Developing leadership identities: Influences on Emirati graduate students’ leadership perspectives.

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Abstract

The College of Education at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates has recently introduced a graduate program for a Master of Educational Leadership. The first cohort has completed the program and a new cohort has begun their study. During the program, graduate students were asked to identify and reflect on their current leadership perspectives and philosophies in the framework of their culture and religion. Through the process of identity development (Holland et. al. 1998; Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004) they attempted to merge their personal beliefs, value systems and tacit knowledge with explicit international best practice leadership theories. This paper compares and contrasts data from the first and second cohort to analyze how participants’ identities of self as leaders emerged, and to discuss the extent to which the process ‘proves’ theories of the development of professional identity and simultaneously ‘improves’ understanding of leadership and their own practice. Islamic perspectives, home and family, leadership models (e.g. situational, participative), and the importance of role models proved to have been critical in the development of their identities as educational leaders.

Introduction

Rapid and ongoing development across all sectors of its’ society characterizes the young nation of the United Arab Emirates. Currently a great deal of attention is focused on the reform of its education sector including the further development of graduate programs. Responding to Zayed University’s mandate for leadership development, the College of Education has recently introduced a graduate program for a Master of Educational Leadership. The first cohort has recently graduated and the second cohort is halfway through their program. The first cohort comprised 24 students (19 women and 5 men). The second cohort comprises 24 women the majority of whom are UAE nationals who work in a range of current and aspiring leadership situations. A small number are from surrounding GCC countries such as Jordan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

During one course in their program participants are asked to reflect on their current leadership perspectives and philosophies in the context of their culture and religion. For the second cohort, the particular course was taught by the same 2 female Australasian lecturers as for Cohort One and they were joined by a visiting male American faculty member. Students were exposed to a range of international leadership concepts and ideas together with material from Middle Eastern and Islamic contexts. For Cohort Two a wider range of literature was introduced together with a stronger emphasis on organisational theory.

This paper uses data from participants’ statements to explore and analyse their developing leadership perspectives and to compare and contrast data from the first and second cohort to analyse how participants’ identities of self as leaders emerged, and to discuss the extent to which the process ‘proves’ theories of the development of professional identity and simultaneously ‘improves’ understanding of leadership and their own practice.

Theories of Identity

Identity is a person's self-understanding about who they are, who they say they are and trying to act as though they are who they say they are (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998:3). The development of identities is a historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed.
frame of social practices where individual and collective behaviour are mediated by senses of self or identities (Holland et al., 1998).

The "communities of practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998) perspective highlights the connections between identity and learning and the role practice has in constructing and maintaining individual and collective identities. For the purposes of this paper, we draw on social identity theories with the view that identity is an ongoing process of interaction of person and context and thus interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences so that individuals understand who they are and who they wish to become (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004).

If identities are being lived then they are unfinished and in process (Holland et al, 1998: vii). Therefore, meanings that attach to certain identities shift with time and vary from place to place. Identities are shaped through the tensions between knowing and being, thought and action, theory and practice, and the objective and the subjective. According to Britzman (1991), these relationships are not neat or binary but rather are better expressed as dialogic because they are shaped as they shape each other.

Produced because of social interaction, subject to negotiation, consent, and circumstance, inscribed with power and desire, and always in the process of becoming, these dialogic relations fashion the ways teachers understand their practices and the subjectivity that bestows this practice with identity (Britzman, 1991:3).

Wenger’s (1998) model also emphasizes the dialogic nature of identity construction. In his model the development of leadership identities is an ongoing process that changes as an individual learns through lived experiences, shaping and reshaping meanings that result from the social nature of identity development in specific contexts. Wenger (1998) identifies seven ways that identities are constructed and emphasizes the complexity of identity construction as a result of life’s experiences. In his view, identities are configured by life and experience, negotiation, across ongoing lifespan experiences, through social experiences, by the incorporation of past and future into the present, at the nexus of current practices, and through the interplay of global and local contexts where those practices are located, and finally, through the participation in varying communities and practices at different stages of life.

For Salling Olesen (2001) identity is a process of ongoing concern for the professional in a field. She identifies two main objective elements: work practices, with their more or less contradictory and coercive conditions, and the social interactions, missions and changes to which the professional has to and wants to relate; and the cultural institution consisting of the profession as an institution and a professional discourse.

Learning and experience building is a process of subjective flexibility, in which a learning subject, meeting new and changing phenomena and social practices, redefines itself cognitively and emotionally (Salling Olesen, 2001:295).

