specialist areas such as curriculum, assessment or exam preparation. The training model implies that teachers are passive and the trainers are responsible for transmitting the information to the participants. It is aligned with standards-based teaching and it supports central control by the school and it can be effective in introducing new knowledge but much of the responsibility of how it is used in practice is with the schools and the teachers (Webster-Wright, 2009).

The Award-Bearing Model

Another model that bears some similarities to the training model is the award-bearing model. This model emphasises the completion of programmes of study, often accredited or validated by universities or associated bodies. Accreditation is seen as a mark of quality assurance, and therefore, value is attached to this. The control of this model is often with the accreditation body so the learning is often decontextualised. The award-bearing model provides teachers with qualifications that can be beneficial to their career but in some cases, they lack real focus and impact for the schools in which the teachers work. Award bearing models that are aligned to local needs and teacher needs are best situated to have greater impact (Kennedy, 2005:4).

The Deficit Model

Another delivery style model that shares some similarities to the 'training' model is the deficit model, which is often adopted to address a deficit in teacher effectiveness and performance. This is often defined within the context of performance management or performance appraisal. It is an obvious limitation but it is common across the literature; the teacher evaluation has to be reliable and accurate so that the perceived deficit in performance can be effectively supported. If there is a discrepancy between evaluation and performance then the learning may be misaligned. This model of professional learning attributes under-performance with the individual, not the school or other stakeholders.

The Cascade Model

Another delivery style model explored within the literature is the cascade model, which involves individual teachers attending 'training events' and disseminating the information to colleagues. It is commonly employed in situations where resources are limited. This model relies on the individual attending the training event and their ability to effectively communicate the information to a range of other individuals. According to Harland and Kinder (2006), one of the drawbacks of this model is that what is passed on is generally skills or knowledge bases and absent of values. Teachers adopting this particular model are therefore, expected to "feedback" to their colleagues who were neither situated in the activity, aware of its purpose or in partnership with its actual participants (Harland and Kinder, 2006).

The Standards-based Model

Another model within the literature is the standards based model of professional learning, which is defined within a wider system and teacher standards. This model places the standards as the main focus and centralises the agreement of what should be done and what is successful. This model could be seen as an accountability model and it could be argued that this model does value teachers' own capacities for reflective, critical inquiry. It could also suggest that this model sets clear expectations regarding the extent to which teachers should take responsibility for their own professional learning and encourages them to be reliant on central direction, even in assessing their own capacity to teach.

The Coaching/Mentoring Model

The coaching and mentoring model is defined by the importance of one-to-one relationships. The most important feature of this model is the relationship of power between the participants. Coaching can quite often be peer to peer, or specialist around a key theme. Mentoring tends to be more hierarchical, and between experienced and less experienced teachers. This model implies that professional learning can take place within the school context and can be enhanced by engaging in dialogue with colleagues (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002, 301). The quality of interpersonal relationships is crucial. In order for the coaching and mentoring model to be successful, participants must have well-developed interpersonal communication skills (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002).

Models of Professional Learning

The Community of Practice Model

The community of practice model is clearly associated with the coaching and mentoring model discussed above. The essential difference between the two is that a community of practice generally involves more than two people, and would not necessarily rely on confidentiality. DuFour et al. (2008) defined a professional learning community as educators committed to working collaboratively in an ongoing process of collective inquiry to achieve better results for the students they serve. They operate under the assumption that the key to improve learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning. (DuFour et al., 2008). Feger and Arruda (2008) and Bolam et al. (2005) state the characteristics of effective professional learning communities includes supportive and shared leadership, shared purpose and values, a collaborative culture, problem solving and collective inquiry on teaching and learning and continuous improvement of the school (Daniel Carpenter, 2015:3).

embrace new forms of formal knowledge. It suggests that what is really needed is not a wholesale move towards the teacher-centred, context-specific models of professional learning, but a better balance between these types of models and the transmission focused models.

Evaluation of Professional Learning

The tools that are used to evaluate professional learning are equally as important as the intended learning itself. Evaluation is often done by schools themselves, departments and individuals, and evidence is sought after in student learning outcomes, teacher performance, and student and teacher perception and in the resulting policy development that might take place after it.

