



The University of  
**Nottingham**

UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

# **The International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (MYP) in the United Arab Emirates**

**International Baccalaureate Organisation**

## **Submitted by:**

Professor Howard Stevenson

Dr Saeeda Shah

Dr Lucy Bailey

Dr Lucy Cooker

Emily Winchip

Maamon Karak

School of Education,  
University of Nottingham

## Table of contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>UAE Context.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1	The context of the United Arab Emirates.....	9
2.2	The development of the UAE .....	9
2.3	The history of schools in the UAE.....	11
2.4	Regulation of education .....	12
2.5	The future of education in the UAE - Vision 2021 .....	14
<b>3</b>	<b>Research Overview/Conceptual Framing .....</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1	Context matters .....	16
3.2	Curriculum as policy and the process of policy enactment.....	20
3.3	Curriculum, context and culture.....	23
3.4	Islam, Islamic values and Islamic education.....	26
<b>4</b>	<b>Methodology .....</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1	Research as policy analysis .....	31
4.2	Data sources and sampling .....	32
4.3	Interviews .....	34
4.4	Observation within the school, and of lessons.....	36
4.5	Website analysis.....	37
4.6	External report and documents.....	37
4.7	Research challenges.....	38
<b>5</b>	<b>Findings .....</b>	<b>41</b>
5.1	Research question 1.....	41
5.2	Research question 2a .....	47
5.3	Research question 2b .....	52
5.4	Research question 3.....	59
5.5	Research question 4a .....	70
5.6	Research question 4b .....	83

<b>6 The IB Middle Years Programme in the United Arab Emirates – analysis, conclusions and recommendations.....</b>	<b>87</b>
6.1 Curriculum as policy enactment: One school, two curricula .....	89
6.2 Curriculum as policy enactment: the significance of context .....	92
6.3 Recommendations .....	95
<b>References.....</b>	<b>96</b>

## **Table of figures**

Figure 1: The macro and micro contexts of schooling (Barnett and Stevenson, 2015) .....	18
Figure 2: Policy development and enactment: a theoretical framework .....	21

## **List of tables**

Table 1: Required number of instructional periods per week for Arab students in private schools .....	13
Table 2: Required number of instructional periods per week for non-Arab students in private schools .....	14
Table 3: Numbers of interviewees by school .....	35
Table 4: Categorisation of learner profile attributes .....	72

## 1 Introduction

This report presents findings and conclusions from the research project *The International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (MYP) in the United Arab Emirates*.

The Middle Years Programme (MYP) is that part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) intended for 11-16 year olds. It forms part of a 3-19 continuum with the Primary Years Programme focused on 3-12 year olds and the Diploma Programme and Career-related Programme meeting the needs of 16-19 year olds. The aim of IB programmes is to offer a continuum of international education that 'encourage[s] both personal and academic achievement, challenging students to excel in their studies and in their personal development' ([IBO, 2017](#)).

Specifically the MYP is described in the following terms:

*A challenging framework that encourages students to make practical connections between their studies and the real world, the MYP is inclusive by design; students of all interests and academic abilities can benefit from their participation. ([IBO, 2017](#))*

The MYP was established in 1994 and, as indicated, is the 'middle link' in the IB continuum. It has grown substantially in recent years and in student number terms is probably the largest of the IB's programmes (Bunnell, 2011). Although the Diploma Programme is most widely known, as a two year post-16 programme the actual numbers of students are lower than the MYP which is typically implemented as a three to five year 'whole school programme'. The fieldwork for this study was carried out between 2015 and 2016, which mirrored the period that the MYP: The Next Chapter was being introduced and implemented in schools. Some comments then from teachers, parents and students may refer to the pre 'Next Chapter' phase.

This study is focused on the specific experience of providing the MYP in the context of the United Arab Emirates. At the time this research was carried out (2015-2016) within the UAE there were eight authorised schools that offered the MYP with a further six candidate schools. Candidate schools are those going through an approval process with the IBO with the goal of becoming fully authorised.

The intention of this report is to deepen our understanding of how a 'global curriculum' is implemented in a specific national context. This matters, because it is well understood that context matters. Whatever 'policy' might be the focus of attention, and however powerful is the influence of globalisation, what is understood is that policies are played out in local contexts and the way they are enacted and experienced reflects those local contexts. In this study our approach to the curriculum is based on the view that 'curriculum' is an expression of a particular form of 'policy'. However, curriculum is always a very particular type of policy with a very particular relationship to the vernacular and the local. The role of the curriculum is to not simply reflect the local, but often to reinforce the local. This inevitably creates complexity and this study seeks to capture that complexity.

The study focuses on addressing the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the MYP's guiding principles of holistic learning, intercultural awareness, critical thinking and communication align with UAE national education objectives?
- 2a. In what ways do heads of school and teachers at MYP schools with Emirati student cohorts, including candidate MYP schools, believe that the IB MYP is a relevant framework for middle years education in the UAE? What do heads of school and teachers identify as the key benefits of the MYP in the UAE?
- 2b. What are parent and student views of the value of the IB Middle Years Programme?
3. To what degree are MYP schools fulfilling UAE curriculum requirements (e.g. teaching of Arabic, Islamic religion and UAE history)? What are

examples of approaches and practices used by schools to align the MYP with UAE curriculum requirements?

4a. To what extent does the MYP, including the Learner Profile, align well with UAE Islamic religious/civic values?

4b. What are examples of approaches and practices used by schools to align the MYP with UAE Islamic religious/civic values?

The research was undertaken by visits to seven schools that provide the MYP, with five of the schools in Dubai and two of the schools in Abu Dhabi. Four were MYP authorised schools and three were candidate schools. In the methods chapter we provide a more detailed account of the fieldwork that was undertaken.

The report opens with a context chapter in which we provide key information about education in the UAE, and the place of the IB within that (both at a general level, and in relation to the MYP in particular). The chapter sets out local governance arrangements, the nature of the education market and also includes details of UAE curriculum requirements.

In the next chapter we provide an overview of the literature and conceptual frameworks that have informed this research. This includes a discussion of how we have conceptualised 'context' in this paper (drawing on a framework provided by Barnett and Stevenson, 2015), our justification for treating curriculum implementation as a 'process of policy enactment' and finally a discussion of the relationship between Islam and education, and the role of education in Islamic culture.

In chapter 4 we set out the methodology that underpins this research with details of the case study schools and additional data sources that were consulted.

In the final chapters we set out our research findings, analyses and conclusions in relation to the questions that have guided this study. We conclude by offering a number of recommendations that we hope will be helpful for the IBO, for



schools that currently offer the MYP, for candidate schools and for those that are considering offering the MYP in the future.

## **2 UAE Context**

### **2.1 The context of the United Arab Emirates**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been dubbed a “social experiment” (Abed & Hellyer, 2001, p. 6) of rapid economic growth in a wider region that is generally considered politically unstable. After the discovery of oil and natural gas in the 1950s and the ensuing upheaval of the previous balance of power in the region, the loose tribal connections among the sheikhdoms were solidified into a united and independent country in 1971 (Zayed University, 2016). The sudden increase of growth and wealth due to the oil and gas industries allowed the UAE to compress decades of economic development into a short period of time (Abed & Hellyer, 2001, pp. 7-8). The UAE did not follow the typical trend of gradual capital accumulation and advancement but instead, was able to “leap these stages to the stage of high mass consumption” (Shihab, 2001, p. 249). This history has had significant implications on how the country has developed, especially in relation to the system of education.

### **2.2 The development of the UAE**

The change from a trade-based economy reliant on agriculture, animal husbandry, pearling, and handi-crafts to one dedicated to the infrastructure for oil occurred in the 1960s and 1970s (Ghanem, 2001). During this time, significant resources were dedicated toward improving the transportation, local industry, and the support structures for a globally competitive oil industry. With this sudden increase in local jobs, the UAE required high numbers of skilled and semi-skilled workers and this demand was initially met with workers brought in from Europe and other Arab countries (Ghanem, 2001, pp. 260-261). Subsequently, as the construction industry grew dramatically, high numbers of unskilled workers were brought in from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and service industry workers were brought in from the Philippines and Indonesia (Fargues & Shah, 2011).

The population of the UAE has increased dramatically from an estimated 90,000 residents in 1960 to the current population of 9.3 million people, the majority of

these being workers relocating to the region (World Bank, 2015). Between the years of 2005-2010, the rate of population growth was 2.8% annually while the rate of foreign residents grew by 16% annually (De Bel-Air, 2015, p. 8). This is an incredibly high rate of growth which has the effect of diluting the indigenous Emirati population each year.

As of 2010, approximately 88% of the population of the UAE was composed of non-UAE nationals. In Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the two largest cities in the UAE, the expatriate populations are approximately 75% and 90% of the population respectively (De Bel-Air, 2015, p. 9). Across employment sectors, approximately 89% of management positions and 99% of unskilled labour positions are occupied by non-UAE nationals (De Bel-Air, 2015, p. 10). The structure of the UAE's sponsorship laws have been shaped with the high numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in mind. These laws bind together immigration and employment as workers are sponsored by their employer. The labour law clearly indicates which workers are allowed to bring an accompanying spouse and family according to their wages. The unskilled labour population tends to be men who immigrate to the UAE alone. A few jobs (e.g. teacher, doctor) allow women to sponsor an accompanying husband or family. The result is that expatriate workers who are allowed to bring accompanying family members tend to be highly educated and bring along highly educated spouses. Of non-UAE nationals, approximately 16% are not active in the labour force, and of those, 66% are homemakers. These foreign spouses are highly educated with 52% having completed tertiary education (De Bel-Air, 2015, p. 13).

With this rapid change in population, limits on family visas, and the "leaps" over phases in gradual development, the UAE has experienced an extraordinary growth of social services, especially in the sector of education. Highly paid and highly educated expatriate workers with accompanying families come to the UAE expecting an excellent education system (Wilkins, 2013, p. 45). But the education system in the UAE has had little time to develop and historically government-run education was solely aimed toward meeting the needs of the local population. This has created significant challenges, with the need to address them at some speed.

### **2.3 The history of schools in the UAE**

Before the official creation of the UAE in 1971, schooling was primarily religious in nature with Quranic study groups formed by the Mutawa or Imam of the local mosque. These groups met in private homes and were quite informal. In more developed areas, Katateeb were built. These more formalised education systems resembled modern primary schools. Students were taught Islamic law, reading, writing and mathematics (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015, p. 2). As commerce developed, so did the expectations for education in the region. Teachers were brought in from neighbouring countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to teach the local children. The Kuwaiti model of stages of education was adopted and in 1971, at the formation of the UAE, primary education was made mandatory for all Emirati children (Alhebsi et al., 2015, p. 4).

In the following years, several embassy-led schools were created and religious schools began to emerge in the UAE. But the rapid growth of the UAE created a significant demand for schooling for the children of expatriate workers who were not eligible for places in the government school system. The difficulty of becoming a citizen in the UAE, even for second or third generation expatriates, has created a system where many young people never have access to free schooling (Ridge, Kippels, & Shami, 2015, p. 16). Restrictions on who has access to government education in conjunction with the rapid increase in demand for schooling for the children of expatriate workers has created a high demand for private schools in the UAE.

Currently, approximately 88% of schools in the UAE are privately owned (Ridge et al., 2015, p. 7). Private schools cater to the expatriate population by offering curricula matching the home countries of the expatriate workers, but the children of UAE nationals also make up a significant part of the student population in the private school sector. The Dubai Statistics Center (2015) reports that, in the 2015-2016 school year, 295,000 students were enrolled in state and private education in Dubai with 29,500 (only 10%) of those students in government schools. The 57,000 UAE nationals are split nearly 50/50 in the two systems, resulting in a large imbalance of non-Emiratis in the private sector. Emirati students compose approximately 85% of the government school student population and only about 12% of the private school student population (Dubai

Statistics Center, 2015). The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) estimates that approximately 200,000 students of a variety of nationalities attend private schools in Abu Dhabi with around 50,000 (25%) of them Emirati nationals (Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2014).

## **2.4 Regulation of education**

Recognition of limitations in the UAE education system in the early 2000s led to significant policy being created in regards to improving both the government and private education systems (Macpherson, Kachelhoffer, & El Nemr, 2007, p. 2). The UAE Ministry of Education (MOE) responded with new policies for the expectations of education in the country with a particular focus on improving schools in order to maintain growth and ensure prosperity beyond the oil and gas boom (Macpherson et al., 2007). The school reform initiatives were aimed at improving the quality of education and training in the UAE, modernizing the government system, and overseeing the private school industry to “ensure private schools offer safe and legal environments, and quality for value” (Macpherson et al., 2007, p. 6). This led to the creation of the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) in 2005, and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in Dubai in 2006.

Across the Emirates, the Ministry of Education (MOE) sets the basic standards for K-12 state and private education throughout the country. In the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, ADEC oversees all educational activities in that Emirate. ADEC is primarily focused on the 265 public schools and 32 Adult Education training centres and is also charged with overseeing quality assurance in the 185 private schools (Abu Dhabi Education Council). ADEC seeks to improve the quality of government schools and acknowledges the importance of the private school sector due to the high rates of enrolment. In 2008, ADEC launched the Irtiqua’a (“upgrade”) programme to inspect the quality of schools across the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

In the Emirate of Dubai, the KHDA has developed a strategy for increasing educational opportunities and educational training in the Emirate including vocational and higher education. KHDA also has a specific focus on the training and development of Emirati nationals, preparing them for the workforce. KHDA

additionally creates programmes to increase active participation in the local labour market zones and sets the standards for their quality. In 2007, KHDA established the Dubai School Inspection Bureau (DSIB), charged with inspecting private and government schools.

Although ADEC and KHDA are significantly different institutions, they have many similar requirements for schools in the regions. The two agencies issue permits for building private schools, deal with disputes related to schools, oversee the quality of private schools through inspections, and regulate school fees. Through school evaluation visits, the agencies operate as a quality assurance monitor and judge of the value for money in the private schools. Both agencies also closely follow the provision of education to Emirati students at private schools. Each agency runs an “Emiratization” programme aimed at increasing the skills of Emirati nationals and placing them in jobs with continuous support and development opportunities to meet the demands of the job market.

ADEC and KHDA set policies for the requirements of daily Arabic language instruction for native and non-native Arabic speakers, mandate Islamic studies courses, and standardize the UAE social studies curricula of schools. KHDA and ADEC also review and authorize the curriculum of each school. In subjects where the number of instructional periods per week is not required by law, there may still be a requirement for all schools to include these as part of their curriculum.

*Table 1 and*

*Table 2 show the minimum number of instructional periods per week required for different subjects for Arab and non-Arab students in foreign curriculum schools.*

*Table 1: Required number of instructional periods per week for Arab students in private schools*

	Grades 1-3		Grades 4-6		Grades 7-9		Grades 10-12	
	Dubai	Abu Dhabi	Dubai	Abu Dhabi	Dubai	Abu Dhabi	Dubai	Abu Dhabi
Islamic Education (Arab Muslims)	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2

Arabic Language	6	6	5	5	4	4	4	4
UAE Social Studies	--	1	--	1	--	2	--	--

*Table 2: Required number of instructional periods per week for non-Arab students in private schools*

	Grades 1-3		Grades 4-6		Grades 7-9		Grade 10		Grades 11- 12	
	Dubai	Abu Dhabi	Dubai	Abu Dhabi	Dubai	Abu Dhabi	Dubai	Abu Dhabi	Dubai	Abu Dhabi
Islamic Education (Non-Arab Muslims)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Arabic Language	4	4	4	4	4	4	--	4	--	--
UAE Social Studies	--	--	--	1	--	1	--	--	--	--

Note: Data compiled from Knowledge and Human Development Authority of Dubai (2007, pp. 3-4, Article 3) and Abu Dhabi Education Council (2014-2015, pp. 122-123).

The requirements are quite similar between the two Emirates with the exception of the requirements for UAE Social Studies in Abu Dhabi. The most striking pattern is the difference in Arabic language instruction requirements for Arab and non-Arab students. In grades 1-3, Arab students are required to have 2 more instructional periods per week than their non-Arab peers. In grades 4-6, they are required to have one more than non-Arab students. In Dubai, Arabic instruction is no longer required for non-Arabs in grades 10-12, but 4 instructional periods are required for Arab students. This difference may have significant implications for scheduling, student grouping, and instructional offerings for students.

## **2.5 The future of education in the UAE - Vision 2021**

The UAE government has recently introduced *UAE Vision 2021*. The national agenda is composed of goals for improving the UAE with a particular focus on government agencies and includes a focus on improving schools in the UAE. The Ministry of Education has set goals of increasing TIMSS (Trends in International

Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) ranking, increasing scores on national tests of Arabic, increasing graduation rates, increasing enrolment rates in preschools, increasing the quality of schools, teachers, and school leadership, and decreasing the number of students who enrol in a foundation (i.e. remedial) year at universities in the UAE. These goals are aimed primarily at the government schools in the UAE, but standardized testing requirements are becoming more significant across both government and private systems.

In Dubai, the KHDA requires schools to participate in internationally benchmarked exams and the results are considered as part of the school inspection process as of the 2015-2016 school year (Knowledge and Human Development Authority of Dubai, 2015).

Requirements for standardized teacher registration in the UAE may also apply to private schools, but this programme had not been fully implemented.

### **3 Research Overview/Conceptual Framing**

In this section we set out some of the key ideas and theoretical frameworks we have drawn on in this study. Central to our approach is to see the curriculum as an act of 'policy enactment' that takes place within a specific context. We therefore discuss the importance of context and the different ways in which macro and micro contexts interact to shape the practices and behaviours in individual schools and classrooms. We also discuss our approach to the curriculum as a process of policy enactment in which policy is presented as the 'operational statements of values' (Kogan, 1975), and the curriculum is construed as the operationalisation of values within the context of a programme of learning. We therefore see the curriculum as the expression of a fundamental set of values that emerge from the (oftentimes contested) responses to a set of key questions – what is education for? What 'knowledge' is privileged and who decides?

Finally, there can be no engagement with these issues without an appreciation of Islam as a faith and the role of education within Islam. Understanding of individual faiths is often superficial and it is a sad reflection of current times that

in many Western countries, this particularly applies to Islam, often with extremely deleterious consequences. In this report we cannot hope to do justice to the richness and complexity of the Muslim faith and the centuries of thinking, and range of philosophical opinion captured within it, however we do set out some of the key issues in relation to Islam as a religion, with a focus on how these connect with education.

### **3.1 Context matters**

Wherever schooling takes place it must be considered as a complex relationship between the actions of those working in the school, and the wider contextual factors, including political, economic, cultural and religious, that frame that work. Within schools the scope of leaders, teachers, and students to act (have agency) is also framed by powerful contextual factors that can enable, or limit, the scope for particular actions. For example, the curriculum requirements mandated by ADEC and KHDA, as outlined in section 2.4, may offer both affordances and restrictions to school leaders and teachers. In this sense, it is important to recognise that agency is constrained, and it is essential to recognise how, and in what ways, contextual factors shape the cultures, norms and behaviours within specific educational settings.