The developing identities of Cohort One and Two participants were the result of their interaction between their internal values, beliefs and assumptions and the contexts in which they lived leadership experiences. As they interpreted and reinterpreted their workplace and work-related experiences they changed their individual leadership perspectives and the value they placed on these views (Bushe, 2005). These elements are discussed in the following sections.

The Cohort Two statements identified a range of leadership themes including theoretical perspectives, building relationships, distributed leadership, Islamic perspectives, role models, changes in perspective, moral purpose and ethics, values, leadership learning, leadership styles and vision. Due to time and space constraints, a selection of these will be discussed. The paper outlines some broad similarities in the leadership views of the two cohorts and then discusses
some emergent, slightly different themes (metaphor and narrative, gender) appearing in the statements of Cohort Two.

Similarities Between the Views on Leadership of the Two Cohorts

**Theoretical Perspectives**

As with Cohort One the core text used by the graduates was Fullan’s (2004) *Leading schools in a culture of change* which participants viewed as an appropriate one for the UAE context where they would be expected to assist in educational reform. The first cohort had identified strongly with many of Fullan’s perspectives. This alignment was also apparent in the views of Cohort Two. Fifteen of the participants made specific reference in their statements to aspects of Fullan’s ideas. The following quotes reflect typical statements.

*Fullan’s book “leading in a culture of change” was a solid introduction to understand the organization in a culture of change (Majida).*

*The book of Michael Fullan “Leading in a culture of change” reflects the responsibilities of an effective leader. A leader must share experience and new skills with others not by dictating instructions or preaching but by serving as an individual who is as a part of his society. As a result the others will be encouraged to ask and seek ways to expand their own leadership traits (Shaima).*

As with the earlier cohort, the second group drew links between Fullan’s perspectives and their own cultural context.

*I agree with what Fullan said about this component “People do not voluntarily share knowledge unless the culture favors exchange” (Fullan, 2004). This is similar to Muslims manners, we have to exchange knowledge between each other because this is what our religion encourages us to do (Amira).*

In addition a range of key texts and articles from writers such as Schein (1985), Leithwood et. al. (1998), Lindgard et. al. (2003), Hargreaves (1994), Knapp et. al. (2003), Senge (1996), and Sergiovanni (1982) were used to provide an international perspective on leadership. Some material from Islamic and Middle Eastern contexts was also used (e.g. Al Hinai and Rutherford, 2002). The writing of Sergiovanni appeared to resonate more strongly with the second cohort and several referred to him in their statements in comments such as the following:

*A good leader always assesses the interacting forces of change that Sergiovanni identified: the technical, human, educational, symbolic, cultural, and political forces. Therefore the leader tries to identify the facilitating forces to empower them as well as the restraining forces to manoeuvre around the. (Sabah).*

*In my opinion, and as per Sergiovanni’s stages of culture, several forces have effected positively in creating and accomplishing the goals and changes that we all witness in Dubai. (Tahani).*

*The administration and even the staff saw me as a rebel and a troublemaker without having results. So I decided to stop and try in another way which was to change the structure of future schools. [As Sergiovanni (1992)] said "Leadership forces are the means available not only to bring about changes needed to improve schools, but to protect and preserve things that are valued" (Anoud).*

During class workshops and discussion participants were encouraged to draw comparisons between theoretical perspectives and their own experiences. For Cohort One the two most frequently mentioned aspects related to building relationships and developing trust, and systems thinking. Many of Cohort Two identified similar views in their statements.
Building relationships

As with Cohort One the nature of the leader-follower relationship was a common point in the statements of the second group and the majority of statements included comments on the importance for leaders of building relationships. The following statements typify these responses:

Actually, building a relationship between the group members and the team leader is a very important point for me, because it acts like an icebreaker between the leader and his/her colleagues. From my experience in the work field where I have observed that building a relationship with my fellow colleagues is important and crucial to have and build a successful and peaceful environment, as well as giving and being creative (Afra).

The first cohort had discussed aspects such as the position of the leader, reciprocity between leaders and followers, and the development of leadership capacity in others. Similar views appeared in the statements of the second group.

Several of the participants noted the complexity of building relationships with diverse constituencies:

Consequently, the transformational leader has to build relationships between the staff at schools as well as the external environment because lifelong learning will dominate the atmosphere of our school organization. I admit that chaos may occur at the early stages of implementation, but it is the leader's responsibility to make coherence in order to keep the process of change continuing (Majida).

And the challenges of relationship building were also identified:

I agree that building relationships is important but leaders, when forming a group, must consider that the group should know each other and that they are comfortable with every member otherwise they will not complete their tasks effectively or the work will be late (Ayesha).