What is critical to the analysis of CPD models is not just the obvious structural characteristics, but also the underpinning influences, expectations and possibilities.

The Action Research Model

The action research model involves participants acting as researchers of their own practice. Supporters of this model tend to suggest that it has a greater impact on practice when it is shared in communities of practice or enquiry. However, collaboration of the nature found in a community of practice is not a prerequisite of the action research model. Burbank & Kauchack (2003) argue that collaborative action research provides an alternative to the passive role imposed on teachers in traditional models of professional learning. It is also, arguably, a means of limiting dependency on externally produced research, instead shifting the balance of power towards teachers themselves through their identification and implementation of relevant research activities.

The Transformative Model

The transformative model involves a number of processes and conditions. The key characteristic of the transformative model is its effective integration of the range of models described above, together with a real sense of awareness of issues of power, i.e. whose agendas are being addressed through the process.

The central characteristic is the combination of practices and conditions that support a transformative agenda. In this sense, it could be argued that the transformative model is not a clearly definable model in itself; rather it recognises the range of different conditions required for transformative practice. It draws comparisons between the knowledge focused and contextually void model of a training approach with the context-specific approach of a communities of practice model that does not necessarily

The Survey



Our professional learning survey was carried out with over two hundred teachers connected with the UAE Learning Network. The teachers were asked a series of questions over a three month period relating to their beliefs, perceptions, and reflections about themselves and their learning within their context.

What's the purpose of the survey? Who is it for?

The purpose of the survey was to get a meaningful snapshot of the perception of professional learning at a classroom and school level. How would teachers rate their professional learning? How would they rate the environment they are in? Do they feel supported? Are they equipped to evaluate if their professional learning is having an impact on themselves and their children? Do they feel that their learning has improved since being in the United Arab Emirates?

The results, which show some clear trends, will be helpful to school operators, school leaders, regulators, investors and governors. UAE teachers and other educators will be able to see how their experiences resonate with this sample. School principals, governing boards and investors will be able to gain some valuable insights from the data on how to plan for improvements within the professional learning arena.

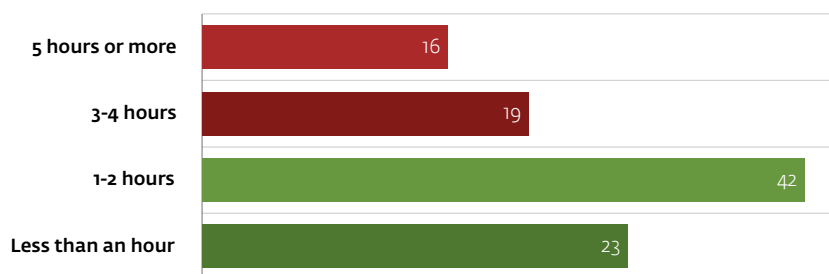
Who took part in the survey?

200 educators from all over the UAE took part. Of the 200, 1% had less than one year of teaching experience, 38% have between 1-10 years' experience; 43% have between 11-20; 18% have over 20 years' experience; 79% of the staff surveyed were female; 21% were male; 12% of the responses are aged between ages 24-30 years; 75% between 31-50 years; 13% are above 50 years; 28% of the responses came from American curriculum schools; 38% came from British curriculum schools; 27% of the respondents surveyed are Senior Leadership Team; 125 are Middle Leaders; 58% are Teachers; 2% are Admin/operations team; 1% Supporting staff, 21% of the respondents are Arabs; 21% are Americans; 32% are European; 19% are Indian; 5% Africans;

The Survey - Findings

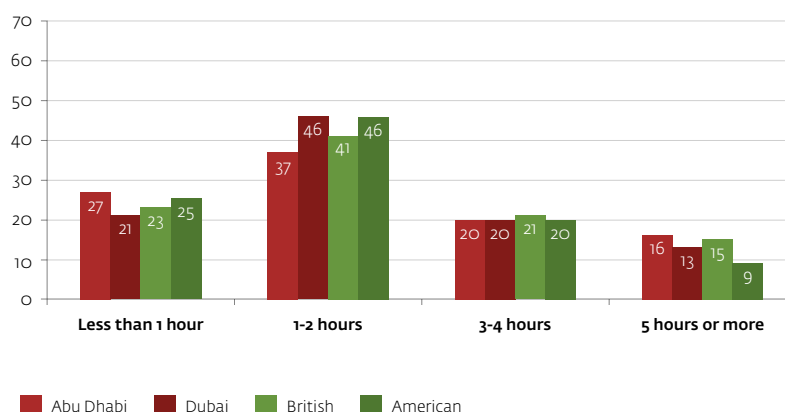
How much time do you spend on professional learning in the working week?