In taking this approach we seek to understand the relationship between the global and the vernacular. Globalisation is best understood as a process by which the world has become smaller. It can be considered in economic, political, social and cultural terms and is characterised by ever larger, and faster, flows of goods, services, capital and people across borders. Education is at the heart of the processes of globalisation. It is central to addressing the key questions facing any society – what type of society is the aspiration? What does it mean to be a citizen? These disarmingly simple questions become more complex as the notion of society and identity become shaped by global factors.

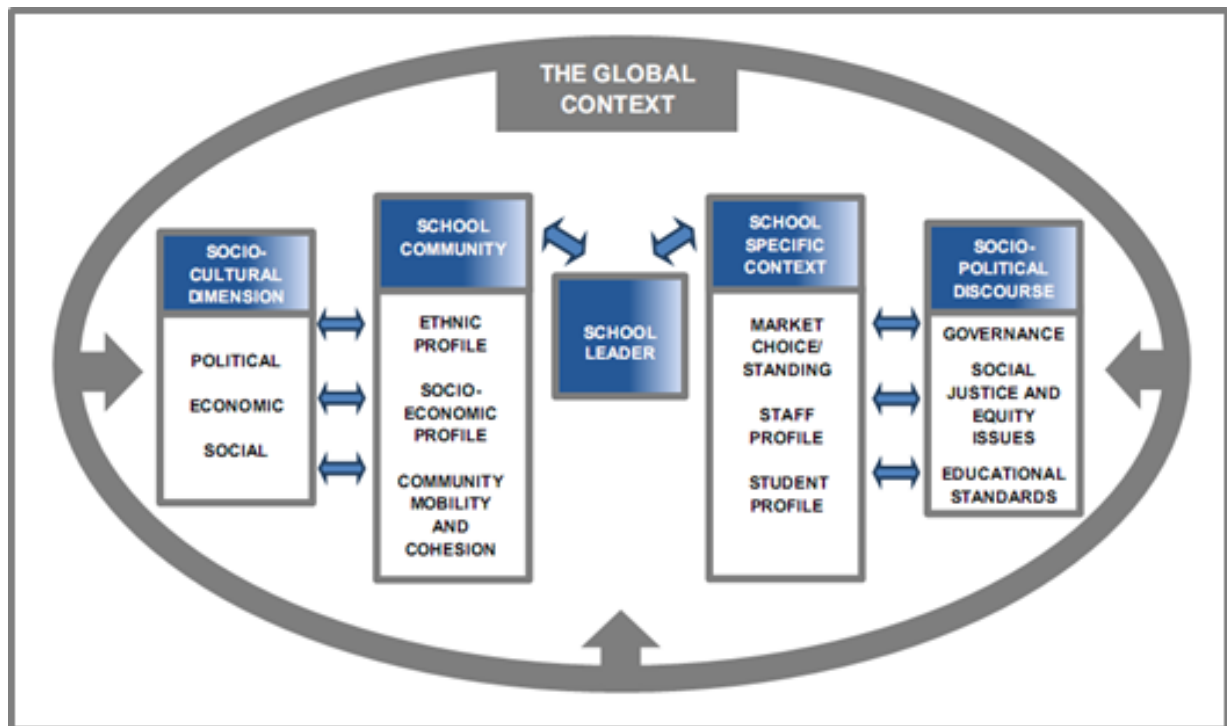
Spring's (2015) analysis of the relationship between globalisation and education highlights the multiple ways in which education is framed by the processes of globalisation. One obvious example of how globalisation pressures shape education provision is in response to greatly increased labour mobility. The growth in the international schools movement is one manifestation of the



changes in demand that emerge from a more mobile workforce. However, the impact of globalisation is about more than meeting the needs of sections of an internationally mobile workforce but requires the development of curricula and pedagogical responses that reflect this internationalism. Some of the pressures reflect the demands of the global economy, most obviously the demand to learn English as a foreign language. However, other curricula pressures have different sources. For example, although a young person may never leave their home nation, they are nevertheless, increasingly, global citizens. How does the curriculum they experience in their schooling prepare them for an increasingly interconnected world, even if in geographical terms, they remain located close to the place of their birth? And how does the curriculum they experience reflect the experiences of their peers, many of whom will have come from other countries – oftentimes by choice, but sometimes by necessity?

These developments are significant, and they have considerable impact on the ways in which schools and schooling develop around the world. There can be no question that globalisation is contributing to increasingly common experiences in many different parts of the world. However, this should not be confused with a uniform homogenising of the educational experience, whereby global trends play out as though local factors make no difference. On the contrary, there is a clear need to recognise the enduring influence of local context and to understand how local experiences reflect a mix of global and local in which local factors remain centrally important.

In this study we draw on a framework that seeks to connect the macro and micro contexts within which every school operates in order to understand the experiences, and actions, within which the schools in this study operate. This framework was first presented in a study involving two of the authors of this report (see Dimmock, Stevenson, Bignold, Shah and Middlewood, 2005), and was specifically developed to explain the experiences of schools with culturally diverse student populations. It has been further refined and developed in Angelle, Morrison and Stevenson (2015) and Barnett and Stevenson (2015). The framework is presented here:



*Figure 1: The macro and micro contexts of schooling (Barnett and Stevenson, 2015)*

The model is not intended to be an accurate reflection of any particular system, but rather is intended to provide a framework for understanding what might be described as the eco-system within which a school functions. Where the model does not reflect local conditions it may need to be modified.

Within the model the outer boxes can be said to broadly reflect national level factors such as systems of governance and political cultures, a country's economic system and circumstances and the religious orientation of the country which will include the relationship between any dominant religion(s) and the state. All of these have a significant impact on the shape and experience of schools. In this study, these national level factors include the governance of the UAE as a federal absolute monarchy, the influence of Islamic (Sharia) law and the five pillars of Islam (see section 3.4), and the cultural values of the UAE shaped by the Bedouin history of the Emirati people, and the manifestation of that in strong family ties and codes of honour.

References to the 'social political discourses' draws attention to the dominant discourses that frame policy and practice in any specific context, and in

particular those that relate to education. These might include questions of excellence, equity, standards and citizenship. Many of these themes can be traced to global discourses but within particular countries and contexts they are often framed distinctively. In this study, one example of the social political discourses can be encapsulated by the policies and ordinances from ADEC and the KHDA.

At the micro level the model identifies a number of contextual issues that reflect a school's local community and some of the specific factors that impact on individual institutions. Those factors relating to the 'school community' refer primarily to the community from which the school potentially draws its students, and is, by definition, beyond the school. For some schools, this community may be very close to the school and it may describe community immediately located adjacent to the school. However, for some schools this notion of a 'catchment area' may be both much larger, and less obviously bounded. In the UAE, school communities are diverse, depending on the neighbourhood where the school is situated, and the reputation of the school and the fee structure, both of which go some way to determining how far students would commute to attend school.

In contrast, the 'school specific context' addresses more directly the question of who is in the school – both as students and as staff. Again, the issues of interest relate to who the students are – by gender, background, age profile. A similar set of issues can be applied to the staff. All of these factors can have a very specific impact on shaping how a school context is experienced. We visited schools where the majority of students were Emirati, where the majority was split between Emirati and expatriate students from MENA regions, and those schools with student populations from primarily Western countries.

We have presented this framework here because of the need to locate this study in a broader context framed by global, national and local developments. The International Baccalaureate can be considered as a quintessentially global phenomenon. It is global in both form and intent. IB schools are found throughout the world, moreover, IB explicitly seeks to prepare students as global citizens who are internationally minded and who can be active participants in a world that is more diverse and connected than ever. At the same time, its

commitment to intercultural awareness requires any implementation to acknowledge and respect national traditions, and ensure these are embedded within local programmes.

The challenge for educators, and most obviously school leaders, is to navigate these contextual issues. This requires teachers and school leaders to understand the context within which they work, and to identify where there is 'space' for agency, where decisions can be made and judgement exercised. This can be considered the 'space' where teachers and leaders seek to adapt and mediate the diverse factors that shape their context in order to create a coherent educational experience for students and young people.

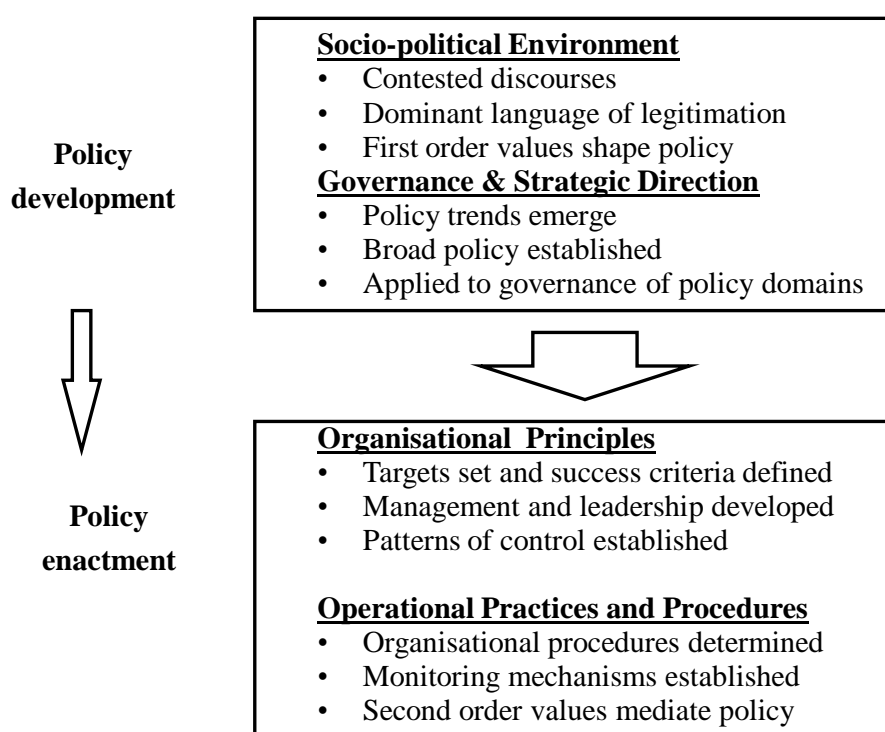
### **3.2 Curriculum as policy and the process of policy enactment**

The analytical frame that we propose for this study is grounded in that of policy analysis, and in particular it draws on the notions of 'policy enactment' (Ball et al, 2012) and 'policy evaluation' (Gordon et al, 1997). Before we provide a justification for such an approach, we wish to set out a justification for treating curriculum as 'policy'.

Traditional notions of policy frequently conjure up images of 'upper case 'P' Politics' – or what governments do (Dye,1992). Although there is an acknowledgement that it is important to think of 'policy' much more broadly than that which refers to the acts of governments it can be difficult to move beyond a conception of policy which is more than a set of rules or guidelines (Harman,1984). Whilst such approaches are understandable they fail to capture the diversity of contexts in which what we might call 'policy' frames practices. As a consequence it is argued that policy must be seen as a broader construct that can assume many different forms. Our starting point is to draw on Kogan's (1975) classic statement of policy as the 'operational statements of values' (p. 55) in which policies provide a framework whereby values are translated into statements (articulated in diverse forms) that in turn frame actions and practices. The advantage of such an approach is that it rejects simplistic notions of policy as purely 'guidelines' that provide instructions (policy as outcome), but rather allow us to see policy as a process in which values are translated into practices through the actions of all those engaged in the 'policy process'. Such

an approach reminds us that policy is frequently messy – it is contested and negotiated and reflects not only the struggles and compromises over competing values, but also the relative power of policy actors. It also, crucially, reflects the contextual specificities of the environment where policy is being enacted. This approach to policy enactment avoids a neat, and over-tidy, representation of policy development and implementation as two separate processes.

In a previous study (Bell and Stevenson, 2006 and more recently Bell and Stevenson, 2013) we have offered Figure 2 as a visual representation of this process.



*Figure 2: Policy development and enactment: a theoretical framework*

Although presented as a 'top-down' model it is not intended to be interpreted as overly hierarchical or linear. In whatever system, and however apparently centralised, there remains scope for agency as those who 'implement' policy interpret, make sense and evaluate any policy in particular ways. In this sense it

is possible to think of policy as a something that is constantly being formed, and re-formed, as it is being enacted. It can never be considered as a finished product, but is always a work in progress that is being navigated, mediated and sometimes contested. This complexity is conveyed by Ball (1994) when he highlights the range of meanings that are divested in policy 'texts', both in terms of those who write them and those who read them.

*The physical text that pops through the school letterbox, or wherever, does not arrive 'out of the blue' – it has an interpretational and representational history – and neither does it enter a social and institutional vacuum. (Ball, 1994, p. 17)*

Our approach in this study is to set the concept of curriculum within the context of curriculum as policy. Traditional notions of curriculum emphasise curriculum as a framework (or frameworks) around which teaching and learning is organised. The curriculum, narrowly defined, may specify content in the form of knowledge and skills, although broader conceptions also recognise all the diverse ways in which learning in an institution such as a school takes place (the 'hidden curriculum'). There is also often a recognition that the curriculum enunciated (for example in curriculum documents) often differs to the curriculum enacted (what is 'taught') which in turn differs to the curriculum experienced (what is learned).

Approaching the curriculum as a study of 'policy enactment' allows us to explore the complex ways in which understandings about the aims and purposes of education are translated into the practices of teachers. The value of the approach is that it seeks to capture the diverse ways in which 'curriculum' is articulated (from formal curriculum policy statements through to the daily practices of teachers), and to understand the complex ways in which these processes are negotiated by the actors involved. We further believe that this approach is well suited to understanding how those working in schools seek to navigate and negotiate multiple policy frameworks, for example where those working in IB World Schools are also working within the policy frameworks of local statutory bodies. Such situations can require complex manoeuvres as those

working in schools seek to reconcile what can be contrasting, and in some cases contradictory, policy expectations.

### **3.3 Curriculum, context and culture**

There is always a close relationship between any curriculum and the cultural context in which it is based, although the nature of that relationship is extraordinarily complex. Wiliam (2013) argues that one of the key functions of education is that of cultural transmission, but whose culture is being transmitted, and who decides? What aspects of culture are to be 'transmitted' and whose culture 'counts'? What features of culture are included in the curriculum, and which are made invisible? How important is it that the curriculum is constructed in a way that reflects the cultural experiences of students? In many ways this latter question goes to the heart of some of the most fundamental debates in education today. These are debates about the curriculum which illustrate the interconnectedness of everything from the debate about educational purposes through to the pedagogical experiences in classrooms, via the curriculum.

Those grounded in the humanist constructivist tradition emphasise the need for teaching to start from the lived experience of students, and to create educational experiences in which students make meaning about the new, based on what they already know and understand about their world. Meaning is, literally, constructed, from the world the student inhabits. Learning is a social process in which the learner needs to be provided with opportunities to interact with others as part of a meaning making process. An alternative perspective has achieved renewed interest and is best summarised in the work of ED Hirsch (The Core Knowledge Foundation, 2016), and his notion of 'core knowledge'. This approach to the curriculum (and pedagogy) emphasises the need to expose children to 'the best that has been thought and known'. Briefly, proponents argue that there is a body of knowledge ('core knowledge') that, within any particular society, an educated person should be able to access. Hirsch's argument is that there does not need to be much disagreement about what this core knowledge should be. It should reflect the latest developments in scientific knowledge and an appreciation of the best that culture can provide. There is a recognition that some of this content will be culturally determined, partly

because Hirsch makes the case that 'core knowledge' is the knowledge required to participate in particular societies, and that will look different in the USA, for example, when compared China. Given the basis of this argument it follows that a different set of pedagogical implications flow from the analysis. Those involved in teaching are much less involved in a process of co-construction but rather they can be seen as in possession of the core knowledge with a duty to transmit this to future generations. In this sense the notion of curriculum as principally concerned with content (*what* is taught) cannot be separated from a wider concern with curriculum as pedagogy (*how* teaching develops learning).

This is an important debate about the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and culture but it risks, being contained within a narrow, western tradition which ignores much wider questions about the role of culture, and problems of cultural bias in curriculum design. In this instance, the accusation is that the debate between constructivists and 'traditionalists' fails to acknowledge a much wider question in which whatever side in the debate is being taken, a western paradigmatic view of knowledge and the nature of knowledge is being privileged over other traditions.

With regard to the IB this issue has long been regarded as an issue. The IB is philosophically committed to promoting international mindedness and developing active global citizens. For the IB these can be considered core values when answering the question 'what is education for?' However, it is also recognised that the way this question is often answered reflects the IB's roots in the western liberal tradition.

This was identified in the publication '*East is East, West is West*' (Walker, 2010) in which the author counsels against over-simplification and stereo-typing, but does accept IB's difficulty in adequately reflecting the rich intellectual tradition of East Asia. In *Towards a continuum of international education* (IBO, 2008) the International Baccalaureate Organisation recognises that a key challenge to its programmes is that they "have grown from a western humanist tradition, [and now] the influence of non-western cultures on all three programmes is becoming increasingly important" (IBO, 2008. p. 2). Singh and Jing (2013) conclude that



the origin of the IB programme in Western philosophies is the key issue with the definition and practice of international-mindedness today.

*Western humanism celebrates the life, the only life, we have in this world, rather than any anticipated life beyond it. It does not deny the significance of religious belief but insists that human virtue does not necessarily owe anything to religious intervention. Authority religious and secular—is open to challenge in the search for truth. Empathy and scientific understanding create a set of moral values that confer dignity upon human beings who have the capacity—though not the necessity—to "say no to God".*

*For better or for worse, humankind is on its own, believing, in Socrates' words, that the unexamined life is not worth living. Scholarship must function independently of religious authority and devise its own criteria for truth, or for the different truths that shape our chosen classifications of knowledge and understanding—scientific, historical, mathematical, religious, moral etc. The search for these truths will be through the accumulation and examination of evidence, through argument and debate, and through the construction and demolition of hypotheses. (Walker, 2010, p. 4)*

Walker's work focused on the contrast between IB's western tradition, and the Confucian tradition dominant in much of East Asia. It is understandable that this was the author's chosen focus but it is perhaps significant that there is no equivalent work that explores the relationship between the western humanist tradition and its Islamic equivalent. Recognising and responding to this diversity has long been acknowledged as a complex issue, and a challenge for school leaders and teachers (Dimmock *et al*, 2005 and Shah, 2009).

A focus of this research therefore will be to explore the complex range of factors which influence how individual IB World Schools in the UAE seek to align the values and frameworks of the IB MYP with the values of Islamic education and the expectations of the local community with regard to Islamic education.

Central to this project is the need to understand the role of education in Islam, and the ways in which Islamic approaches to education are underpinned by core Islamic values.