Starting with my first trainee course I began to learn many lessons about variety and how can I build relationships with other staff that come from different countries. I realize that it is sometimes much easier to connect with people whose beliefs, values, and background are very similar to my own, but it’s not difficult to build relationships with others also. In addition, I was able to share ideas, knowledge and feeling with those who have different backgrounds. That’s support (Alia).

Often this element is mistaken as being insignificant, but this assumption is wrong. As Fullan (2004) said "leaders need to pay as much attention to how they treat people as they pay to structures, strategies, and statistics." Many power/authority clashes occur in the school grounds because of the unfairness in the treatment or opportunities (Sumaya).

Distributing leadership

As with Cohort One the concept of distributed leadership was endorsed by several of the second group:

At the moment, I can describe the leadership style at my current job and within the division, as a distributed leadership style. Each employee is a leader in one way or another (Tahani).
When I did my internship in Dubai Media City, I realized that each department was self managed and that the hierarchy of authority was not only from top to bottom but also horizontally across different departments. I believe that because the organization is considered an advanced one with a lot of professional minds working at it, the idea of distributed leadership worked out well. As an employee, it was very easy for me to communicate my ideas. (Athaba).

I found myself [using] distributed leadership. Actually, I believe that this type of leadership is the best way of leading (Alia).

In my opinion this type of leadership is the most suitable one to lead in most learning organizations particularly in schools. This sort of leadership I think is the most effective in the UAE community (Ahlam).

However some participants were more critical, seeing some challenges with this style of leadership:

I think that the idea of distributed leadership is lovely but on the other hand it will be too risky because of lazy people; even evaluating their participation in the work will be difficult (Asia).

I don't think that distributed leadership works in the school. It may possibly work in the industrial sector where everybody has equal ability and has authority within his specialty. Using distributed leadership colleagues will not accept the decision of the leaders. For example: in my school there are actually three powers (principal- vice principal- supervisor) how can they have an equal strength of power in the school if they oppose each others’ ideas and decisions (Ayesha).

The second cohort was introduced to more content about organizational theory and leadership and this was reflected in their comments about these topics. Several noted the importance for the leader to be able to have a broad understanding and knowledge of the organisation in order to make changes and improvements:

I believe that a leader is a person who develops an organization keeping what is good, getting rid of what is bad, enabling change when and where it is needed, and creating an entity that is well positioned to reach the set target(s). In order to do that I think that the leader should understand the culture and the structure of the organization, should be aware of the contemporary imperatives, should formulate a vision, should create the proper atmosphere to enable change, and should enhance coherence between all the parts of the organization (Sabah).

A leader in an organization should clarify the organization's role and responsibility in the society as well as modify the roles and positions of their team members. The leaders should be able to share their mission and vision to achieve their aim as team (Afra).

The leader’s job is to choose the right place for the right person and to do that the leader must use organizational skills or the organizing leadership. I think this tool is the base to getting work done effectively and when the followers find that every thing is organized they will be relieved (Alanood).

The term "organizations without boundaries" is becoming necessary in this age of globalization, and the focus on integration and incorporation of ideas, people and
money is the only answer to creating competent, coherent, trustworthy networks that reflect positive and strong relationships (Tahani).

Islamic Perspectives

A pervasive theme within Cohort One’s perspectives on leadership was the impact of local cultural practices and of Islamic beliefs. While the participants’ personal statements identified with and endorsed many aspects of international theoretical perspectives on leadership they were very clear about the role and importance of their Islamic beliefs and values in the construction of their leadership identities. This was also apparent for several of the participants in Cohort Two as evidenced in the following statements. For some it was simply a given:

My own conception of leadership is based on a combination of my beliefs and Islamic values (Asia).

In the Holy Quran and the Hadith, a great emphasis is given to moral and ethical values in Islam. These ethics and values are not just a set of rules to be followed, they are a whole lifestyle and this comprises the foundation of my personal beliefs and values (Tahani).

Authentic leaders in our Muslim society are supported strongly by the people and citizens. In Islam, leaders are encouraged to implement their Islamic principles and values by creating an ethical institution, practicing authority in ethical ways and applying it in daily practices and challenges (Asia).

Some participants referred to the leadership of Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) as an exemplar to guide them in their own approach to leadership. Often they referred to specific messages from the Holy Quran to reinforce this:

Prophet Mohamed founded one of the world’s great religions, and became an immensely effective political leader. Today, thirteen centuries after his death, his influence is still powerful. He is surely right and we love the prophet Mohamed (peace and blessings be upon him) as he lives with us and we always find him a great leader who has all the necessary qualities for success in every aspect of life (Suhaila).