42% of teachers surveyed across all curricular, and the Emirates said they spend between 1-2 hours per week on professional learning.



How much time do you spend on professional learning in the working week?

16% of teachers in Abu Dhabi said that they spend 5 or more hours a week on their learning. 46% of American curriculum teachers in the country spend between 1-2 hours a week compared with 42% of British teachers.

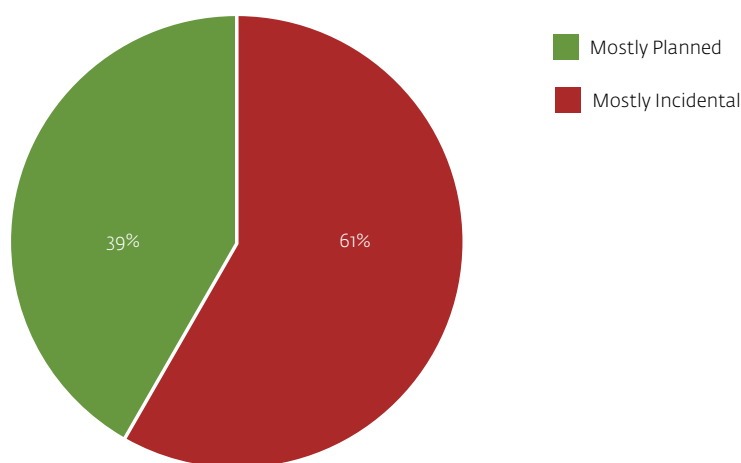


“Knowledge can be acquired and skill-sets developed anywhere – learning is unavoidable and happens all the time. However, lifelong learning is about creating and maintaining a positive attitude to learning both for personal and professional development.” Teacher, Dubai

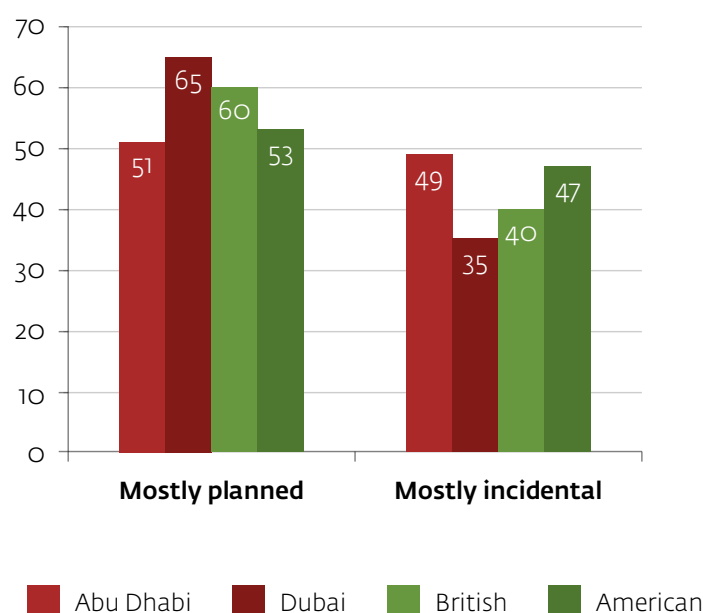
The Survey - Findings

Is your PL mostly planned or incidental?

61% of teachers across all curricular, and the Emirates stated that their learning was mostly planned. However, 39% of teachers said that there's was mostly incidental. This suggests that teachers get the 'lightbulb' moments when they are not expecting it.