### **3.4 Islam, Islamic values and Islamic education**

The following is intended to set out the key elements of Islam in relation to this study. It is inevitably presented at an elementary level. Islam is a faith that reflects centuries of complex philosophy and there are different traditions and perspectives, as there are in many religions. These differences in perspective reflect differences of both time and geography. Many readers of this report will already possess a detailed and sophisticated understanding of Islamic beliefs and values. What follows here is intended to act as the essential understanding of Islam required to engage with the key issues presented in this report. We begin by setting out the basic elements of Islam as a religion, including some historical background before discussing in more detail Islamic values, the role of education in Islam and discussing some of the more complex questions within these debates.

Islam is a monotheist religion, in which the essential elements of faith are articulated in the Quran, which is considered to be the verbatim word of God (*Allāh*). The Quran is written in the Arabic language, and translations can be considered accurate, but not authentic or equivalent, versions of the original. Muslims (adherents of Islam) believe that the Quran was revealed to the prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel during the last 23 years of Muhammad's life (he died in 632). Islam as a faith predated Muhammad, and was communicated through prophets such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus but Muhammad is considered as the last prophet of Allah. Alongside the Quran, although not of equal importance, Muhammad's teachings and example are considered to be key guides to Islamic living, and these are recorded in accounts composed following Muhammad's life called *hadith*.

Muslim commitment to faith is demonstrated through the five pillars of Islam, considered to be the fundamentals of Muslim life, which are faith (*Shahada*), prayer (*Salat*), charity (*Zakat*), fasting (*Siyam*) and pilgrimage (*Hajj*).

Islam is the second largest religion in the world, and considered to be the fastest growing. It represents between 20-23% of the world's population and with 20% of that total located in the Middle East and North Africa region. The faith has many variants, with the main two main denominations being Sunni and Shia. The former are estimated to include between 75 and 90% of all Muslims with Shia accounting for 10-20%. These are not the only two denominations, and within all the denominations there are groups and sub-groups. This is only to be expected in a religion with more than 1.5 billion members, spread across the globe. Inevitably there are significant debates between and within denominations, and such pluralism of thought can be considered a virtue in a faith that privileges knowledge and intellectual thought. However, it is important to acknowledge that what unites all Muslims in their faith is the belief in the 'Oneness' of God (*Tawhid*) – 'the existence of one God who is the Source of all knowledge directly entails the unity and integrality of all epistemological sources and ends (Daud, 1989, pp66-67 in Shah, 2015, p.26).

This complexity in the nature of Islam is reflected in the debate about what might be considered to constitute 'Islamic values'. Despite the importance of authoritative texts there is no singular statement of the values that underpin Islam, but rather any attempt to construct a framework of Islamic values must be gleaned from interpretations of the key contexts. Values can be considered fundamental to the world we construct. Earlier in this report we have argued that 'policies' ought to be considered as 'operational statements of values', and in much the same way it is clear that key elements of the architecture of any society, such as its legal and judicial framework, are also, in essence, grounded in a set of values. However, to assert this is not to assert that there is clarity, let alone agreement, about what those values are. Does equality mean everyone receiving the same treatment, or those in greatest need receiving preferential treatment? These can be completely different responses based on a rhetorical commitment to the same fundamental value.

Recognising the fundamental importance of values it becomes necessary to at least attempt to map out what can be said to constitute 'Islamic values'. This is perhaps doubly important at the current time. Amongst many Muslims there is a concern that the essential features of Islam are not widely understood outside of

the Islamic community, and that such ignorance can feed Islamophobia whereby, for example, the terrorist actions of those who claim to be Islamic are imputed to the wider Muslim population. Within the Muslim community this is understandably a concern, and is reflected in the issues raised in a recent survey when only a minority of Britons surveyed believed that Islam is 'compatible with British values', and in which only 30% of over 25s believed Islam promoted peace ([ComRes, 2016](#)).

Any analysis of Islamic values would actually reveal a high degree of congruence with what might be widely considered as 'universal values', although it is still important to highlight Islamic values in more detail as the nuance and the detail is important. As indicated, these values are not presented as a definitive, or even agreed list, but rather a number of items have been extracted from the writings of various Islamic scholars.

One common approach is to identify the values that are evident within the five pillars of Islam. For example, Shahada (faith) emphasises the notion of good moral conduct, to pursue excellence in commitment to faith and to live one's life according to high ethical and moral standards. Many scholars emphasise the pursuit of knowledge as an important Islamic value with the Quran emphasising the pursuit of both spiritual and worldly knowledge. This clearly has important implications for education, in terms of an attitude to learning, as well as having implications for content.

Zakat, with its commitment to giving, highlights a number of values such as compassion, equality, selflessness and giving. On the other hand, Siyam (fasting) and Hajj emphasise the values of patience, self-control, persistence, abstinence from what is unnecessary, devotion and humility.

Any reading of Islamic literature makes clear the central importance of knowledge and learning. It should not be surprising, given the emphasis on knowledge acquisition in its broadest sense that Islamic cultures have long privileged the place of education in society. This was clear in the 'golden age' of Islam between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries when Islamic societies were at the forefront of human intellectual development in the areas of arts, science and

culture. This was also the time when the Madrasas emerged, paralleling the development of the first universities in Italy and France, and the 'colleges' in England. That said, any notion of an education system in the traditional sense would be an inaccurate description, with much emphasis in learning placed on learning within families, and indeed the responsibility of the individual to engage in learning.

One particular emphasis within Islamic attitudes to education can be identified as a focus on 'wholeness'. This can be discerned in a number of ways including between the temporal and the spiritual, between the technical and the artistic and between different stages in one's life and indeed between life in this world and the next.

All of the above emphasises the centrality of learning and knowledge in Islam. Shah (2015) argues that an Islamic approach to education rests on a number of core Islamic values, and that an understanding of these values is central to understanding Islamic approaches to education, and the importance of knowledge pursuit to Muslims. First, Shah identifies education for holistic development, which is seen in relation to both the individual and society. Second, Shah argues that inquiry and reflection are pivotal to Islamic approaches to education. Indeed, she goes further and argues that inquiry and reflection must be underpinned by a commitment to consultation (*Shura*) and seeking consensus based on rational argument (*Ijtihad*). It follows from this that there must also be space for disagreement (*Ikhtilaf*) and from this Shah identifies a third key element of Islamic approaches to education which is a respect for difference, a rejection of compulsion and a commitment to pluralism. She elaborates the argument thus:

*... emphasis on tolerance [is] one of the essential values on which Islam is based. Shura, Ijtihad and Ikhtilaf cannot be operationalised without tolerance and respect for plurality and diversity. Islam proclaims equality and fraternity, and promotes Shura (the Quran 42:38) and consensus as the recommended approaches to decision-making ... The significance of Shura in Islam is evidenced in the fact that Sure 42 is named Al Shura*

*(consultation), and it emphasises and explicates consultation as decision making process. An education that does not align with these principles cannot claim to be Islamic. (Shah, 2015, p4.)*

In conclusion we focus on the centrality of knowledge within the Islamic tradition, which is an element considered so important that pursuit of knowledge is esteemed even above acts of worship. God is presented as the ultimate knower (the 'All-knowing One', The Quran, 12:76), and this spiritual knowledge is far beyond the knowledge available to humans in this world. Indeed Shah (2015) points out:

*Knowledge occupies a central position in Islam and is a distinctive feature of Islamic philosophy and Muslim civilization. The word used for knowledge in the Quran is 'ilm', which embraces meanings and messages that are beyond the scope of the English word knowledge. The word ilm emerges as a very powerful concept in Islam with unparalleled depth of meaning, exercising a defining influence over all aspects of the Muslim civilization. (p. 20).*

The notion of knowledge within Islam is therefore far broader than that traditionally conceived within western philosophy. In particular, proponents reject what is presented as a false binary between positivism and interpretivism and argue that by rejecting the spiritual dimension that underpins knowledge western traditions are limited and, necessarily, inadequate. For Muslims it is necessary to go beyond the limitations imposed by a rational secularism and pursue a deeper and more spiritual conception of knowledge.

*Islam invites its followers to exercise their intellect and make use of their knowledge to inform action and to attain truth. Islamic concept of knowledge recognises the role of human intellect ('aql) and senses in knowledge building . . . but then moves on to claims that knowledge gained through senses or material forms is an initial stage which should prepare for moving on to higher levels of*

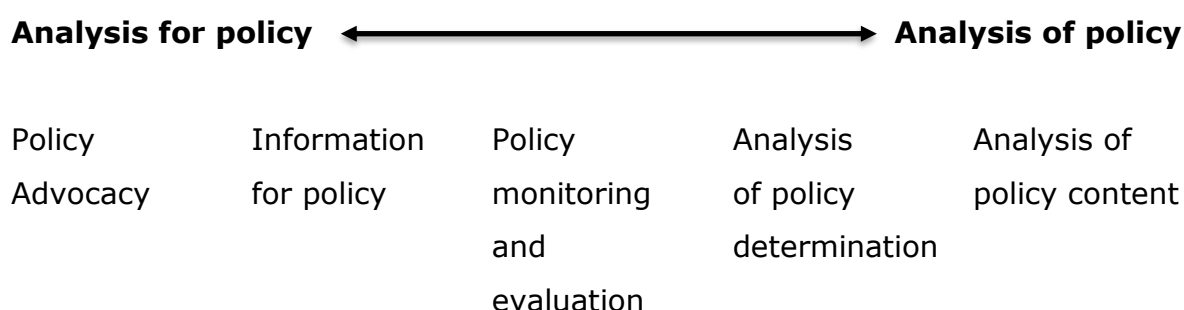
*knowledge into the realms of the spiritual and divine, embracing the mystic and prophetic knowledge. (Shah, 2015, p. 27)*

## 4 Methodology

As indicated previously, this study is focused on the experience of providing the MYP curriculum within the context of the United Arab Emirates. The research approach taken by the study was to adopt a qualitative methodology in which we sought to engage with as many of the MYP schools in the UAE as possible. The research questions that underpin the study are listed in the introduction.

### 4.1 Research as policy analysis

As discussed in section 3.2, the approach we have adopted is to understand the process of 'curriculum implementation' as a process of policy enactment, and therefore this study is located in an approach to research informed by policy analysis. Such a term can be used to include a broad range of approaches to researching policy, with some of the different approaches identified by Gordon et al. (1997) as those between research *for* policy and research *of* policy.



*Source: Gordon et al. 1997: 5*

The research in this study draws on several of the perspectives outlined above. The research is intended to be helpful to both those engaged in providing the IB MYP in the UAE, and those considering it. For this reason we see one of the key aims of the research to provide 'information for policy'. However, in order to meet this objective we are concerned with an analysis of policy whereby we seek to understand how policy is enacted, both in terms of how it is developed locally,

how it is interpreted and how those involved as 'policy actors' make sense of the policy and translate it into specific actions and practices.

Adopting this approach to the research questions necessitated a qualitative research methodology in which we have sought to capture the richness, complexity and sometimes the tensions embedded within the policy enactment process. Our concern was to identify data sources that provided this level of detail in terms of both text and talk.

In the following section we set out the data sources used in this research project, and in so doing we also provide details in relation to questions of sampling.

## **4.2 Data sources and sampling**

All authorised and candidate MYP schools in the United Arab Emirates were invited to participate in this study. When the study commenced in 2015 there were 14 schools in the UAE offering the IBO MYP, with six being candidate schools whereby the schools are in the process of becoming fully authorised IB World Schools. It was never the intention to work with all schools, but the decision was taken to invite all schools to participate given the relatively small number of schools in the population and the recognition that it would be unlikely to secure 100% involvement. Following these invitations a number of schools responded positively and we set about working with these schools to make arrangements for the research teams to visit. In many cases this proved to be straightforward although in some cases an initial positive response was followed by a subsequent withdrawal. This was often for understandable reasons such as changes in senior staff after the initial contact or the timing of an inspection that could not have been anticipated. The study therefore is based on all those schools who accepted an invitation to participate, and for whom it was possible to arrange a visit.

The education community in the UAE is relatively small, and within that the number of IB World Schools offering the MYP are few in number. As a result, the provision of any school specific details can make school identification relatively



easy. We are keen to maintain the anonymity of schools (and individuals) as this was an undertaking we gave to all participants. For this reason we have chosen not to present individual anonymised profiles of the participating schools as this would not be compatible with ensuring non-identification. However, in order to provide readers with important contextual information we offer the following background information about the sample of schools involved. Where specific school features impact on the findings we refer to these in the relevant section of the results.

This study is based on visits to the seven schools that accepted the invitation to participate from amongst all eligible schools. Five of these schools were located in Dubai, with the other two based in Abu Dhabi. This is significant as the inspection bodies, which play an important role in the UAE are different in the two Emirates, and there are small but important differences in curriculum requirements.

School sizes varied from just over 500 to circa 2000. Three schools had fewer than 1000 students (across the 3-19 age range) and three schools were just above or below the figure of 2000 students.

The student profiles varied considerably by school. In three schools the largest single group represented in the student body was Emirati, whilst in two schools this was Indian and in two other schools it was students from the USA. Most schools were extremely diverse with 70+ nationalities being represented in some cases. The percentage of Emirati students in the seven schools was as follows (in ascending order): 1%, 2.5%, 15%, 19%, 21%, 75% and 95%. We would present this as having two schools significantly above and significantly below the national figure, and three schools broadly similar to the figures for the UAE more widely.

KHDA reports now indicate which is the largest nationality grouping on the staff, and the figure for teacher turnover. ADEC reports provide only the teacher turnover figure. In four out of the five Dubai schools the largest grouping of

teachers was British (and teachers from the USA in the fifth). Figures for annual teacher turnover in schools in Dubai and Abu Dhabi ranged from 11% to 40%.

All schools educated girls and boys, although in two cases this was done separately in the MYP years.

### **4.3 Interviews**

The visits to the seven schools were typically two days in duration and involving one or two members of the research team. The principal purpose of visits was to undertake interviews with key actors. In each case schools were provided with full details about the project, its aims and methods. We then provided to each school a profile of the type of people/ role holders that we wanted to interview, and then we relied on the school to construct a programme of interviewees. This inevitably involves some gate-keeping by the school, although we have no reason to suggest that in any school we worked with, this was a problem. Schools require the ability to take some control over the organisation of the research visit as constructing such a programme can be difficult. Timetabling and unscheduled events need taking account of, and in many cases, schools will be able to identify people important to the project who the research team will know nothing about. This collaborative approach to constructing a programme is essential and, in our view, has no obvious compromising effects on the research.

Each school was asked to construct a schedule broadly within these parameters:

1. Senior leaders (School principal, MYP co-ordinator etc)
2. A range of classroom teachers across subject areas, and, importantly, to include teachers of Islamic studies and Arabic language.
3. Students – ideally drawn from a range of years across the MYP
4. Parents – ideally reflective of the school’s student profile.

Table 3 makes clear how many interviewees were seen in each school, and their distribution across the different types of role.

*Table 3: Numbers of interviewees by school*

<b>School</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
School leaders	3	3	2	2	5	4	2
Teachers	9	13	9	4	8	1	6
Students	9	12	7	6	9	6	6
Parents	3	6	5	3	2	8	2
Other	-	-	1 <sup>1</sup>	1 <sup>2</sup>			

<sup>1</sup> – member of staff responsible for liaison with Ministry authorities and KHDA.

<sup>2</sup> - librarian

Interviews were conducted in a range of formats. Most interviews with school managers and teaching staff were conducted with individuals or sometimes in pairs. Interviews with teachers of Arabic and Islamic studies were almost always interviewed in pairs, or part of a small group. This was largely due to language issues, the frequent need for translation, and sometimes the confidence that is gained from being with others, especially in an unusual context and where English fluency may be an issue.

Interviews with students were always conducted in groups. This was in part because of the research team's commitment to always ensure student interviews are conducted this way for child protection reasons, but also for all the positive arguments that relate to group interviews. Such an approach allowed the research team to put questions 'on the table' and then listen and observe as students debated the issue between themselves. This was particularly effective when mixed groups of students debated their attitudes to, and experiences of, for example, Arabic and Islamic Studies allowing for the type of exchange that would be most unlikely in a one-to-one, or even a small group, interview. The research team have conducted several studies with IB students and a feature of these students has been their ability to engage with researchers in a confident and articulate manner. IB students do not have a monopoly on possessing good discussion skills but we would argue that a feature of an IB education is that the students are often very capable debaters. This was our experience in this study

where the group interviews with students provoked lively exchanges and provided extremely rich data.

Parents were also interviewed in groups. Parent interviews can be difficult to convene and so schools found these easiest to organise at one single time. Parents were overwhelmingly drawn from those involved in Parents' Associations or similar. As a consequence parents were very familiar with their school. Parents were generally very positive, and this may reflect the small sample size drawn from a particular source. However, there was no evidence that views might be unrepresentative, and indeed parent interviewees could be very forthright on some issues. Although, created for convenience the same arguments that applied to student groups could be said to extend to parent interviews, that is they were often greatly enhanced by an element of debate within the group.

#### **4.4 Observation within the school, and of lessons**

Almost all of the visits were based on a model of one or two researchers in the school for two days. During such times there is considerable opportunity to absorb the culture of the institution and to see it in its 'every day way'. In all cases researchers were given a guided tour, usually conducted by MYP students. In some cases, following initial orientation, researchers were left to navigate their own way round the school, finding their own way to the next interview or appointment. In some cases 'formal' lesson observations were included in the schedule, and in other cases teachers welcomed us into their classrooms, keen to show us the work they were doing, and how the classroom environment they have created reflects the IB experience they wanted to offer. All of these experiences were very valuable and contributed greatly to our appreciation of the rich dynamics of each school. However, 'observation' *per se* was not part of our research design and although it is inevitable that one 'absorbs' what one sees, and in turn has some influence on what one reports, there has been no systematic attempt to analyse what was observed. At no point were we walking round with clipboards and no judgements were being made about what we saw in schools or specific classrooms.

#### **4.5 Website analysis**

Websites are widely recognised as a powerful means of communication. Such is the power of the internet that many institutions now see this as their principal means of communication, avoiding using 'hard copy' which can become outdated and is hard to keep current. Websites therefore have assumed a particular significance in modern communication acting as a channel to both internal and external audiences. Recognising this function of websites, a detailed analysis of the websites of all the MYP IB World Schools in the UAE was undertaken. Content was recorded and analysed in so far as it shed light on the research questions addressed in the study. In using this data, we have avoided using any direct quotes from web pages. Such information makes the source easily traceable and therefore the easy identification of individual schools. Although, by definition, this material is in the public domain, indeed its purpose is precisely to communicate to the public, we believe it is in the spirit of this report to work hard to avoid the direct identification of any individual institution. This was the undertaking we provided to participants and it is one we are keen to maintain, even with regard to information that is publicly available.