I believe that there is no better example of leadership than Prophet Mohammed (blessings be upon him). His character shows all examples of effective leaders in one. He was the leader, the teacher, the soldier and all Muslims love him and have great faith in him. The greatest successes of Prophet Mohammed’s life were affected by sheer moral force (Shaima).

As a Muslim I know that Allah had asked the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) to use Al Shura as a way of leading. He said: “And by the Mercy of Allah you dealt with them gently, and had you been severe and harsh- hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so pass over their faults, and ask Allah forgiveness for them and consult them in the affairs”. (Al- Imran159) (Alia).

Throughout history people have been trying to define leadership at it has evolved. Therefore, I will choose the holiest definition by our Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) when he said: "Each of you is a guardian, and each of you will be asked about his subjects (Majida).

Others linked their views to ‘western’ theoretical perspectives:
Each of us needs something within to guide us; to give us wisdom, hope, and courage when times get rough. This can come from religious beliefs, or from ethics, morals, or values we were raised with… I totally agree with what Fullan said that the moral purpose is very critical to any organization since it provides stability and ensures that the organization will survive longer in the midst of change. (Kaltham).

Leadership ethics and Islamic ethics go together toward the same goals. A leader should represent a good model whether he/ she is a Muslim or he believes in another religion. Values and morals do not change - what is changing the way that people are thinking (Majida).

A further aspect of leadership practice that was connected with Islam by some participants was that of personal change. This was mentioned by several members of Cohort One and was again reflected in Cohort Two.

Change from inside must come first. In the Holy Quran in AlRa’ad, part 13, page 250 it says "Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls)" (Shaima).

A comparison of the two cohorts indicates that there was an increase in the references to the influence of Islam by the second cohort. Thirty-three percent of Cohort One participants referred to this aspect while just over fifty percent of the second group did so.

**Role Models: Home and Family**

Within Emirati culture the place of family is paramount and family position involves important leadership duties and obligations. The personal statements of Cohort One made consistent references to how key family members impacted on participants’ current views both in the past and present. Most provided examples of how this impact had been positive and had linked strongly to the development of values and attitudes. Cohort One members had mainly referred to mothers and siblings as early influences. The members of Cohort Two also commented on the influence of family members. For some, like Cohort One, their mother had been influential in their views of leadership.

My mother, who presented my second role model, took over all duties. Although she had a graduate certificate, she never joined the workforce but instead devoted herself completely to raising her four daughters. She was forced to take up this challenging family leadership position, but through her hard work and support we succeeded in finishing our graduate studies and each daughter became a leader in her own way (Tahani).

I believe that there were two perfect examples that helped me to construct and develop my leadership skills. The early one is my mother who was my first role model in leadership. This means that I have ‘inherited’ leadership skills. Furthermore, my mother’s personality characterized by her strong perspective in leading and managing and solving problems in my life had a positive affect in the way she raised me (Mona).

In my early life my mother was the leader in my family and one of her duties was giving orders “do dishes, make your bed, take the garbage outside” …..etc. Consequently from my early experience my personal leadership definition was “The authority or position to empower others to carry out demands, instructions, and directions in the ways that achieve organizational goals (Ahlam).

Others cited their father as an early influence. Tahani and Kaltham identified specific traits that they admired:

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I was born to a very well educated family. My father, who practiced medicine, was my first role model. He was charismatic, honorable, straightforward and honest. A man with a vision who had a lot to offer (Tahani).

Early exemplars affected the way I behave and the way I view leadership, I grew up to see my father as a leading figure. He used to work in the military, and he always told me “if you want to grow up and be a leader you should gain others confidence through your good manners and never ever force your opinion on others … use negotiation and compromise to reach your goal…” (Kaltham).

Shaima’s father had influenced her drive to be well-educated:

As a child, I was the eldest daughter in my family. I admired my family; especially my father. He urged me to complete my study in order to get a bachelor’s degree. It has always been my ambition to be a teacher and now I have achieved it (Shaima).

And Anoud had been influenced by her grandfather’s leadership skills. Her family itself had a particular status in society:

Being in the main family tree of my tribe made me feel different from other girls. I was the granddaughter of the ‘hidden’ leader. I was always surprised at how people reacted when they saw me or saw one of my sisters. Actually, there was another man who was formally the leader but everybody knew that the real leader was my grandfather. Studying in this course I understood for the first time that my grandfather possessed [particular] leadership traits (Anoud).

Tahani had mentioned both her parents as having positive leadership influences. She went on to identify her husband as someone who had provided the impetus to continue to develop those earlier effects:

My husband was my third role model. Through his continuous support, he encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone to seek further knowledge and continue my education (Tahani).