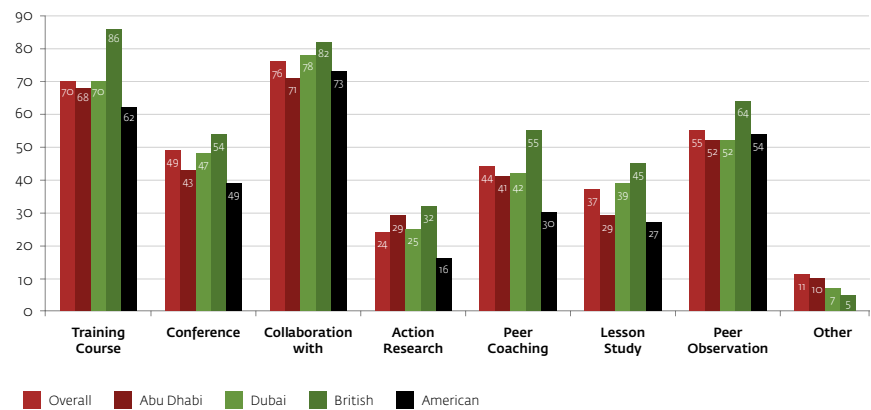
Is it mostly planned or incidental ?



“I reflect on my own practice in response to professional learning I have participated in. As a result I have amended my practice and/ or implemented new strategies. Not only does the professional learning itself prompt me to do this but the opportunity to connect with other educational professionals.” Teacher, Al Ain

General

How much time do you spend on professional learning in the working week?



The most popular type of professional development activity has been collaboration between colleagues, with 76% of teachers surveyed stating this as an activity. Attending a training course was second (70%) followed by peer observations with 55% of teachers stating they had done this. Overall, collaboration between colleagues was high on the list for British, and American teachers, and for teachers in Dubai and in Abu Dhabi.

Overall, 70% of teachers surveyed said that they had been on a training course in the past year.

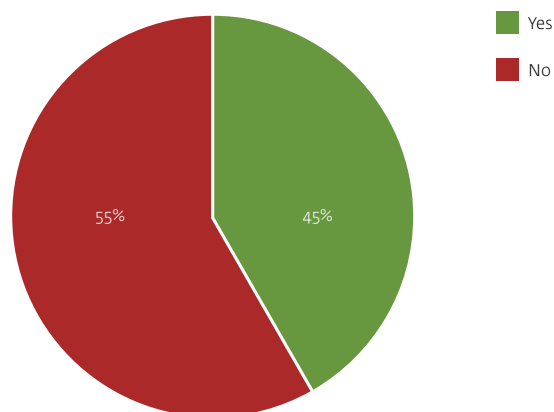
American curriculum teachers said that they largely collaborate with each other (73%), attend training courses (62%), observe each other (54%) and attend conferences (49%).

British curriculum teachers said that they largely attend training courses (86%), collaborate with each other (82%) and observe each other (64%).

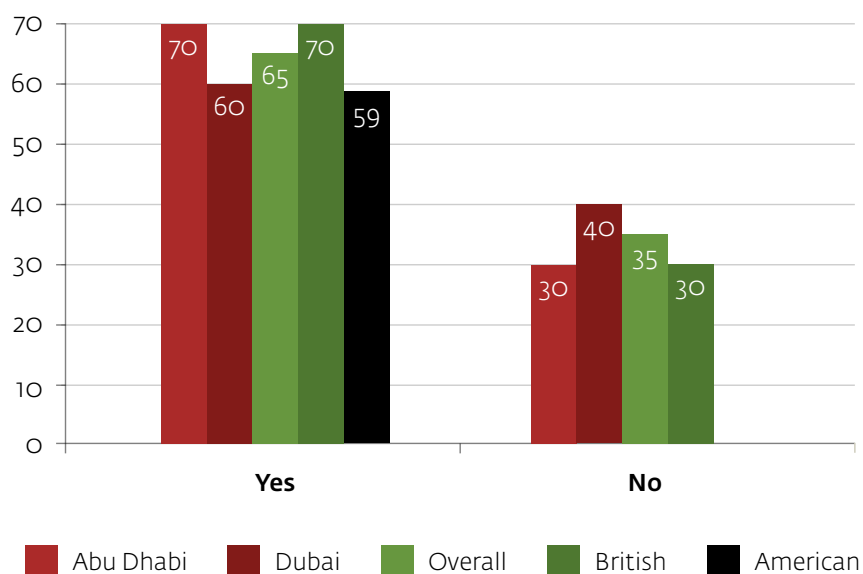
The results are a very positive sign for the professional learning landscape of the UAE.