#### **4.6 External report and documents**

In order to address the research questions it was important to analyse a number of external reports and documents. Following on from the point above, the vast majority of these were accessed from websites. A search was undertaken of several websites considered germane to this study including the UAE Ministry of Education and the websites of KHDA and ADEC. A very large amount of the material on these sites is in Arabic and English. However, the search was specifically undertaken by an Arabic speaker to ensure any key documents that may be in Arabic only were identified. In some cases, the translation of English documents was compared to the Arabic original in order to ensure that all key information was identified.

As well as a range of policy documents, the inspection reports for all the schools in the study were analysed.

## 4.7 Research challenges

In a globalized world there is growing interest in undertaking cross-cultural research. There is nothing intrinsically new about such research but the increased interest in it has generated an awareness in relation to a number of issues that can prove challenging for researchers. In the final section of this chapter we set out a number of methodological challenges that emerged in this research project, and how we endeavoured to resolve them. In presenting this discussion we do so in the interests of transparency and discussion. We do not claim to have resolved the issues we discuss, because they are not resolvable in any simple sense. What we hope is that by being transparent readers can decide for themselves to what extent we may have successfully mitigated for the challenges we faced. Readers may also make judgements about whether the issues identified here, represent an adequate reflection of the issues we faced. It may well be that we have made assumptions which others would want to challenge. We present all this in a spirit of openness, which we hope reflects the way we have conducted this research. We have sought to be rigorous, systematic and, where possible, conclusive. But we do so recognising that the issues are complex and require interpretation from multiple perspectives to ensure that findings do not reflect only a narrow set of assumptions. In presenting these arguments we identify two particular issues that emerged in the study relating to, firstly, the need to develop deep cross cultural understanding, and second was the need to protect the anonymity of institutions and individuals in a context where various practical problems, largely based on the small number of schools in a small geographical area make that very difficult. The first issue might be considered one of principle, whilst the second is more pragmatic.

The need for cross-cultural understandings was recognised as an issue at the outset. The IBO's commissioning of this research has been borne, in part, out of a recognition that there is not an obvious and easy alignment between the culture and values that underpin IB programmes and the cultures of non-Western traditions. This was acknowledged within the IB's discussion document 'East is East, West is West' (Walker 2010) in relation to predominantly Confucian based cultures and is likely to present similar issues in an Islamic context. Indeed, Mullen, Samier, Brindley, English and Carr (2013) have argued that

Emirati culture is at risk of being marginalised within its own country by a form of intellectual imperialism being promoted by foreign universities and international schools in which Emirati culture is made invisible. As a research team based in the UK we recognised we were in danger of reproducing in our research precisely the problems Mullen et al. (ibid) highlighted in their article. In recognising this problem we have tried to mitigate for it in a number of ways, but it is for readers to decide to what extent we have been successful or otherwise.

One way we have tried to achieve this is to assemble a research team that has a broad range of relevant perspectives and experiences. Within the research team two of the six members are Muslims (one from the Middle East and North Africa, and the other from Pakistan) whilst two others have extensive experience working in Muslim countries (one in higher education in Malaysia and one in international schools in different MENA countries). Assembling a team in this way not only allowed for a range of perspectives, but allowed us to subject our own assumptions and understandings to challenge from within the group.

In all our dealings with schools and individual interviewees we sought always to be culturally sensitive. This always involved a discussion with our contact in each school about cultural norms and expectations in the school prior to our visit. This was always undertaken as a simple courtesy. Each school had the opportunity to inform us of local expectations, and researchers would modify behaviour as appropriate.

More complex was the way in which the dynamics of the research process play out in the practices and experiences of the researchers, and how those in turn impact on the research. This is borne out of a recognition that our interactions as researchers, and the subjects of research, are shaped profoundly by who we are. These experiences are not value-neutral, but are the product of a myriad of factors in which age, gender, culture and status (to identify *some* factors) have an impact.

Our approach to this study was to recognise this issue and be transparent about it. Whilst it is a methodological issue that needs to be problematized it is not

necessarily a problem *per se*. We hope that by recognising the issue, discussing it as a team, interviewing where possible in pairs, and by reflecting on our processes of data analysis that we have surfaced an issue that was an important feature of this research. It was, for example, evident in interviews with staff whose first language was not English. Interviews with outside researchers inevitably generate some element of stress, however much there may be reassurances about there being no element of inspection or judgement. Communicating complex issues with accuracy in a language which is not one's first language can be particularly daunting, and this was something we witnessed in the study. In such cases these interviewees elected to be interviewed in pairs or small groups, and in some cases colleagues accompanied specifically to act as translators. In one case, interviewees arrived at the interviews with statements they had already prepared in Arabic, with an English language translation. We had not pre-circulated questions, but such was the desire to communicate with clarity that the interviewees felt it necessary to take this step. In highlighting these issues we do not want to reduce them to questions of confidence in the use of a second language. This example illustrates the issue, but the issues are both wider and more complex, relating to questions of gender, status and power. As indicated, we have no way of quantifying the impact of these issues, but in drawing attention to them we hope that both the writing and reading of this text becomes more nuanced as a result.

The second issue that we have been concerned about, in line with the BERA and University of Nottingham research guidelines, is the need to preserve anonymity. Providing assurances of anonymity is a basic requirement of social science research in the vast majority of contemporary studies. Given these concerns, and the assurances provided in line with our ethics approval, we have gone to all possible lengths to ensure anonymity (see earlier discussions). We have for example avoided any identification of features of individual schools that will make them identifiable. Given the small sample of schools that were involved in the study, we have also avoided providing individual case study accounts of schools as to do so renders them very easily identifiable. Also, when providing direct quotes from teachers, we have avoided making any link to a particular school.



## 5 Findings

In this section we present our findings in relation to each of the four research questions.

### 5.1 Research question 1

***To what extent do the MYP's guiding principles of holistic learning, intercultural awareness, critical thinking and communication align with UAE national education objectives?***

The UAE's national objectives for education have been most recently articulated in the country's statement *Vision 2021* (UAE, n.d.). *Vision 2021* is a five year strategy document, in which the UAE sets out ambitions for transformation in all aspects of civic life. As such it is a document informed by values, but it is not primarily a values statement. Rather it is a statement of strategic ambition, underpinned by a set of targets and goals.

A significant aspect of *Vision 2021* is its commitment to the UAE's role in a global, entrepreneurial, knowledge based economy marking a recognition of the longer term need to shift away from oil dominance. *Vision 2021* commits the UAE to developing a '*first rate education system*'. This will require, in the words of the statement, '*the complete transformation of the current education system and teaching methods*'. The short vision statement that underpins *Vision 2021*'s education targets is worth reproducing in full.

*All Emiratis will have equal opportunity and access to first-rate education that allows them to develop into well-rounded individuals, enhance their educational attainment, and achieve their true potential, contributing positively to society.*

*We want our nation's schools to nurture well-rounded citizens, confident in their inner abilities and fully equipped for adulthood. Our educators will instil in young people the shared values of our moderate religion and our national identity. Each new generation*

*will emerge ready to play an active and positive role in society as self-directed and responsible citizens.*

*Our nation will set and achieve increasingly ambitious educational targets. A progressive national curriculum will extend beyond rote learning to encompass critical thinking and practical abilities, equipping our youth with essential skills and knowledge for the modern world. In terms of such practical competencies – as well as high scores on standard international examinations – our children's educational achievements will place them on a par with students in the most advanced nations.*

*The UAE will successfully encourage Emiratis to maximise their potential by remaining in school and reaching higher levels of education. School drop-outs rates will fall, university enrolment will rise, and more Emiratis will climb higher up the ladder of learning into post-graduate education. The majority of high-school graduates will choose to continue their studies, and those who do leave school early will receive other forms of support such as vocational training.*

*Education will provide equality of opportunity and balanced outcomes for all students. Special needs students will be properly integrated within the education system with the benefit of support programmes and infrastructure that guarantee fair access. (UAE, n.d., p. 23)*

To what extent is an IB education consistent with the UAE's national priorities, in particular as set out in *Vision 2021*? In order to address this question, we refer to the IB's own description of an IB education:

*What is an IB education?*

*Aims to be informative, not definitive; it invites conversation and regular review.*

*The IB has always championed a stance of critical engagement with challenging ideas, one that values the progressive thinking of the past while remaining open to future innovation. It reflects the IB's commitment to creating a collaborative, global community united by a mission to make a better world through education.*

*As the IB's mission in action, the learner profile concisely describes the aspirations of a global community that shares the values underlying the IB's educational philosophy. The IB learner profile describes the attributes and outcomes of education for international-mindedness.*

*The aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world.*

*Informed by these values, an IB education:*

- *centres on learners*
- *develops effective approaches to teaching and learning*
- *works within global contexts*
- *explores significant content.*

*Working together, these four characteristics define an IB education.*

*(IBO, 2013, p. 1)*

What emerges from the statements above, from *Vision 2021*, and from the IBO, is a high degree of convergence in the goals and aspirations between the two.

*Vision 2021* clearly commits to developing ‘well-rounded citizens’, with a balanced outlook. There is an explicit commitment to going beyond rote-learning and a recognition that an education fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires the development of a broader range of skills. This is certainly consistent with the IB’s commitment to the development of a holistic approach to learning, and in this sense the MYP can be considered to be well aligned with *Vision 2021*.

It is the case that international issues, and intercultural awareness, do not feature prominently in *Vision 2021*, and they are certainly not central in the way that international mindedness and global citizenship might be considered central to IB provision. However, this can be attributed to the fact that *Vision 2021*’s principal concern is with its own national citizens, and the protection of Emirati national identity, in a society that is already extraordinarily cosmopolitan. Global citizenship is not an explicit commitment within *Vision 2021*, but the priorities of *Vision 2021* need to be seen in the context of a society which is already highly globalised, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world. It is unsurprising therefore if the more explicit concern is on the local and the support for retaining a specific Emirati identity. This emphasis does not present an alternative to global citizenship but can be seen as a ‘re-balancing’ in a context which is already highly internationalised and welcoming of others, as suggested by this MYP Curriculum Leader:

*Dubai is such a welcoming place to be an ex-pat and to have an international school that promotes international mindedness. The government here does the same thing. There are certain restrictions of course. I’m finding that being in an international environment here is absolutely perfect because you’ve got a city that is so international, and you’ve got a school system where the majority of schools are international. So I think the two work very, very well together. Because Dubai sees itself as the hub of the world, if you will.*

The point at which *Vision 2021* might be seen to align less well with the guiding principles of the MYP is in the list of eight key performance indicators (KPIs),

referred to as 'ambitious targets' set out in *Vision 2021*. These targets seek improvement in relation to:

1. Average TIMSS score
2. Upper secondary graduation rates
3. Enrollment rate in pre-schools (public and private)
4. Average PISA score
5. Percentage of students with high attainment in Arabic according to national tests
6. Percentage of schools with high quality teachers
7. Percentage of schools with highly effective school leadership
8. Enrolment rate in Foundation Year

These KPIs focus on the performance of UAE-based students, teachers and schools in international and national testing and evaluations systems such as TIMSS, PISA, and school monitoring schemes. Whilst the KPIs used do not all align closely with the MYP, the goals underpinning the targets, such as the development of knowledgeable students and well-educated teachers are better matched. For example, high attainment in Arabic and higher TIMSS and PISA scores can find alignment with the 'communicator' and 'knowledgeable' learner profile attributes; high quality teachers and highly effective school leadership are both commensurate with the ethos of the MYP, evidenced in the many opportunities for professional development for teachers and leaders made available by the IBO.

The focus on the KPIs listed above is becoming increasingly apparent in inspection reports published by ADEC and the KHDA, in which, in recent years there has been increased emphasis on benchmarking data (much of which relates to the targets set out in *Vision 2021*). The emphasis on benchmarking is accompanied by new requirements to increase standardised testing in the MYP years. Schools have some flexibility over the tests they choose to use (such as the International Benchmark Tests developed by the Australian Council of Educational Research), however there appears to be a clear 'direction of travel' towards increased reliance of reporting through standardised testing. These new regulations were introduced into Dubai for implementation shortly after our

fieldwork was completed, so it is unclear how this will impact on curriculum provision and the student experience.

The increased emphasis on standardised testing is mirrored in the IB's new approach to tracking student progress in the MYP years through end-of-programme assessments collectively known as eAssessment, part of the MYP Next Chapter initiative. eAssessment is an approach to assessment involving 1) ePortfolios of coursework for four subjects (Language Acquisition, Art, Design and Physical and Health Education; and 2) a suite of externally marked examinations for Mathematics, Language and Literature, Sciences, Individuals and Societies, and an innovative Interdisciplinary exam). These are taken online. eAssessment complements the assessment of the Personal Portfolio which, like the ePortfolios, are externally moderated. Students receive a certificate at the end of the eAssessment process. eAssessment offers parents and schools a means of benchmarking student progress within and across MYP schools and thus meets a demand often expressed by parents for a summative assessment process that can provide some assurance of student progress and prepare learners for the Diploma Programme:

*I think that a lot of parents don't want to do the MYP because, like the British system, at the end of the curriculum they do an exam and they already have a kind of Diploma to continue with their studies; and I think that is a big issue with the MYP because they don't have that. (MYP Parent, non-Emirati; interviewed before eAssessment became available in schools)*

It is optional for schools to register for eAssessment. Given the emerging emphasis on performativity evident in *Vision 2021*, it will be a point of interest for the IBO to track the level of take-up of the eAssessment mechanism in the UAE.

Overall, based on an assessment of the *Vision 2021* documents, and IB programme documents, we would argue that in general there is a high level of correspondence between the goals of the two approaches. *Vision 2021*, with its aim to develop highly engaged, independent and critical thinkers is consonant

with the aspirations of the IB, and these shared approaches also emerge when the IB's Learner Profile is included in the analysis. *Vision 2021* seeks an element of cultural shift in the UAE education system and this fits comfortably with the established philosophy and approach of the IB MYP.

## **5.2 Research question 2a**

***In what ways do heads of school and teachers at MYP schools with Emirati student cohorts, including candidate MYP schools, believe that the IB MYP is a relevant framework for middle years' education in the UAE?***

***What do heads of school and teachers identify as the key benefits of the MYP in the UAE?***

The IB Middle Years Programme gives education professionals considerable scope in implementation, and makes it attractive to school leaders and teachers. In general terms it is possible to identify a number of features of the MYP that make it popular with teachers: the learner profile, flexibility of approach, and the focus on international-mindedness, and in setting these out we seek to identify where these have a particular relevance in the UAE.

### **5.2.1 The Learner Profile**

The Learner Profile is at the core of the IB, and this is an important feature for teachers. The Learner Profile sets a framework for learning that is about more than 'content', and as such it can be considered to provide a 'compass' to direct learning at both an organisational and classroom level. The core nature of the Learner Profile provides a powerful link between the practical aims of the curriculum, the aspirations of students, and their grounding in a fundamental set of values. For example, 'open mindedness' is an intellectual disposition that can encourage an individual to be receptive to new and different ideas as a way of beginning to process ideas and evaluate them. However, a commitment to being open minded is also grounded in a wider set of values that reflect attitudes and approaches to learning.

For school leaders the learner profile can act as a touchstone for framing the culture of the school. Given the grounding of the attributes in a values system, the Learner Profile is often used by school leaders to 'set a tone', and create the type of learning environment to which the school aspires. This clearly needs to be located in the specific context of the relevant school phase, but it can be considered to have particular traction in the middle years. These are years when children experience rapid development, and where commitments to independent learning, for example, can begin to look bold and radical. Here the MYP's flexibility is an obvious attribute. School leaders and teachers value the 'space' provided by the MYP:

*I think that there are many benefits for the student because it encourages students to research and to think and it gives them a freedom to do everything around the subject and this is ... I think is good and useful for us to do that. (Arabic Teacher)*

Many teachers highlight the problems of students' over-exposure to the Learner Profile (and the possibility of a diminishing sense of impact); however when used judiciously it can be used very effectively to promote the culture and ethos of the institution. For example, we witnessed one school assembly that was based entirely around the Learner Profile. It was a highly engaging event with considerable student engagement. Such instances play an important role in framing organisational culture around the values articulated through the Learner Profile attributes.

### **5.2.2 Flexibility of approach**

Assessments are clearly undertaken in the MYP, but teachers are able to design their own assessments in ways which are supportive of learning, rather than distracting. The MYP's flexibility, particularly with regard to assessment, was frequently cited by teachers as a considerable benefit.

*... we can change it every year and so if something doesn't work we can reflect on our practice. (MYP Coordinator)*



*I love this framework and it gives flexibility for the teacher to be more creative to do more reflection ... in terms of preparation like when you are planning and in terms of ok this is what you teach and this works well with the students and this is what we need to change. (MYP Coordinator)*

IB programmes privilege the professional judgement of teachers, and this is particularly the case in the MYP. In the Diploma Programme, end of programme assessments necessarily sharpen the focus, and teachers, quite rightly, tailor their pedagogical approaches accordingly. However, in the MYP, the parameters are broader and this provides considerable scope for teachers to exercise professional judgement and to think creatively how they plan their learning programmes.

In some cases the flexibility of the MYP was seen as a challenge, and one teacher described the MYP as IB's 'awkward step-child' due in part to the flexibility and fluidity that is here being offered as a virtue.

However, the view was that the latest iteration of the curriculum, the 'Next Chapter' was a significant step forward, as one teacher commented:

*So I have enjoyed teaching it more and I feel like I am dealing with less white noise since those changes have been made and to explain to new people coming in to teach who are not used to MYP. I wouldn't say that I am a proselytiser... but I enjoy the freedom and flexibility for me and I would not describe it as a curriculum it is a framework. (MYP teacher)*

Several teachers identified the need for strong middle leadership to ensure consistency of experience, coherence of provision and a focus on quality. The MYP can be considered a particular challenge for secondary phase trained teachers who have often been educated in ways that emphasise a narrow subject specialist pedagogy:

*I feel that sometimes that the student is and I haven't choose the right word but they are 'floating' .. you know .. I think it needs to be narrowed down to have certain fixed points more in order to go .. to go through the curriculum in order to teach and for them to reach the Diploma. (Arabic teacher) ..*

Support for new teachers, or teachers new to the MYP, was seen as a particular challenge and hence the focus on middle leadership.

### **5.2.3 International mindedness and authenticity to local context**

Within the UAE the clear benefit of the IB in general, and perhaps particularly the MYP, is the ability to offer a curriculum, and a holistic learning experience, which is authentic to local context. This requires schools to work in ways that meet local expectations (and are compliant with local mandates), that are consistent with local cultural norms and expectations (in ways that are not about complying with rules, but at a deeper level) and which meet the needs of a diverse range of students. This places international mindedness, in its broadest sense, at the heart of the education experience, and in this research teachers and schools leaders were very supportive of how the IB facilitated this. At a general level the extent to which the MYP allowed a school to develop an internationally minded curriculum that met the needs of all students was appreciated. However, it was recognised that there could be specific difficulties in connecting the school with a national context that was hard to define.

*Many people live here and I mean the number of expats in these schools who have very little connection to the local and what is the local community? You first off have to define just what that is. Because if you are talking about Emirati then you are talking about a small percentage of the population of the people who live here. So from my perspective it is not a question of 'is that in the philosophy to do that or not?' It is just the reality is there isn't any grounding in the local community. And I mean after two years I am*

*beginning to start my second year and I am trying to ask well what is the local culture. Right? Are we talking Emirati? Well then that is a specific context. (MYP teacher)*

Notwithstanding the challenges identified, the emphasis in the IB on international mindedness and intercultural awareness was seen as critical. The UAE is a very specific context, with some very specific expectations. Some of these might be considered broadly similar across the MENA region, but there is also a specific UAE dimension. The IB MYP is a programme that surfaces these issues in ways that help young people understand, and respect, the community of which they are a part, as indicated in these quotes from parents:

*So my kids were in IB school in Canada and they are not going to get what they are getting here .. they are getting tolerance and they are getting exactly what [other parent] is saying because we have such a big diversity here . (MYP Parent, non-Emirati)*

*I am so proud because we came from Nigeria and this is the first time we have been in an international community like this. But my son the one who is in Grade 11 .. will tell me and when we pass someone in the street he will say .. "This person is Dutch .. this person is from Australia!" And I am so surprised! (MYP parent, non-Emirati)*

Any environment in which 85% of the population are immigrants is inevitably complex. Through the MYP teachers argued students were well prepared to navigate this complexity. This is also essential for the creation of an inclusive culture in a school, and where all students feel safe and valued. In highly diverse student populations such cultures have to be consciously created, and continually nurtured and sustained. Many teachers believed that the IB's emphasis on cultural issues made it well placed to do this.

### **5.3 Research question 2b**

#### ***What are parent and student views of the value of the IB Middle Years Programme?***

In each case study school we interviewed groups of parents. The interviewees were diverse and represented many different nationalities. It was possible to capture a range of perspectives, and these are reflected in these findings. However, although Emirati parents were involved in the interviews, these were relatively few (although proportionate) in number (five from a total of 29) and so although Emirati and non-Emirati parents' views are labelled accordingly, there is no attempt made here to report separately on these views.

Parents were always asked to indicate why they had chosen to send their child to an IB school in their middle years. Responses reflected a mix of views with some parents indicating that they would only consider an MYP school, together with those whose approach was more pragmatic.

*There is a school shortage problem here. As soon as I knew we were coming to the UAE I made informal enquiries to contacts and was told "just apply everywhere so that you make sure you get something", and that is what we did. I am very happy with the school, but it wasn't a conscious decision to choose IB. (MYP Parent, non-Emirati)*

One Emirati parent talked about the importance of the wider school culture, beyond the MYP, in determining school choice:

*We have had parents come to this school and bring their children from other IB schools, so they're staying within the same curriculum, but just switching schools, and they were saying 'You know what, when my kids got into the MYP, I found the environment in this school was not acceptable to me for my kids. And if you go speak to the staff they'll tell you that we are not an Emirati school, we never said we're an Emirati school, and we promote Western culture.' And that's part of the issue. And you*

*have the right to say that. You can say 'We promote Western culture' but the parents need to be very aware of that. Sometimes they're not aware of what they're getting into until their child is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and the child says 'Well everybody else smokes' or 'So and so has a girlfriend' or the teacher comes in and starts talking about gay rights, and you're like 'Even if my child is to learn about that he's to learn about that within OUR cultural context, and within OUR religious context, not with some guy coming in from the UK and talking about gay rights. That doesn't work for me. (MYP Parent, Emirati)*

Where parents made a positive choice to select an MYP school a range of different reasons were provided. One very practical consideration relates to the questions of mobility in a global context. Many of the parents we spoke to had made several career related moves. One observation within the research team was that, even by international school standards, the 'turbulence' of movement was substantial when compared to our experience of researching international school contexts. A high proportion of expatriates are on relatively short-term contracts (1-3 years) and of course within the almost unique context of the UAE, expatriates are a relatively high proportion of the school population. For several parents, therefore, there is considerable value in being part of a 'global system' in which movement between schools is mitigated by consistency in style and approach. Interestingly, this appeared more important than continuity and progression in terms of 'content'. One parent commented that the IB had worked well for her son, and this consistency of approach was important.

*So the MYP is much better suited for my son. And we do travel a lot from one country to another country and it will always be the IB system for my child, then if there is no IB school then I will not move with my husband. (MYP parent, non-Emirati)*

The flexibility within the IB MYP, discussed earlier in this section, can mean that particular curriculum areas can be covered at different points in the MYP, and therefore moving between schools runs the risk of replicating material. Some

students gave us examples of where they had experienced this. However, it was clear that for many parents this was a minor problem (and risk) when compared to the benefit of moving between schools where there was a broad consistency in pedagogical approach. What was considered potentially problematic was for students to develop a particular approach to learning based on IB principles, only to transfer to a system with high levels of formulaic content, rigid approaches to teaching and a considerable volume of testing. Of course, this could equally work in reverse, with students moving from rigid systems experiencing some adjustment issues as they had to adapt to more enquiry based approaches to learning, with the associated independence that comes with it. Parents also cited the importance of breadth, with the MYP seen as avoiding the pitfalls of over-specialisation at too early an age. One parent observed:

*I think that as parents we look at the child as a whole and he is developing in all ways – socially, personality wise, education yes ... and sometimes you would like the education to be a bit stronger and you want to be able to measure it but at the end of the day I want my child to succeed in life and it is not just because he got his timetables right and that he is doing his science lab properly - it is who he is - the confidence. (MYP parent, non-Emirati)*

Similar views were expressed by another parent.

*My son was in a school in Pakistan and it was very academically oriented and there was only the academic and there was no extra-curricular activities but I want my son to have a balance and do everything and now he is doing very well and he is doing music and he is in sports and he is doing very well. (MYP parent, non-Emirati)*

In a similar vein, parents valued the 'portability' of the IB curriculum. The qualification was seen as being equivalent to a highly respected international currency. Its international awareness means it is accepted globally, without the need to convert it into an equivalence, whilst its reputation provided it with a credibility that is essential in the global education and employment marketplace. Whilst this may be considered as an issue of particular relevance to the DP, in

reality it is one that cannot be ascribed to one programme alone. Several parents cited this reason for their choice, and accessing an IB programme at whatever level is considered central to this.

The points above emphasise the importance of the IB as a system, or qualification, which supported mobility. It was also possible to identify a number of factors in which parents emphasised questions of mobility, but their concern was with how an IB MYP education prepared their children to be mobile in a globalised world. At this point it is worth making some observations about the parents we spoke to. Inevitably this is based on impression, and there is always risk involved in being impressionistic, but especially in research. However, these contextual issues are important. We have already indicated that many parents of the children in these schools in the UAE were frequent 'movers' – moving, on a regular basis, often to very different parts of the world, is how they live their lives. This almost certainly develops particular orientations towards the education of their children. For example, parents recognise that their own children live in diverse environments. It is important therefore that their children learn to be able to thrive in (whatever) the specific context they are in at any one point in time. It is understood that children will be placed in a school that has many different nationalities. It may be that before very long they will move to another school, quite different, but perhaps equally diverse. Their ability to be able to function in such environments is critical to parents being confident their children will be happy and confident in whatever their context. However, these parents, by virtue of their own experience, also appreciate the global nature of the labour market, and therefore the need to prepare young people to be able to work in such environments in their adult lives. The parents we spoke to understood the need for young people to have the skills, attitudes and dispositions to operate as global citizens in a global labour market. For these reasons parents placed a considerable premium on the emphasis on international mindedness and global citizenship in the IB programmes generally, and which are a strong feature of the MYP. These views were expressed by one parent as follows:

*I think that we are very lucky that we are in this situation because it definitely adds value. First they are learning a language that they would never normally learn, which is Arabic and second, they have to learn tolerance and they have to learn about respect in a big, big way and not just the word and the generalisation and not just ... and if you look at the IB Learner Profile it is really is having this international diversity. It really, really does draw on exactly the different, and the core depth of what the Learner Profile is trying to achieve. I think the kids don't see people from different countries anymore and I don't think that they see colour, culture, race. I don't think that they see it at all. They are so much wiser and so much more in-tune with everything that is going on than we are ... (MYP parent, non-Emirati)*

Within the study a number of parental concerns were raised. For non-Emirati parents, these often related more to concerns about local regulations, rather than in relation to the IB MYP *per se*. Two particular concerns that were raised in relation to the MYP related to, first, the sense of a mismatch between the MYP and DP programmes (with a resulting transition problem), and second, a concern that the MYP's lower focus on regular examinations to date, meant that parents did not always feel confident they knew if their child was making good progress or otherwise.

In relation to the MYP/DP alignment parents expressed concern about an apparent disconnect between the two with the former leaving students unprepared for the Diploma experience. This was not expressed as an unreasonable jump in demands, or that the MYP had not been sufficiently rigorous, but that the difference in styles required considerable adjustment on the part of students. This was in part attributed to the presence of high stakes assessment in the Diploma programme, and the absence of it in the MYP<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> One of the intentions of the MYP Next Chapter was specifically designed to address the gap discussed here; for example, the Next Chapter includes end-of-programme E-assessments for subjects as discussed in Section 5.1.



Indeed, it was the absence of such assessment that led some parents to express concerns that they were not always aware how well, or otherwise, their children were doing. In one school where this was discussed the school had adopted 'ManageBac' a reporting system designed specifically for IB, and this was widely appreciated by the parents who used it.

Students who were interviewed represented a mix between those who had only known an IB education (although many at more than one school) through to those with non-IB international school and public education experiences. When asked to explain what was distinctive about an IB education the initial emphasis was almost always placed on a combination of independent learning and an enquiry-based pedagogy. Students describe, and value, a form of learning where they are given autonomy, where their learning is connected (across 'subjects' and through 'real world' application) and where they are given opportunity to both pursue interests and to explore issues in depth. One student described an emphasis on 'bottom up learning':

*I have been in an IB school before I have also taken part in like British curriculum schools and I realise that the IB is much different to the British curriculum which is very, you know, "this is what you have to do and know by the end of the year. So this is how we are going to teach you". But with the IB it is more "this is what you are kind of having to know by the end of the year but you have to find out what you do yourself". So it is very much more student-based learning so it is from the bottom-up and not top-down. (MYP student)*

This contrast with other national systems was also highlighted by this student:

*I come from the Australian curriculum and before I came here, and in that curriculum, it was really only knowledge based and there was only what you would be told and they would give you a list and you would learn it, but coming to an IB school you kind of learn ... it's ... you have to learn certain things like that is the requirement*

*of any school, but it is also the fact that you can link it to the real world. In my previous school we would never have to make that link but now we make that link constantly and in every subject and in every test and every task that we do there is a link to the real world. Even in a maths test ... at the end of the test you always link back and try and find out how you use this skill in the real world. (MYP student)*

Interconnectedness was another theme identified by students:

*It is very self-driven. And also it is like all about connecting the different subjects. So say you do something and say you are studying Romeo and Juliet in English and you might be doing it in Drama too. So teachers try to like get the units to correspond ... (MYP student)*

Students recognised the development of themselves as a whole person as particularly important, and in some cases this would be specifically reference to the Learner Profile.

There was also an acute understanding of the IB's role in developing international mindedness and intercultural understanding.

*So like the different cultures that we come from. It helps you understand some ideas better because you can ... you can see how people see different perspectives and from different mind sets and we all come from different cultures and different religions. So like so we can see from different points of views and we can understand each other's perspectives and from the other ideas. (MYP student)*

*So like what he said I think that because there are so many different nationalities there is no bias when they are teaching*

*subjects. So like for example in history a lot of the time they [elsewhere] portray the European explorers as like the good guys because they are coming and they are founding colonies for their countries but a lot of the time what they done in places that they were exploring might not have been things that you would like to talk about as a member of the country. But we look at it from the different perspectives and we look as to different factors as to why things happened. Which gives us a much more open view on things and in real life and in looking in on the past in our subjects. (MYP student)*

For students, therefore, their views about the MYP would echo findings that we have identified in earlier sections. A flexible curriculum, which challenges narrow subject boundaries and which emphasises inquiry based learning was highly valued by students. The pedagogical approaches underpinning these commitments promote independent learning and a respect for learners who feel their views and opinions are valued. Students recognise that the IB's emphasis on intercultural awareness is an important issue in a community where there may be more than 80 different nationalities. Students see this diversity as a virtue and they appreciate the role of the MYP in ensuring this is their experience. Elsewhere in the study we identified some tensions in the curriculum, in terms of how the IB MYP and local curriculum requirements align with each other. These are discussed in subsequent sections.

#### **5.4 Research question 3**

***To what degree are MYP schools fulfilling UAE curriculum requirements (e.g. teaching of Arabic, Islamic religion and UAE history)? What are examples of approaches and practices used by schools to align the MYP with UAE curriculum requirements?***

Local curriculum requirements in private institutions are restricted to three specific areas of provision. The three areas determined for schools are:

- Arabic (language learning)

- Islamic studies (religious education, principally Quranic studies)
- UAE social studies (history of the UAE and UAE citizenship education)

In section 2.4 we set out the basic requirements in relation to these curriculum areas. Other aspects of the curriculum are determined by the choice of curriculum within the private institution. In the schools in this study that means the IB MYP.

ADEC and KHDA set the policies for the requirements of daily Arabic language instruction for native and non-native Arabic speakers, mandate Islamic studies courses, and, in Abu Dhabi, standardize the UAE social studies curricula of schools. KHDA and ADEC review and authorize the curriculum of each school.

It is important to understand that with regard to these key features of the curriculum, different students access different curricula depending on faith and nationality. This can be summarised as:

Arabic language is divided into two programmes – Arabic A for those who are enrolled into school with a passport indicating their nationality to be Arab - it should be noted that this may or may not mean that Arabic is their first language; and Arabic B for students who are enrolled into school with a passport indicating their nationality to be other than Arab – this may mean that Arabic is their first, second or other language. It is a requirement that all students study one of these two programmes.

Islamic education – is accessed only by students identified on their passport as Muslim.

UAE Social Studies – is studied by all students although regulations differ between Dubai (KHDA) and Abu Dhabi (ADEC).

The above set out what can be described as the national requirements for formal curriculum content. In addition to these requirements schools are expected to align with the National Agenda, as set out in *Vision 2021* as described above in

section 5.1. The National Agenda Parameters provide the framework against which schools are evaluated.

In all the schools we worked with there was a high level of compliance with the local curriculum requirements relating to the national expectations and regulations for Arabic language, Islamic Studies, and UAE Social Studies. This was at least in part because the system is closely monitored by ADEC and KHDA. Although private schools have significant curriculum autonomy in relation to much of their curriculum, the aspects relating to Arabic language, Islamic Studies and UAE Social Studies are much more tightly prescribed. This includes detailing the amount of time that needs to be spent in specific programmes, the content and often the specific resources, such as text books. The system is one that might be described as 'tightly coupled' as there is close monitoring to ensure compliance and close fidelity to requirements is expected. There are sanctions for non-compliance and schools are well aware of these, and their consequences. On several key issues, such as time allocations, there is no scope for local discretion, as pointed out by this interviewee:

*... the Ministry is federal and their key driver and mandate is often revolving around the delivery of Arabic and Islamic and Arabic A and Arabic B ... Islamic studies and Islamic social studies. So the curriculum for those areas comes from the Ministry of Education and we have to adhere to that (School Principal)*

However, it would be wrong to argue that compliance is driven by the imperative to meet a local requirement, for fear of receiving sanctions otherwise. Schools we worked with understood that the local requirements were legitimate expectations of a national system, and the reasons for the requirements were appreciated. Schools appreciated that these requirements were a key feature of the specific national context in which they operated, and they were keen to support this work as being part of the local community.

*So at the moment we are going through the process of developing unit plans for later in this social studies framework that the Ministry wants us to incorporate. So that is one aspect of it but in terms of*

*another aspect of it, lets say for science or history and geography, so what we always try and work towards is that we try and work towards a curriculum which has a local emphasis. So we will do units about issues that are of importance to this country and this region and then globally. (MYP Coordinator)*

It is also important to recognise that the IB's commitment to a broad curriculum and international mindedness expects MYP students to study two foreign languages. Therefore local curriculum requirements are relatively easily absorbed within the IB MYP where all students study Arabic and one other language.

Moreover, there is a danger in seeing compliance in purely technical and bureaucratic terms whereby a judgement is made about whether a particular requirement is being met or not. We have already indicated that the local curriculum requirements can be considered more prescriptive than within the wider IB MYP. Within the Ministry guidelines there is a level of detail relating to content, and the use of resources, that can appear incongruent with the IB MYP. Furthermore, this detailing of content and resources inevitably impacts on pedagogical approaches, whereby the most appropriate teaching methods appear to be those that promote rote learning, memorisation and teacher-centered methods which are a long way from the inquiry-driven approach demanded by the MYP.

However, what we witnessed in schools presented as a more complex picture. First, it is important to recognise that *Vision 2021* as a policy statement explicitly aims to 'go beyond' rote learning, and develop more creative pedagogical approaches. Second, we heard of many cases in which teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies felt they had considerable flexibility to align local curriculum requirements with the pedagogical approaches that underpin the IB MYP. These teachers felt not only conversant with IB pedagogies, but very supportive of the approach. They felt there was no inconsistency between Ministry requirements and IB expectations, and that there was scope in the Ministry curriculum for adaptation, although clearly teachers have to work hard to make these adjustments. As one teacher of Arabic asserted '*We have two curriculum. The*

*Ministry/KHDA and the MYP.'* Another teacher of Arabic described how it was possible to align learning objectives and also to adapt resources from Ministry programmes so they aligned with MYP approaches:

*So the KHDA the Ministry - we have to follow **some of this but not exactly** (our emphasis) and I think that we use the resources that the Ministry of Education provides to us, but we also are taking resources from many things. (Arabic teacher in Dubai)*

*And as a curriculum I can say that the books that the Ministry books are divided as units like the IB as the same as the IB context. So this make it easy to be a good resource for us and the Ministry books are good resource to make the MYP. But also we add novels and we add stories and we add some poems and to make it ... you know ... and enrich this. (Islamic Studies teacher in Abu Dhabi)*

We were also made aware that changes in the local syllabus requirements had resulted in it being easier to align the Ministry assessment with MYP criteria. As one teacher commented:

*It is easy for us to interchange with the MYP and the Ministry syllabus and also the assessment we are doing assessment the same as MYP system and criteria and summative assessment and formative assessment. The same way as MYP. (Arabic teacher in Dubai)*

What is clear is that many teachers work hard to ensure coherence and alignment between the Ministry curriculum and the IB MYP. This is not straightforward and requires teachers to work with two curricula simultaneously. This inevitably requires sophisticated pedagogical skills whereby teachers seek to align both content and approaches to learning. Such is the complexity of this process that a number of issues inevitably arose.