Evaluating Professional Learning

Have you received any kind of training in evaluating your professional learning?



Does your school allocate time within the timetable for professional learning?

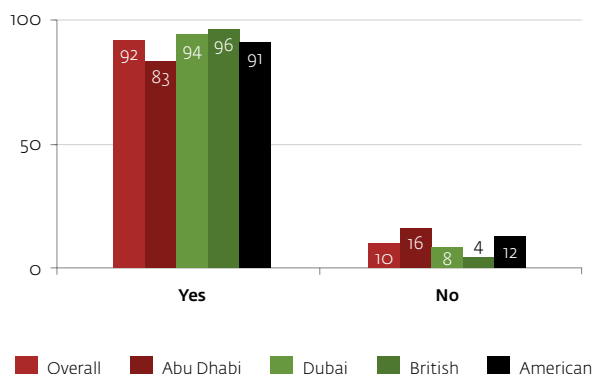


“To have time scheduled to reflect on professional learning as well as the time scheduled to attend Professional Development. This would make me better able to reflect on my learning and act upon it.” Teacher, Abu Dhabi

Evaluating Professional Learning

Do you read academic literature about areas of teaching and the curriculum?

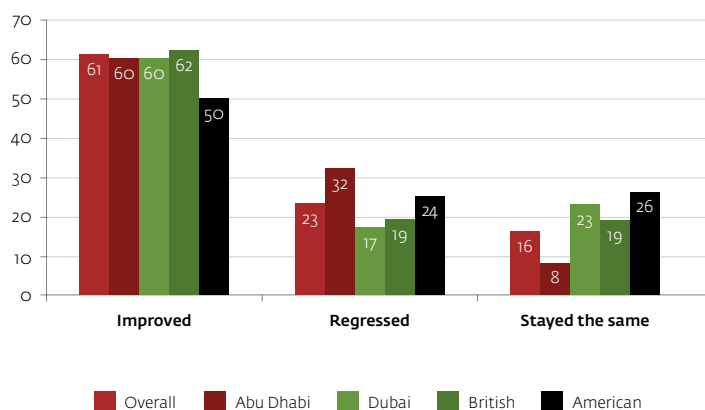
The results show that teachers across the board are engaged in their profession. A high percentage of teachers in the country are reading academic literature about teaching and the curriculum, suggesting that it really is more than just a job for the majority of teachers in the industry.



“I wish that my supervisors realized how much the training has changed my daily routine as a teacher. I also wish they knew how much time outside of the 40-hr week I spend in reading & learning from other professionals for my own growth and development.” Teacher, Dubai

Since working in the UAE, have your professional learning improved?

The results indicate that the UAE is place where teachers improve. 61% of all teachers surveyed said that since moving to the UAE, their professional learning has improved. 16% said that it had stayed the same and 23% said it had regressed. Teachers in Abu Dhabi and Dubai both had similar results with 60% of teachers in each Emirate recognising their improved growth.

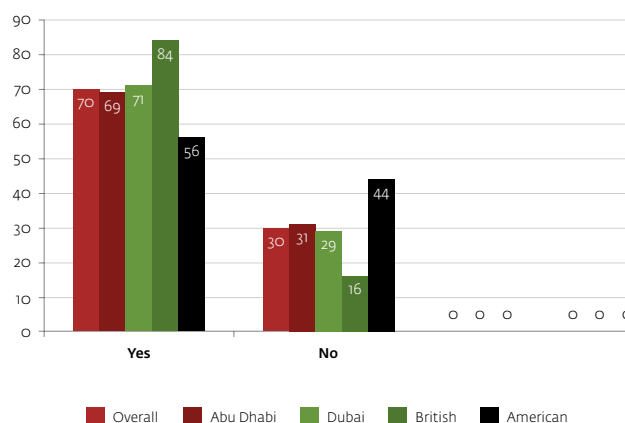


Evaluating Professional Learning

Does your school value professional learning?