First, it is important to recognise the importance of staff development in supporting this work. Those staff who are working with two curricula simultaneously need to be supported to do so. There is for example a need to have a deep understanding of the IB and its pedagogical philosophy. Where this is well understood, and internalised by teachers, there appears to be a greater chance of teachers actively seeking to align the two approaches. One teacher of Arabic and Islamic from the MENA region talked about his sense that the government of the UAE cares about education, but also talked about the value he placed on attending IB workshops in order to develop and strengthen his understanding of teaching and different approaches:

*You know I guess ... it is not like about the place. It is about the school and about the people that are working with you and secondly it is about the government and if they care about education and what facilities they provide. ... It is very important like that the government ... like cares for this but basically you gain the experience of the people that you work [with]... I have attended two workshops about teaching and differentiation and yeah and I didn't have a clue before about this like how to implement strategies and like in the class. ... In Dubai the same the company here provides us with workshops especially in the IB and I have done three IB workshops here. (Arabic and Islamic Studies teacher)*

Second, it is important to note that the expectation to work across two curricula in this way falls almost exclusively on staff recruited 'locally', ie across the MENA region. This is because these staff tend to teach those subjects mandated by the MOE, namely Arabic, Islamic Studies and UAE Social Studies. These staff face a particular expectation that they are both meeting local requirements and teaching in ways that are consistent with the IB. Teachers in other curriculum areas (overwhelmingly Western) have fewer such obligations. There is no corresponding requirement to meet closely monitored curriculum regulations and as such these teachers generally avoid the need to 'face two ways'. The



challenge for schools in the UAE is how to support the teachers of Arabic, Islamic Studies, and UAE Social Studies to develop their pedagogical skills in line with IB expectations. One teacher of Arabic and Islamic Studies from the MENA region spoke of the traditional methods often employed by teachers of these subjects:

*... for them they used to kind of lecturing and just talking and explaining like a grammar rule, and no activities, and no speaking skill in Arabic, or listening and speaking, and always writing and reading and most of it ... and the assessment was very traditional and no formative or summative assessment and no criteria for the assessment and the curriculum itself was just traditional curriculum following page by page, and not a text book, which is not fine at all to be just stick to a text book and the MOE curriculum .... and they shout a lot in the class and they call the students stupid and like to 'shut up!' ... and this is the old mentality in the Arab world unfortunately. (Arabic and Islamic Studies teacher)*

Other school leaders and teachers talked about the challenges they faced in gaining a deep understanding of the MYP expectations when workshops are frequently held outside the region, or in English with far fewer opportunities available to take workshops locally or in Arabic, as expressed here by a School Principal and MYP Coordinator from two different schools:

*[The training requirement is for] at least one person per faculty area and then people who have responsibilities and so forth and all are trained on official IB workshops. If they were not available in the region then they are very costly to always be sending people to Brussels, and we have sent people to Athens and to the Hague and it becomes costly then for something which you are already spending a lot of money on. (School Principal)*

*And there are very few workshops in Arabic so ... like in the 'Individuals in Society' in English and I have trained for ... but my*

*teacher who is teaching Arabic Individuals in Society, and if they are using MYP criterion and I can't send her for training and the teachers feel that, and its ... and they are being impartial that they don't enrol us, but there is nothing available in Arabic. (MYP Coordinator)*

For candidate schools, it was seen as particularly challenging to ensure that all staff members were able to access IB training at convenient times as a large number of teachers needed to attend workshops within a relatively short space of time:

*The first stage was training teachers because most of the teachers we hired didn't have the experience so that was one of the challenges to get everybody on board ... and they are from everywhere. So their background and their training is different so you are getting people from ... you know ... South Africa ... New Zealand ... Australia ... the UK ... the US ... although we were in the same profession we were all trained differently ... and then we are trying to get into this frame so ... and so the mind-set is one thing and then the logistics is something else and so ... like we appreciate the fact that ... you know ... that they have training in Dubai and so on and so forth but ... when you have eight teachers out in the building this small it ... it hurts us and we don't have ... we don't have a sub'ing system whereas maybe in like ... even in the US for example they usually have a sub pool and there is a system that you can call on. Here it is like we have to cover each other and so the kids know ...*

*'Oh the teachers are doing IB training!'*

*Because half the staff are gone (School Principal)*

Third, it is important to recognise that the alignment between local curriculum requirements, and IB expectations, proved controversial within this study. Teachers of Arabic Language and Islamic Studies generally spoke positively about their ability to ensure their teaching of these subjects was consistent with

the IB ethos in the school. However, this was not always viewed in the same way by school leaders, parents and students, and is an issue confirmed in some inspection reports. This is discussed in more detail below.

For the most part, the curriculum requirements within Dubai and Abu Dhabi are similar, although there can be some significant differences. One feature of the regulations is that whilst Muslim students are attending Islamic Studies classes, those not attending such classes should not engage in any meaningful activity which might be considered advantageous relative to those unable to attend. For example, those not attending Islamic classes are not allowed to receive formal classes at the same time, or engage in extra curricular activities such as sport or music. This expectation is largely the same across the two Emirates, although there were significant differences in local implementation. In Dubai it appeared possible for students not attending Islamic Studies classes to engage in rather more productive activity than seemed to be the case in Abu Dhabi where it appeared more important to be able to demonstrate that students not attending Islamic classes were not receiving any additional benefit as a consequence:

*When the Muslim students are in Islamic studies the non-Muslim students can't learn anything new ... that the kids who are in that subject aren't also learn. So I can't take the non-Muslim students and do science with them ... or do a different subject ... so that is another challenge as well because ... so what do you do with those kids. Some schools might in say like old school they would have a study period and they just did ... you know ... homework ... or they read a book or ... it is difficult because ... you know ... if ... if they are seen as separate programmes and we could be in trouble and if these kids here are doing stuff that these kids haven't learnt. (MYP Coordinator)*

One senior school leader commented on the 'massive political minefield' that the school had to navigate when they transitioned to the MYP curriculum, and consequently had to reduce the number of classes for Islamic Studies from three to two (the minimum requirement):

*When we switched fully over to MYP, we had to look at the curriculum and look at you know that you need 50 hours or 70 hours for specific subjects, and at that time we were teaching three periods of Islamic studies, and we had to cut it down to two because we had to give other subjects priority. By priority I don't mean that's not important, but that caused a lot of ripples ... why are you doing this? Why Islamic? And that was a political minefield. A massive political minefield. (Deputy Principal)*

It is important to note that for parents, and students, this was a point of contention. Local regulations require that these classes are part of the formal curriculum and are timetabled as such. It is not possible therefore, as is the case in some other Islamic jurisdictions with a similar requirement, to timetable the classes at the end of the school day, when other students may depart. There is therefore a perception that this is 'down time' in the curriculum for many, when more productive learning could be taking place, and it was the source of generally negative attitudes from parents and students, ranging from reluctant acceptance through to more explicit resentment. The irritation amongst some students was expressed as follows in a lively student group interview:

*Interviewee male: And while these fine people are enjoying their Islamic class ... guess what we are doing?*

*Interviewee female: Nothing!*

*Interviewee male: We are doing absolutely nothing and we are sitting in our classes and we are doing free study time.*

*Interviewee female: And no one really studies ... and everyone is just on their computer!*

*Interviewee male: And not doing anything productive. So it's ... it is like a kind of scar in our day.*

*Interviewee female: It is a waste of time.*

*(Student Group Interview)*

And parents also commented:

*I don't like this system ... if I want my children to learn religion and I will teach it to them and I just don't like it being imposed on us. I don't want my child wasting time in a class that he is not learning anything in and when he could be focusing on some of the core subjects. And that is a very big issue for me, and like a big argument that me and my husband have. (MYP parent, non-Emirati)*

Although schools would appreciate more flexibility and discretion relating to the implementation of some of these requirements, they are, perhaps paradoxically, assisted by the very limited room for local discretion. The notion of an Emirate-wide requirement with minimal flexibility, applied across all private institutions does have the effect of deflecting criticism from any individual school. This also prevents schools feeling that this is an aspect of their provision that might in any way result in competitive marketing. The requirement is the same for all, it applies across all schools, and this is well understood by parents. In many cases, when this arose as a perceived problem in interviews parents were at pains to point out that the school was not responsible, because it was a local requirement that had to be followed by all schools. Students also accepted the requirement, and indeed supported aspects of it:

*There has to be a compromise though if you want ... it is a rule and it is that if you want to have a school here you have to follow those rules and I don't think that it should be complained about. Because if you are an Arab student then you have to learn to speak your language properly and it is important and you can't say be like ... "Oh I don't want to do Arabic classes!" Because if you are Arabic then you need to speak the language properly. (Student)*

One particular manifestation of local requirements requiring compliance that emerged in the research, and which falls outside of the particular areas of

Arabic, Islamic Studies and UAE Social Studies related to restrictions on the conduct of school excursions and extra-curricular activities in Abu Dhabi.

At the time of one of the visits to a school in Abu Dhabi we were told the school had been required to suspend all student trips, and also after-school extra-curricular activities including sporting activities. It was indicated this was a requirement from ADEC, possibly due to security concerns, with no parallel requirement from KHDA. In interviews non-Emirati parents, students and teachers expressed frustration at the loss of extra-curricular activities, which they perceived to be an integral part of an international school and of the IB experience. Through the press, with official commentary from ADEC, a different story emerged which challenged the argument that extracurricular activities were being prevented, and argued that a new system for seeking permission for visits was being introduced, which may have accounted for delays.

This incident highlights a number of issues. One is that there is a discernible difference in approach between ADEC in Abu Dhabi and KHDA in Dubai. These are separate bodies and there are differences in how they approach their work. The second issue this experience raises is the lack of clarity around communication that we witnessed in a small number of areas. Explanations for particular policies are not always clear, or may not have been communicated with any clarity. The result is that rumour and hear-say fill the gap. At times this can feel like policy communication through a form of 'Chinese whispers' and inevitably multiple versions of the same situation develop. Consequently, one recommendation from this study is that there might be a role for the IBO to work more closely with the UAE Ministry of Education, and specifically with ADEC and the KHDA, in providing a liaison service to support IB World Schools in their understanding and awareness of policy dictates, and how effective MYP provision could be continued in light of these policy requirements.

## **5.5 Research question 4a**

***Does the MYP, including the Learner Profile, align well with UAE Islamic religious/civic values?***

In the sections above we discussed the guiding principles of the MYP, namely holistic learning, intercultural awareness, critical thinking and communication. In this section we return to the IB's Learner Profile and assess to what extent these features of IB programmes align with Islamic religious values in the UAE and UAE civic values and laws, and the steps that schools have taken more generally to align the MYP with local values, laws and customs. Our starting point is to focus on the Learner Profile, and to link this to issues of Islamic education set out in section 2. However, we also make connections to what can be considered more specific Emirati expectations and the role of Islamic Sharia Law within the UAE.

As has been indicated, the Learner Profile can be considered as the aspiration of the IB for all the students undertaking an IB programme. A feature of the Learner Profile is that it forms the core of all IB programmes, and runs through the whole Continuum of IB provision. This highlights its centrality to the aims and aspirations of IB.

The full Learner Profile, with descriptors, can be accessed at

<http://www.ibo.org/globalassets/digital-toolkit/flyers-and-artworks/learner-profile-en.pdf>

Below are the individual attributes of the Learner Profile.

Inquirers

Knowledgeable

Thinkers

Communicators

Principled

Open-minded

Caring

Risk-takers

Balanced

Reflective

Within this study many educators we met felt strongly that the attributes in the IB Learner Profile align well with the religious values that underpin Islam, Islamic values and Islamic attitudes to education. In this section we discuss how IB Learner Profile aligns with Islamic values at a general level, before highlighting how this is achieved practically in schools. However, the relationship is not unproblematic and we highlight where some tensions were identified.

In order to undertake this analysis we have grouped the Learner Profile into three sub-sets which make it easier to align the Learner Profile with Islamic values. In some cases, individual attributes feature in more than one sub-set.

*Table 4: Categorisation of learner profile attributes*

	Learner Profile attribute
Attitudes to knowledge	Inquirers Knowledgeable Thinkers Open minded
Attitudes to others	Communicators Principled Open-minded Caring
Attitudes to self	Principled Risk-takers Balanced Reflective

### **5.5.1 Attitudes to knowledge**

Several of the Learner Profile attributes highlight particular relationships to knowledge acquisition. These attributes emphasise an inquiry approach to learning, to engaging with knowledge conceptually and to subject current knowledge claims to critical scrutiny. In this context, open-minded refers to a receptiveness to new ideas, or the ideas presented by others. Such ideas may challenge existing understandings and orthodoxies. The IB Learner Profile



implies a disposition to approach all knowledge in this way. Such an approach does not mean it is necessary to be accepting of all ideas. On the contrary, it is important for ideas to be challenged, but this is made stronger by being grounded in an intellectually rigorous approach to knowledge.

Knowledge acquisition is central to Islamic values, and what it means to be a good Muslim (see section 3.4). Islamic approaches to faith depend on betterment through learning, and hence being scholarly, and a good scholar, can be considered as central to taking faith seriously. One teacher of Islamic studies argued that the commitment to knowledge is privileged above all other virtues in the Quran, and features as the opening of the Quran itself. This is highlighted in the following exchange between two teachers of Islamic Studies:

*Teacher A: The first word in the Quran is to read. This is the first word, read, and read in the name of your God ... and then read it for being a human and read about science so read about science, read about biology, and read about every kind of science, this is what it says.*

*Teacher B: It is first order ... not to pray ... not to fast ... but the first thing is to read and research and understand.*

*Teacher A: The priority is for knowledge.*

*Teacher B: When you believe ... when you believe after reading, and after research, and after thinking - after all of that, if you believe you should do that, and then pray and so on.*

*Teacher A: Actually you cannot believe in the Quran unless you approach it through knowledge.*

This is consistent with Shah's (2015) analysis that Islamic scholarship, and Islamism, requires a commitment to seek knowledge, and to be willing to engage in discussion and debate about issues. There is a need to be pluralist in approach and principled in relation to the possibility of disagreement.

Within the research this raised an important issue, which emerged time and again in the fieldwork, about the ways in which local cultural expectations frame what can be discussed and how. UAE law is based on Islamic Sharia law, and hence activities involving drinking alcohol and drug-taking are illegal. This means that books talking about or illustrating these activities are not permitted, and that discussions around these topics in class are forbidden. Heterosexual activity outside of marriage and homosexual activity are crimes in the UAE; so whereas books featuring such topics might be included in the curriculum in more liberal countries, they are not permitted in UAE schools. However, despite these clear laws, what emerged strongly was an absence of consensus, or clarity, about what might be considered as 'acceptable' to discuss in a classroom, and therefore multiple interpretations of what might be possible developed. This is best illustrated through the concept of evolution, which emerged in several interviews.

At several points teachers of science informed us that the subject of evolution was one that was considered contentious, and therefore largely avoided, or taught in a way that sought to avoid what might be contentious elements. In the absence of clarity, or confidence, there was often a default to avoid any problem by avoiding the topic. However, amongst Muslim parents and teachers there was often a different perspective. One Emirati parent pointed out that it is not just within Islamic cultures that the subject is contentious, but that one might encounter similar views in other religious contexts:

*...anywhere that you go where you have conservative religious background ... and then you want to teach evolutionary science you're going to have a clash. You want to come and teach evolution and Darwin and that's not going to fly here. It's not just about*

*Islam so much as a conservative theory of creationism. It's going to be a conflict you have anywhere, and the IB is very fact and science-based. It's one of those tricky subjects in every educational system. Do you teach it, do you not teach it? Do you teach it as a theory? Do you teach the big bang? (Parent, Emirati)*

This parent argues that the subject is complex, and needs to be handled in a culturally sensitive way, but that there is no reason why the subject should not be discussed. This was confirmed by a teacher of Islamic Studies who asserted that all such issues were open for discussion.

*The Islamic philosophy is based on the living God ... and God is the source of everything and he is a creator of everything. We have had some discussions from the students about the conflict and they are learning in science and then coming to us and they say.*

*'Ok. What do you think about the universe and what do you think about the big bang and what do you think about the evolution theory?'*

*We give the Islamic point of view about it.*

*'Ok. We believe in the big bang but we believe that it is God who made the big bang'*

*Ok? And it has to start somewhere. But who creates the beginning? We believe that God made that. And so ... I said.*

*'There is no conflict - but you have to ask this question "who who made the big bang?". So if you make it is God and then it is ok.'*  
*(Islamic Studies teacher)*

Students were cognisant of the sensitivity surrounding the teaching of evolution, and recognised that this resulted in some issues not being discussed. This was sometimes a frustration, although the prevailing attitude was one of acceptance. One student described the following:

*... last week there was a major breakthrough in furthering the research into the theory about evolution. There had been another add on to that, and I can highly doubt that we will ever like, if you did not read it on your own you will never hear about it within the school. Even though it is a massive scientific breakthrough, and as all these kind of breakthroughs that happen you don't hear about it and it really forces you ... and this is getting into whether this is a pro or a con ... it forces you to go out on your own and to look for things, and to try and not break the boundary almost, but to push from what is not there ... and not only towards what is outside the school. (Student)*

What emerged is that in some cases there is a lack of awareness of the cultural and religious norms of the host nation and, in particular, how teachers can mediate the curriculum to take account of these norms. This is perhaps unsurprising given the large numbers of Western teaching staff and senior management team members in all seven case study schools (see chapter 3) compared to the smaller numbers of Arabic staff and the very small numbers of Emirati staff.

There is no doubt that some teachers from a Western expatriate background found this a difficult adjustment to make. Some framed this as a tension with notions of knowledge pursuit, inquiry and open-mindedness, however, as the discussion of evolution illustrates, what topics may be considered 'off limits' is not at all clear cut, and it may be that there is a high degree of self-censorship as a result of lack of confidence and a default to be cautious.

Other subjects for discussion that teachers were cautious about related to political issues in the UAE and in the wider region. Again, many teachers indicated such topics were avoided. In some cases, where teachers felt unable to discuss issues such as the Holocaust, this did cause some personal angst '*of course a little piece of us dies as well in those moments*' was how one teacher described how he felt when he diverted discussion away from an issue he felt needed discussing.

This analysis of issues also reflects its own Western biases. One teacher of Islamic Studies pointed out that outside of the local mandated curriculum there was almost no recognition of the local, or Islamic, context in what was taught. Her point was that English, History, Mathematics and Science often made little reference to Islamic culture and history. This was a point acknowledged by teachers in these curriculum areas. One Maths teacher pointed out how he tried to use local examples to help illustrate mathematical ideas, however he acknowledged there was no engagement with the great Islamic contribution to mathematical thinking and philosophy. He described that contribution as ‘very significant’ but asserted ‘in our MYP we have not touched on that’.

Whatever the nature of these constraints, which are understood by students, teachers describe how they find ways to navigate the experience. Some are clearly cautious, and avoid contentious topics. For example, at the time of the research there was considerable debate about the role of the Gulf States in accepting refugees from the crisis in Syria. This might be considered an important, topical and controversial issue that might be ripe for IB students to debate. However, several teachers made clear this was not a topic they would broach, in the way that such ‘teachable moments’ might be seized on by IB teachers elsewhere. In other cases, with experience and confidence, some teachers felt more able to introduce topics that might push at the boundary of what is acceptable:

*but we occasionally, and sometimes, you know, individual teachers will take the risk a little bit and they will just delve in a little bit in certain things because we don’t want to say that anything is off limits in that regard. (MYP teacher)*

Moreover, it was pointed out that whilst some areas of study might be closed down there was no shortage of material that teachers can draw on that can achieve similar objectives, but in different ways. Several teachers recognised constraints but pointed out that their school did an excellent job in developing well-rounded and open-minded young people. This might require different sorts

of choices about subject content, but the resourcefulness of good teachers could compensate for this.

*I think that there is plenty of literature and plenty of resources out there to build on students conceptual understanding without having to go there and I think that there is a plethora of resources and I think as being eminently internationally minded which is a fundamental concept of the IB that we must take the cultural perspective in mind in the context that we are in and I think does it stop them from being open minded? No I don't think so. Because it just teaches them respect which is also something that is important and it definitely doesn't stop the critical thinking and ... you know ... there is plenty of opportunities for analysis and evaluation and the critical thinking is still there. (MYP Coordinator)*

This point also emphasises a final point on this issue which highlighted the need to be respectful of local traditions. This was mentioned by several interviewees, students, parents and teachers, and acknowledged that a fundamental IB principle is intercultural awareness and accepting some constraints in curriculum choice was a reflection of this. Sex education was cited as an example in this regard. One MYP co-ordinator argued that for a programme focused on teenage years this was a concern, but that reflects local norms and therefore she respected that decision, adding *'but I believe that is where the parents' role steps in. Our parents are fully aware that we do not run drug, sex and alcohol education and they know that.'*

This pragmatism is also recognised by students, who do not always agree with how issues are handled in class, but they understand why it is and they were accepting of it. This exchange in a focus group emphasises the point:

*Student male: Alright, and so obviously since we are in the UAE and the main religion is Islam and it like limits some of the stuff that we are allowed to talk about in humanities class or in history. So for example a lot of the current events that are*

*happening in the news are based in the Middle East but our history teachers prefer not to teach us about those events just in case they give like a wrong sided view, like compared to like the other members of the class, so ... that kind of limits us.*

*Interviewer: How do you feel about that?*

*Student male: I don't know ... and as I am a westerner it is kind of a little bit annoying because I like doing discussions and exploring different aspects but I respect other peoples' cultures so I go with it ... it is fine.*

*Student female: As a Muslim myself I understand that in many of these discussions, that like with everything in the news at school, we can't talk about it because we have to be respectful to the country and like even I want to go on with the discussion but I understand it is like your religion and you have to like be respectful to it even if you don't always agree with it.*

### **5.5.2 Attitudes to others**

Several of the Learner Profile attributes relate to relationships with others. The attributes that are encouraged are those which promote receptiveness to those of other cultures and faiths, with a strong emphasis on intercultural awareness and understanding. Relationships should be principled, and based on authenticity and integrity. Emphasis is placed on dignity and respect for others, with a need to behave in ways that are cognisant of how one's behaviour might impact others, and the consequences of one's behaviour for others. This commitment to respect for others is particularly evident in the IB's commitment to intercultural understanding and open mindedness in the sense of being open minded to others.

*Well, we try to use the Learner Profile constantly to our advantage. So there are any issues, or if there is some problem, we try to use it. I'll give you a very specific example. About a month or so ago we had one of our girls here, who's from a more prominent family, approach another girl, whom is from Iran. The girl from here*

*approached the girl and said 'You are not dressed appropriately'. And the girl who was told this said something back about 'How dare you tell me how to dress' ... and something about being Arab this or that ... that then became a huge problem. But one of the things we did in speaking to both girls, but especially the girl that started the conflict by actually going up to somebody and saying 'You're not dressed appropriately', we spoke to her about being open-minded, and about being in a place, in Dubai for example really is, it is progressive. It really truly is. So a) the government is clear about being progressive; and b) you're in an IB school and you need to be open-minded. (Curriculum leader)*

In many instances these intercultural relationships are underpinned by an ethic of care, which reflects both a commitment to provide active support for those in need, but also relates to a more general commitment to care for, and care about family, friends and peers. Such an ethic of care extends more widely such as care for the environment, and the planet. Elements of the Learner Profile often were particularly supportive of these approaches:

*Student male: Everyone is different and there are so many different cultures in the school. And knowledge, and like and connecting everything, really helps us develop friendships and language and respect for other cultures and stuff like that.*

*Student female: There was like when disasters are happening, like in the Philippines, and what the school does they create drives to help, and it builds in us a sense of appreciation of what we have but also a sense of 'caring' as in the IB learner profiles and that you should be 'knowledgeable' but you should also 'care' for others.*

*Student male: And for us in the MYP by the end of the year we need to have achieved four of eight different sort of objectives and by different projects and by different things that we do to help the community and the people out there. So last year I did a part in the Nepal drive which was where we were boxing and moving thing that we can get blankets and we can get food and we get that to*



*these people to Nepal because of the earthquake that happened. And by that I earned my CAS points but also helping the community.*

Again, it is easy to demonstrate how these attributes align with many of the tenets of Islam set out in the Quran and associated Islamic teachings. A strong emphasis within Islamic teaching is on the importance of humility, and this may be considered to underpin all approaches to the conduct of human relationships. There is also, within Islam, a strong commitment to providing support to those considered in need, with charity representing a key element of faith.

#### 5.5.4 Attitudes to self

Several Learner Profile attributes can be considered to the personal development of the individual as a person who values themselves, and their own personal development. The emphasis on 'balance' highlights the need for development of the whole person, in all their different aspects, whilst the need to be reflective can be considered to focus on the need for individuals to be self-aware, partly in terms of strengths and weaknesses, but also in relation to a much wider set of questions that can be considered to relate to personal identity – who am I? What sort of person am I?

We have demonstrated previously that the development of the self is a key feature of Islamic faith, with a focus on personal development in both in a holistic sense. Again, several elements of the Learner Profile can be considered supportive of this, although there was a recognition of the need to ensure that Learner Profile attributes are culturally contextualised.

*I don't think that the IB learner profile goes against any religion or culture. I think it is general enough to accept and be inclusive of cultures and religions. I don't think there is any dictate as to what a 'risk taker' actually means ... you know ... a 'risk taker' is not a girl saying - "I am not wearing the shade and I don't care what you say!" That is not a 'risk taker'. A 'risk taker' is here studying in English. So you know 'risk taker' can take a number of different personas and it doesn't have to be wearing western clothes and climbing a rope course. Do you see what I mean? ... I believe that there are different elements of 'risk taker' and being 'principled' and 'principled' is an easy one ... you know ... 'risk taker' might be one that one of the girls might say ... "That would go against my culture." Well there are a lot of different ways of taking risks and being 'open minded' ... (MYP Coordinator)*

*When we are looking for our lesson plan we are trying to put this in our consideration when we put worksheet or ... you know .... to plan to our lesson we put the Learner Profile in front of us just to*

*encourage our students to be 'responsible' and to be a 'risk taker' ... and when we plan for any assessment we have to do this in our consideration and we always and sometimes we tell our students about it and to be clear that we are looking for you to be pushing you as a 'risk taker' and to be 'balanced' ... (Arabic Teacher)*

In conclusion, it is possible to make strong links between the Learner Profile and Islamic values, however support needs to be provided to maximise this opportunity. As one teacher observed, pragmatically, this does not always happen.

*... there could be good positive correlations between either Approaches to Learning or within the Learner Profile with the Pillars of Islam. I don't know - it may be that in Humanities or English they can make that connection. That could be explored and I see that some of the foundations of Islam have a lot of merit in terms of the Learner Profile I think with 'open mindedness' or 'principled' or 'caring' there is a lot of that in connection with the Pillars so I think there could be connections developed there. Does the school encourage us to promote that? I don't know. (MYP teacher)*

## **5.6 Research question 4b**

### ***What are examples of approaches and practices used by schools to align the MYP with UAE Islamic religious/civic values***

It was clear from the interviews with school leaders and teachers that work is regularly undertaken within IB World Schools to align the MYP with UAE Islamic religious and civic values. Sometimes these practices would be straightforward, such as ensuring that units of inquiry were chosen with the local setting in mind, and then suitably contextualised for the UAE, as described by the MYP Coordinators in two separate schools with relation to geology, chemistry, history and geography:

*So we do a unit on ... on geology then we would focus that on the local area and we would develop our lessons and our learning*

*objectives based on stuff that the kids know about this region. The same with science ... you know ... what scientific issues can we make people aware of in the UAE? So a topic I do with students is about antibiotic resistance because here in the UAE doctors tend to overprescribe in antibiotics and for a whole range of reasons. Often because they get shouted at by ... you know ... wealthy people who want drugs. So we try to ... you know ... the teachers are encouraged to read the local press and make units kind of localised and then we do backwards by design way because we have to. (MYP Coordinator)*

*So at the moment we are going through the process of developing unit plans for later in this social studies framework that the Ministry wants us to incorporate. So that is one aspect of it. But in terms of another aspect of it let's say for science or history and geography so what we always try and work towards is that we try and work towards a curriculum which has a local emphasis. So we will do units about issues that are of importance to this country and this region, and then globally. (MYP Coordinator)*

The most imaginative practices we were told about came from Arabic and Islamic Studies teachers for whom the process of alignment was more than one of simple contextualisation. As we have already discussed in section 3.1, teachers of these subjects were often limited by the national requirements and thus constrained in their agency to re-design the curriculum as they may wish. In these cases, teachers were often able to interpret the national requirements to allow them to draw on alternative resources and methodologies. This meant that they were meeting the inquiry-based demands of the MYP, and yet still offering the content required by the UAE MOE:

*Interviewer: So as the MYP coordinator, what is your view on the match between the Islamic and the Arabic curriculum and the MYP curriculum ... because the Arabic curriculum has to meet the MOE guidelines. Is that correct?*

*MYP Coordinator: Yes. We align that and actually now we have KHDA coming and we have inspection so ... the inspection authority every year they come and inspect us. So they asked us to have more of IB rationale and especially in Arabic and Islamic so we work towards it and we introduced world literature and we have exposed them to look at different translated literature, because if you look at it, it has good grammar and it has good structure and stories but it is not very broad. The content is what the MOE have given us, but we use the criteria and the teachers have an understanding of how to use and how to assess, and especially because if you look at the Ministry books it is mostly to do about grammar and how you are able to use it or write or analyse texts and reproducing the right structures and so we have focused on that and we have tried to align both the skills and the IB methodology ... and the skills required by the MOE.*

The Arabic and Islamic Studies teachers in one school, interviewed as a group, described in some depth how they felt the Learner Profile provided a helpful basis for learning in their subjects, making the alignment between the MYP and Arabic and Islamic a fairly straightforward one.

*Arabic teacher male: We always ... you know ... when we are looking for our lesson plan we are try to put this in our consideration when we put worksheet or ... you know ... to plan to our lesson ... we put all ... you know ... all the learning profiles ... ok in front of us just to encourage our students to be 'responsible' and to be a 'risk taker' ... and when we plan for any assessment we have to do this in our consideration and we always and sometimes we tell our students about it and to be clear that we are looking for you to be pushing you as a 'risk taker' and to be 'balanced' ...*

*Arabic and Islamic teacher female: How to be 'caring' and how to like ... from the ... look this lesson and ... and local ... and we learn this as ... as la la la and we can make many things to be ... to be ... anything from the learning profile. Yes.*

*Arabic teacher male: So we try to keep our lessons reflecting to the learning profile and for example I am teaching my students a story and then when I divided the class into groups. I give every group and I let them choose a card and every card has a name of the learning profile with a group for 'principal' and a group for 'risk taker' ... and this one is for 'thinkers' ... and whatever and we always keep using this learner profile and because this is the main ... key.*

These teachers had an enthusiasm for the IB and the MYP in particular, and felt that the underlying values of the programme, as enshrined in the Learner Profile, meant that there was already a great deal of overlap with Islamic values. The flexibility of the MYP framework (as outlined in section 5.2.2) also facilitated a good match between the MYP and the religious/civic values of the UAE.

Finally, the Arabic and Islamic Studies teacher in another school talked about the ways in which he actively sought to mould the Arabic and Islamic Studies lessons in his department to come under the 'umbrella' of the IB:

*I adjusted the curriculum using a lot of and definitely I used the umbrella of the IB system ... yeah ... and so this was as well an opportunity ... yeah ... so ... because this is very important for myself and the system itself it is very important and it gives me and it gave me the opportunity and then I used an MYP units for the middle years programme. I chose my own like novels for the system and my own resources and I brought some [MENA country] novel and it is internationally translated for me to English from some [MENA country] authors and they had lived in the States for years and it was published in English ... I brought some international novels for like Paulo Coehlo and translated into Arabic and Victor Hugo the French author, old one, and there is Shakespeare and there was ... I got some manga-style Arabic books published like in Shakespeare and you can see some samples there and this is Hamlet ... (Arabic and Islamic Studies teacher)*

The same teacher described how he was inspired by guided reading programmes from the literacy programme in the English national curriculum and aspects of the PYP, and worked to create a similar programme for his students learning Arabic, although his selection of novels did sometimes create tension amongst the parents from the MENA region (this teacher was himself from a MENA country):

*This year like I have created an Arabic guided reading programme. So for the first time I guess in the UAE and I don't know if this is done before and it took me a like a month to create it and to choose the stories and for six levels ... and yeah you see I like ... I copied a lot of things from the literacy programme of the national curriculum of England and of the UK and there is some ideas from the PYP teachers because this year we started implementing the PYP for primary ... some novels and they are really hold very important and valuable issues in society and the students actually they love reading this and this you don't find that in the yeah ... and so that sometimes some parents what I like are very committed parents they say 'Why you use this story and it is very sometimes it is very violent or it has something against the Middle East tradition and whatever?' But if these parents say this and I can tell them. 'Excuse me this novel is already mentioned in the IB system so I am sticking to the system.'* (Arabic and Islamic Studies teacher)

## **6 The IB Middle Years Programme in the United Arab Emirates – analysis, conclusions and recommendations**

This study has focused on the experience of educators, parents and students as those involved in providing, working in and studying the IB's Middle Years Programme in the UAE. The research points to very positive experiences. Inspection reports carried out by KHDA (Dubai) and ADEC (Abu Dhabi) provide positive reports of the provision in the area, whilst the growing number of candidate schools attests to local demand, and the desire of local providers to make the IB core to their provision also provide evidence of a popular

programme. Within this study our principal evidence was our own visits schools where we spoke to over 100 teachers, students and parents.

In many ways, the testimony of parents, students and parents echoed the views of others in studies we have been involved in that have researched different aspects of IB provision, sometimes with a focus on the MYP. Teachers and parents in IB World Schools are always a mix of 'conscious choosers' (those who have a philosophical commitment to the IB and seek out IB World Schools to work in, or send their children to) and 'pragmatic adopters' (those who find themselves in the area, and then find a school that looks to suit). Whatever the motivations, we found high levels of commitment to the Middle Years Programme. Whilst there are issues raised, by teachers, students and parents, about different aspects of the programme where someone may identify potential improvements, the overall level of satisfaction is undoubtedly high.

Features of the IB MYP that emerged in this study as important were:

1. Curriculum flexibility – with teachers provided with space to exercise professional judgement about pedagogy, content and assessment design.
2. An inquiry focused approach where students learn through posing questions and being actively involved in researching responses.
3. A connected curriculum where emphasis is placed on joining content up into coherent programmes that better reflect the world we live in.
4. The development of independent learners with an emphasis on skills development (learning how to learn).
5. The emphasis on intercultural understanding in a diverse international school setting.

Many of the above features may be considered core features of IB programmes, although particular aspects can be specific to particular schools (as the report indicated, IB has a strong commitment to developing intercultural understanding, but this can look quite different, in an international school with 85 nationalities to one where the student population is much more homogenous).



However, this research highlighted there are a number of issues that make providing the MYP in the UAE a distinctive experience. In discussing these issues we draw on frameworks presented earlier in the report relating to policy enactment and the importance of context.

### **6.1 Curriculum as policy enactment: One school, two curricula**

One issue that is immediately apparent in the schools we researched is that private schools in the UAE operate in what can be considered a 'dual curriculum system' whereby whatever is the chosen curriculum (in this case the IB MYP) is combined with local requirements, in this case relating to Arabic language, Islamic Studies and UAE Social Studies. Such a situation is far from unique. Many IB World Schools are based in public systems and are required to combine their IB with provision with what may be a national curriculum (sometimes with complex assessment requirements). In many private systems there is often a requirement to provide some element mandated by the State, often relating to the promotion of citizenship and national identity.

There is however a challenge to think through how the two curricula are provided to the same student, in a way that ensures coherence. As has been indicated, a curriculum is more than a timetable, but is a manifestation of the total range of pedagogical values (how is knowledge conceived? What knowledge is privileged? How do we make learning happen? How do the answers to these questions relate to the wider aims of education?).

In the UAE creating this curriculum coherence is not always straightforward. This is because of the way the two curricula can sit together within the same school. In summary, the two curricula have differences in approach, are taught by people with different backgrounds and experiences and in some cases, are taught to different students.

The differences in approach in the two curricula are reflected in the different ways they are presented. The IB MYP might be called 'loosely coupled' in the sense that it deliberately has considerable flexibility. Teachers are provided with the agency to 'create' their curriculum, starting from the local context and the

experiences and needs of children. This flexibility extends to assessment, and the ways in which teachers make judgements about student learning. In the MYP assessment can be seen as the servant of the curriculum, rather than the other way round.

The above does contrast with the local curriculum requirements, which can be described as more 'tightly coupled'. Content is specified more closely, and this extends to resources. Teachers have choices in relation to some aspects of curriculum resources, but not others. In this system the types of assessment are externally determined and teachers have no control over them. Moreover, they are high stakes in relation to the external evaluation of the school. The content is specified precisely because at a local level this work is considered of particular importance. It is inevitable then that the local inspectorate will take a particular interest in this part of any school's activities.

The differences in the two curricula are also reflected in the different people who teach them. Islamic studies must be taught by a Muslim, whilst Arabic teaching clearly requires high proficiency in the Arabic language. We did not see any cases where this was taught by anyone for whom Arabic was not their first language. These teachers are drawn from across the MENA region. In contrast, those involved in the provision of other aspects of the IB MYP are much more likely to be ex-patriate Western teachers, and as has been indicated, in the schools where the data was available this means the largest group of teachers was either from the UK or USA. Other countries represented in significant numbers were largely Anglophone – Australia, Republic of Ireland, and South Africa.