70% of teachers surveyed said that their school values professional learning. This was a trend across the Emirates.

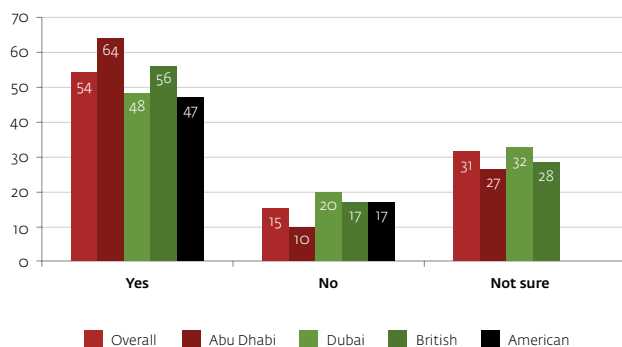
Teachers in Abu Dhabi and Dubai shared similar opinions about their schools. However, American Curriculum teachers (40%) stated that their school did not value professional learning.



“The idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue. People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education—a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organisation, and so on. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.” Teacher, Abu Dhabi.

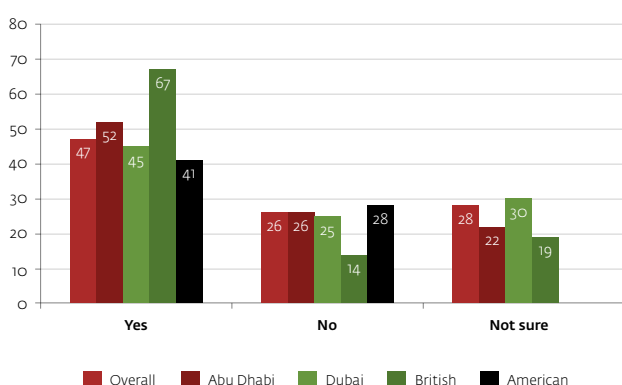
Evaluating Professional Learning

Does your school have a professional learning plan?



“Professional learning is majorly different here. PD is highly recognized as a valuable learning & enhancement tool in the USA. It is not recognized at all at my school in Dubai” Teacher, Dubai.

Does your school allocate funds for professional learning?



“I would want our administration to give us more autonomy in deciding what kind of PD we need. This could be based on our professional goals set at the beginning of the year. It would be helpful if we all had a budget and could spend it ourselves.” Teacher, Dubai.

Evaluating Professional Learning

Conclusions

The purpose of this report is to highlight some of the perceptions of professional learning shared by teachers in the UAE. On the whole, the results are very positive.

Teachers are very committed to their own learning and growth, and they know how to get the best out of each other and themselves. The results indicate that the majority of teachers from this survey recognise that professional learning takes place in many activities, places, and with a variety of people. The teachers surveyed collaborate and they plan their professional development and they engage in academic research to further their knowledge.

Significantly, 61% of all teachers surveyed said that since moving to the UAE their professional learning has improved. This is a positive sign for school regulators, and operators. The competitive nature of the education sector means that schools are vying for the best teaching talent. The teachers that grow their careers in the UAE will foster contextual professional knowledge that will be invaluable for new teachers arriving in the country, but also for home-grown teachers training in the profession.

39% of teachers surveyed said that their professional learning was mostly incidental. It's clear from the results that teachers are undertaking a variety of professional development activities, such as courses, conferences, peer observations, and peer coaching, which all contribute to an individual's learning. However, with 39% noting that their learning was un-expected, it is important to note that not all learning happens where we think it does. Teachers quite often need time to reflect and switch off, and when this happens, many are recognising that their best learning takes place.

The UAE has an ambitious and aspirational vision for 2021 and education is central to it. The good news is that the country's teachers are committed to improving their profession and the knowledge created within this context which can only be a positive sign for parents and for children.

The importance of professional learning should not be understated and the commitment and self-discipline of the nation's teachers will ensure that the next generation of children will be challenged and stretched to achieve their potential and much more.