A final feature of these differences is that the students experience the two curricula differently. Arabic students experience a different Arabic language class to non-Arabic students (which is not necessarily reflective of their language capability) whilst Muslim students study Islamic Studies, and non-Muslim students do not.

Why is this significant? We believe this is significant because within the schools we studied there is the potential for schools to develop an internal dual identity,

in which the differences we describe above are not only different, but quite separate. What is required is for schools to consciously act in ways that ensure that the dual identity we speak of is part of a wider unity, rather than being separate and disconnected. A simple analogy is that they form two sides of a single coin.

This unity is forged through the processes of policy enactment, and the ways in which those who work in schools, leaders and teachers, assert their agency, and make choices, about how the school functions and how 'the curriculum' is provided. The concept of agency is important in policy enactment because it emphasises that those working in schools have choices and can exercise choice in ways that make a difference. For example, we have described the local curriculum requirements for Arabic and Islamic Studies as 'tightly coupled', but this does not mean that any sense of agency, or professional judgement, is removed from the pedagogical process. To suggest this is the case would be to suggest that teaching is robotic, and it manifestly is not. Rather we witnessed very creative ways in which teachers of these subjects sought to integrate local and IB expectations so that the different approaches formed part of a coherent whole. Similarly we saw examples of how expatriate Western teachers adapted their content to reflect local context and local issues.

The point we wish to emphasise here is that this unity forged from dual identities must be *actively created*. Presenting the curriculum as an exercise in policy enactment emphasises the need for school leaders and teachers to 'think through' their actions by identifying where there is agency, and exploiting these opportunities. If the curriculum is seen as a mechanistic process of 'implementation' or 'delivery' there is a danger that some structural pressures that tend towards fracturing will result in an experience where the two dimensions we describe above co-exist but separate from each other – never the 'twain shall meet. The challenge is to create the school experience whereby the different approaches are not just conjoined, but each enriches the other.

*I mean ... my background I have studied Islam and I have studied the conflict in the Middle East when I was at university and so I*

*have got a background that I feel that I can navigate those waters and sensitively and with respect and with a way that I don't think is fair to expect any new teacher to come in who doesn't have that background to be able to understand where the concerns might and they can in a broad sense and you inevitably know it is going to end and it is not what just what you are teaching it is the kids who are asking the questions ... (MYP teacher)*

## **6.2 Curriculum as policy enactment: the significance of context**

What emerges strongly in this study is the importance of seeing the curriculum as a process of policy enactment that takes place within unique contexts. As was indicated in earlier sections of this report, context needs to be understood at multiple levels. At higher levels more and more schools will fall within the orbit of particular contextual considerations. However, at the meso and micro levels of context then the unique contexts of each individual school begin to emerge as significant. In this section we discuss how schools providing the IB MYP in the UAE operate within contextual frameworks.

The UAE represents a fascinating mix of a fast-paced, entrepreneurial environment, located in a country where faith and religion are highly significant issues in all aspects of every day life. In common with many other Islamic states, the UAE sees no simple division between being Islamic and public governance. The holistic nature of Islam as a faith points to a seamlessness between religion and modes of governance. As a consequence, inevitably and intentionally, Islam features prominently in all aspects of public and private life, and informs all the policy discourses that frame the public realm. However, this is a version of Islamic life that must co-exist with an economy that is rapid, often individualistic and at times acquisitive. It is also a version of Islamic life that must recognise that a high proportion of its residents are non-Muslim. These are not insurmountable problems or irreconcilable tensions, but they create complexities and need to be acknowledged. Education is at the heart of the discourses that relate to both the economy and citizenship. Schools, both public and private, play a key role in shaping the society of the future and the

UAE has to navigate a complex and fast-changing world. Schools both shape, and are shaped by, the contexts they operate in.

These macro level discourses framing policy also received expression at the meso, or intermediate level, where for example the different approaches adopted by ADEC and KHDA, the inspectorate bodies responsible for the Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai respectively, emerged as a significant issue. Within this report we make no judgement about the relative merits of the different approaches, as such judgements are not directly relevant to addressing the aims of this project. However, our interest reflects our approach to these issues through the lens of policy enactment. In these terms there can be no doubt that within the different Emirates the different approaches adopted by ADEC and KHDA was significant. The two bodies do differ in some of their expectations and they also adopt different approaches to the ways they work with schools. Inevitably, these factors have an impact on how those working in schools go about their business. The inspectorates are extremely powerful and schools are mindful of not meeting expectations, as the consequences can be significant. For teachers, and school leaders, the inspectorates loom large in their lives, and have a significant influence on daily practices (both within classrooms, and on whole-school issues).

In exploring classroom and whole-school practices it is also important to recognise the specific factors that shape the micro-context of the school. These can be considered as the unique combination of factors that make each individual school what it is. In the model presented by Barnett and Stevenson (2015, see Figure 1), this included issues such as the staff profile, the student profile and the school's location in the local 'market' (whether open or closed, competitive or otherwise). In this study it might also include the school's ownership and governance arrangements.

At the school level these issues are significant because of the way they frame the practices and experiences in the school, and in classrooms. In our study, there were differences between the school owned by a global corporation with an overwhelmingly expatriate student population and a locally owned school where the majority of the students were Emirati. These differences should not surprise

us. The schools in this study operate in a (competitive) market, and inevitably they are 'positioned' in that market. Schools will be reflective of that local market, and will seek to appeal to particular sections of it.

The issue for this study is to recognise how school and classroom based decisions about practice are shaped by contextual issues, and that different schools in the study face different contextual factors that influence them. For example, all schools within the UAE work within the national context but a school in Dubai does face a different context to one in Abu Dhabi, simply because the local regulations and inspection systems are different. School decision making is shaped by this. Within our study we did see examples of how parents may have very different expectations of their children's school. Some parents do not expect to live in the UAE very long. They are looking for an education that is respectful of local culture, but which is also highly mobile in the sense that when the time comes for a child to have to move the next school experience looks appreciably similar to the one they have just left. In other cases, parents may be local and permanent residents. They are proud Emiratis and they wish for their children to be brought up to respect that.

In our study we were struck by the complex mix of contextual issues, and the ways in which these factors shaped practice in the schools. One teacher stated explicitly 'we have two masters', by which he referred to the IB and KHDA. In reality the environment is more complex. Although all the schools in this study are IB MYP schools, school leaders and teachers must navigate local contexts in which the curriculum reflects myriad contextual factors – the local curriculum requirements, the expectations of owners and the experiences of parents and students, which even in the same school are not homogenous.

Leadership in these circumstances is complex, and requires school leaders to navigate complicated environments in which there are often competing, and sometimes conflicting expectations. Hence the need to be able to 'think through' what is possible, and to see policy enactment as the identification and exercising of agency.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

Providing the IB MYP programme within the UAE provides an opportunity to offer a dynamic curriculum in a culturally diverse environment which brings together distinctive cultural and pedagogical traditions. In order for this to be effective we present the following recommendations, based on the findings presented in this report.

#### **6.3.1 Create the culture**

By this we are referring to the whole culture, and in particular the ways in which school leaders created a culture across the school that respected local expectations, reflected the diversity within the school population and celebrated each individual within the school, whether as a student, member of staff or parent. Where this was done especially well, effective use was made of the Learner Profile. This is not an aspect of the IB MYP that is 'delivered' in lesson plans, but rather it is lived in both classrooms and the school community as a whole. Mobilising the power of the Learner Profile presents an opportunity to create a whole school experience that is caring, balanced, open-minded in all senses, and dynamic.

#### **6.3.2 Connect the curriculum**

We have demonstrated how local circumstances, and the need to meet the requirements of two different curricula, can pose particular challenges. There is a danger that this divide creates a fractured experience. There is nothing inevitable about this, but rather careful curriculum planning not only integrates the two curricula, but creates an enhanced and enriched curriculum from the careful integration of the two. Such an integration is achieved through the development of a common experience across all teaching, whether the subject being studied is part of the local mandate, or the wider MYP offer.

#### **6.3.3 Develop the staff**

It is hard to overstate the importance of this factor. Within this study we have argued that the curriculum works well when staff are able to assert their agency.

They have the skills to exploit the opportunities and flexibilities provided by the MYP. In 'enacting' the curriculum teachers are able to identify where they have agency, and maximise the benefits this presents. However, this requires a sophisticated set of pedagogical skills that teachers take many years to acquire. These issues become more complex in particular environments.

The largest staff groups in the schools where we worked were from the UK, USA, and other Anglophone countries. Some of these teachers had IB experience prior to working in their current school, whilst others did not. Similarly, some had MENA experience, but many did not. Many of these teachers had much to learn about teaching in a specific cultural and religious context such as the UAE. What is clear is that teachers need support to make this transition work, by which we mean to not only be able to 'function' in their school, but to begin to connect their teaching with the local context, and to exploit the opportunities available.

Teachers from the MENA region faced a different, but related set of issues. These teachers are recruited from across the region to teach Arabic language and Islamic studies. This group face a considerable challenge to take their local curriculum and offer it in a way that aligns with the MYP. We have seen in this report that that is possible, and can be done extremely well. However, it needs to be properly supported with teachers whose background is very different being provided with the professional development to help them make the necessary adjustment. Based on this study, we are not suggesting this always needs to be externally provided support, which can be expensive, but oftentimes the expertise exists within the school. What is required are the opportunities for staff to share what they do and learn from each other.

#### **6.3.4 Build organisational capital**

Effective schools are characterised by high levels of collaborative working, and strong networks of support. We witnessed these in the schools in this study. Where these work most effectively these networks of support extend horizontally, for example working across subject boundaries. Secondary schools, with their subject specialisms, are always vulnerable to a form of disciplinary balkanisation in which subjects departments operate in isolation



from each other. The IB MYP's emphasis on subject integration helps militate against this, but really overcoming it requires a more conscious effort. Within the UAE, and because of the way different teachers in the curriculum can come from very different backgrounds, then these tendencies can be strong. There is a need therefore to consciously connect colleagues horizontally, by networking across subject boundaries. These are the ways in which some tendencies to division can be overcome, and also the mechanism by which genuine cross cultural professional learning can take place.

### **6.3.5 Engage the parents**

A feature of many of the schools that we worked with was the high level of parent engagement. Schools in the UAE do not have natural geographical communities. They do not draw their students exclusively from their immediate environs. This can make it more difficult to connect with the wider community outside the school. Making this connection with parents emerged as an important issue in this study, helping develop cross cultural understanding and also mobilising considerable reservoirs of practical support. Schools established clear and formal structures for engaging with parents, and which provided parents with a voice in school governance. However, there was also a strong emphasis on less formal involvement whereby parents met socially for coffee in the school day, or were made an integral part of school cultural events, such as those celebrating the different nationalities represented in the school.

### **6.3.6 Support IB World Schools in understanding national requirements**

Finally, our last recommendation is for the IBO, rather than individual schools. We have alluded in this report to the 'Chinese whispers' approach to policy dissemination: the hearsay and rumour that can spread through schools, and amongst teachers, about supposed dictats from ADEC and KHDA in the absence of any formal communication. Here we suggest that the IBO might usefully act as an intermediary to work more closely with the UAE Ministry of Education, ADEC and the KHDA, to clarify, interpret and translate policies and guidelines, and thus support IB World Schools in their understanding and awareness of national requirements.



## References:

Abed, I., & Hellyer, P. (2001). *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*. London: Trident Press.

Abu Dhabi Education Council. (2014-2015). *Private schools policy and guidance manual*. Retrieved from <https://www.adec.ac.ae/en/MediaCenter/Publications/PSPG%20schools%20Policy/files/assets/common/downloads/publication.pdf>

Alhebsi, A., Pettaway, L. D., & Waller, L. (2015). A history of education in the United Arab Emirates and Trucial Sheikdoms. *The Global eLearning Journal*, 4(1), 1-6.

Angelle, P., Morrison, M. and Stevenson, H., (2015). 'Doing' social justice leadership connecting the macro and micro contexts of schooling. In: Ryan, J. and Armstrong, D., (Eds.), *Working (with/out) the System: Educational Leadership, Micropolitics and Social Justice*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Ball, S. J. (1994). Some reflections on policy theory: A brief response to Hatcher and Troyna. *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol.9(2), p.171-82.

Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. London: Routledge.

Barnett, B. G., & Stevenson, H. (2015). Leading high poverty urban schools. In S. C. Clarke & T. O'Donoghue (Eds.), *School leadership in heterogeneous contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Bell, L & Stevenson, H. (2006). *Education policy: Process, themes and impact*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Bell, L. & Stevenson, H. (Eds.), (2013). *Organizing public education*. London: Sage.

Bunnell, T. (2011). The International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme after 30 years: A critical inquiry. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 10(3), 261-274.

ComRes (2016). Ahmadi Muslims – Perceptions of the Caliphate. Retrieved from [http://www.comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Ahmadi-Muslims\\_Perceptions-of-the-Caliphate.pdf](http://www.comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Ahmadi-Muslims_Perceptions-of-the-Caliphate.pdf) Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

Dimmock, C., Stevenson, H., Bignold, B., Shah, S. and Middlewood, D. (2005). School Community Perspectives and their Leadership Implications. In *Effective Leadership in Multi-Ethnic Schools*, Nottingham: NCSL.

De Bel-Air, F. (2015). *Demography, migration, and the labour market in the UAE*. Retrieved from [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/36375/GLMM\\_ExpNote\\_07\\_2015.pdf?sequence=1](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/36375/GLMM_ExpNote_07_2015.pdf?sequence=1). Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

Dubai Statistics Center. (2015). Enrolled Students by Education Type and Nationality - Emirate of Dubai. Retrieved 9 July 2016, from Dubai Statistics Center <https://www.dsc.gov.ae/en-us/Themes/Pages/Education.aspx?Theme=37>

Dye, T. (1992). *Understanding public policy*. Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall.

Fargues, P., & Shah, N. M. (2011). *Socio-economic Impacts of GCC Migration*. Paper presented at the Gulf Research Meeting. <http://grm.grc.net/index.php?pgid=Njk=&wid=Mjc>

Ghanem, S. M. (2001). Industrialization in the UAE. In I. Abed & P. Hellyer (Eds.), *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*. London: Trident Press.

Gordon, I., Lewis, J. & Young, K. (1997). Perspectives on policy analysis. In M. Hill (Ed.) *The Policy Process*, London: Prentice Hall.

Harman, G. (1984). Conceptual and theoretical issues. In J. R. Hough (Ed.), *Educational policy: An international survey* (pp. 13–29). London: Croom Helm.

International Baccalaureate Organisation (2008). *Towards a continuum of international education* The Hague, NL.

IBO (International Baccalaureate Organisation) (2017). Programmes. Retrieved from <http://www.ibo.org/en/programmes> Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

IBO (International Baccalaureate Organisation) (2013). What is an IB education? Retrieved from <http://www.ibo.org/globalassets/publications/what-is-an-ib-education-en.pdf> Accessed 6th September 2016.

KHDA (Knowledge and Human Development Authority of Dubai). (2009). *Order No. (1) of 2009 amending Order No. (1) of 2007*. Retrieved from [http://www.khda.gov.ae/CMS/WebParts/TextEditor/Documents/KHDA%20Board%20Order%20No%20%20\(1\)%20of%202009%20Amending%20Order%20No%20%20\(1\)%20of%202007%20-%20English%20-%20Final%20by%20MAK.pdf](http://www.khda.gov.ae/CMS/WebParts/TextEditor/Documents/KHDA%20Board%20Order%20No%20%20(1)%20of%202009%20Amending%20Order%20No%20%20(1)%20of%202007%20-%20English%20-%20Final%20by%20MAK.pdf)

KHDA (Knowledge and Human Development Authority of Dubai). (2015). *School Inspection Supplement*. Retrieved from [https://www.khda.gov.ae/Areas/Administration/Content/FileUploads/Publication/Documents/English/2015-19-24-08-44-KHDA\\_INSPECTION\\_SUPPLEMENT\\_EN.pdf](https://www.khda.gov.ae/Areas/Administration/Content/FileUploads/Publication/Documents/English/2015-19-24-08-44-KHDA_INSPECTION_SUPPLEMENT_EN.pdf).

Kogan, M. (1975). *Educational policy-making: A study of interest groups and parliament*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Macpherson, R., Kachelhoffer, P., & El Nemr, M. (2007). The radical modernization of school and education system leadership in the United Arab Emirates: Towards an indigenized and educative leadership. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 35(1), 60-77.

Mullen, C.A., Samier, E.A., Brindley, S., English, F. W., & Carr, N. K. (2013). An epistemic frame analysis of neo-liberal culture and politics in the US, UK and the UAE. *Interchange*, 43: 187-228. doi:10.1007/s10780-013-9176-0.

Ridge, N., Kippels, S., & Shami, S. (2015). *Private Education in the Absence of a Public Option: The Cases of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar*. Education Support Program Working Paper Series. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292138912>. Accessed 5th September 2016.

Shah, S. (2015). *Education, Leadership and Islam: Theories, discourses and practices from an Islamic perspective*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Shah, S. (2009). Muslim Learners in English schools: A challenge for school leaders', *Oxford Review of Education*, 35(4): 1–18.

Shihab, M. (2001). Economic Development in the UAE. In I. Abed & P. Hellyer (Eds.), *United Arab Emirates: A new perspective* (pp. 249-259). London: Trident Press.

Singh, M. & Jing, Qi (2013). *21st century international mindedness: An exploratory study of its conceptualisation and assessment: IB research paper*. University of Western Sidney

Spring, J. (2015). *Globalization of education: An introduction*. 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

The Core Knowledge Foundation (2016). *Core knowledge*. Retrieved from <http://www.coreknowledge.org/> Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

UAE, (n.d.). *Vision 2021: United in ambition and determination*. Retrieved from <https://www.vision2021.ae/sites/default/files/uae-vision2021-brochure-english.pdf> Accessed 6th January 2017.

Walker, G. (2010) *East is East and West is West*. International Baccalaureate Organisation. Available online at [http://blogs.ibo.org/positionpapers/files/2010/09/East-and-West\\_George-Walker.pdf](http://blogs.ibo.org/positionpapers/files/2010/09/East-and-West_George-Walker.pdf)

William, D. (2013). Re-designing schooling 3: Principled curriculum design. London: SSAT. Retrieved from <https://webcontent.ssatuk.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Dylan-William-Principled-curriculum-design-chapter-1.pdf> Accessed 5th September 2016.

Wilkins, S. (2013). 'Home' or away? The higher education choices of expatriate children in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 12(1), 33-48. doi:10.1177/1475240913479519

World Bank. (2015). United Arab Emirates. Retrieved from: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/united-arab-emirates> Accessed 28th November 2016.

Zayed University (2016). *The story of the UAE*. Retrieved from <http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/careers/living/story.aspx> Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> September 2016.