Role Models: Workplace

Participants in the first cohort had identified influential people from their work environment and this was also evident in Cohort Two, several of whom identified principals as having an impact on their views of leadership. Most of these examples had been positive:

I remember a principal who I worked with 6 years ago. She encouraged teachers to do what she wanted and they really did it with happiness by her persuading and convincing them. She was very personable. What most I appreciated about her is how she delegated the workload. If there was a problem, she would sit down to speak to the person in private. She was always teaching me new things (Majida).

My boss, who was the principal of a school in Dubai, was a leadership role model. You might be surprised to hear that he didn’t study leadership in text books and theories. He is someone who was born to be a leader (Mona).

I admired one principal I had. She was so active and she made a strong impression on me. She did many tasks in one day which other principals would usually take three days to do. The teachers admired, respected, and followed her guidance even if it meant at their expense, because they simply trusted her and they were sure she made
any decision for a good reason. That principal cleverly generated commitment among
the staff and when commitment builds, team work happens (Sumaya).

Role Models: Community

For both cohorts the leadership examples set by local leaders were frequently cited as having had
an influence on their own views. Here they mentioned particular leaders and designated them as
transformational and charismatic leaders.

One of the great transformational leadership examples is what we are experiencing by
living here in Dubai. This style is represented through HH Shaikh Mohamed Bin
Rashed Al Maktoum's vision to transform Dubai to rank as one of the first cities in the
world (Tahani).

My mind is set on the sheikh who was the former leader of Abu Dhabi before Shaikh
Zayed. I found his principles so attractive and visionary and I held him high in my
mind as a charismatic leader (Sumaya).

The examples of leaders who are ‘born’ that way are many including Prophet
Mohammed (PBUH), and Sheikh Zayed, but talking about them means that we are
looking at something special in their personalities, something which is not learned, and
I think that something is called charisma (Alanood).

Those members of Cohort Two who discussed charismatic leadership tended to see it as effective,
but limited to ‘extraordinary’ leaders. Amira’s comment exemplifies this

I have divided charismatic leaders into two types which are charismatic leaders as
politicians and charismatic leaders as religious. I thought about famous politicians
such as H.H Sheikh Zayed, Gandhi and Martin Luther King who were extraordinary or
heroes who have left special prints on society or built a civilization that is appreciated
by their followers (Amira).

Changes in Participants’ Views

Like their Cohort One counterparts the second group identified ways that their perceptions of
leadership had changed as they discussed the literature and analysed their collective experience.
Some realised that their initial perceptions had been somewhat limited:

Frankly, my understanding of leadership was about managing and controlling an
organization. I wasn't thinking about the idea of change and the relationship between
an effective leader and a successful organization. I was viewing the leader as a person
who gave the instructions and did superior things by himself (Majida).

I can say that before taking this course my knowledge of leadership was very poor.
Really, I didn't have that much concern about that particular issue. The leadership
course makes me observe others’ way of leading their organization, in order to learn
from their experience in leading (Alia).

Ahlam and Amira were able to describe specific changes in their understanding and identity
construction as a result of their learning:

Before I started class I thought that in any organization there is a leader who gives
commands and followers who carry out these commands. But after the course my
personal definition of leadership has totally changed to become “The individual
abilities and skills to innovate or create ways or patterns to activate, motivate,
encourage, support, and involve employees to achieve goals successfully, effectively and cooperatively” (Ahlam).

Before this course, I used to have a definition of “leader” and “leadership” as a person occupying a high position, then persuading people to do whatever the leader asks for. But this definition changed totally when I joined this course, I now understand that the success of any leadership depends on the leader himself and his way of dealing with followers. At the end of this course and after reading and thinking more deeply about leadership and its theories and classifications, I thought about myself as a leader (Amira).

Aisha commented that not only had her overall view of leadership changed, but the course had also impacted on her views of herself as a female leader.

[The course] created a shift in my ways of thinking about leadership, and encouraged me to be eager to explore more issues of leadership. Actually, it changed my concept and ideas of women as leaders. But throughout the course we were exposed to the idea of change and the implementation of new ideas (Majida).

Some saw their course experience as an enlightening one that had a significant impact on their beliefs:

I've always wondered what makes people follow others. For the first time in my life and in this course, I got the point. What I believed about certain issues when the program started has changed completely (new ideas and new theories). With every experience I became a new person with new ideas and attitudes (Anoud).

Alanood believed that the course had helped her to clarify ‘unformed’ ideas and concepts that she had experienced but not clearly understood.

The different forces of leadership were not clear for me before this course but maybe I knew them without their specific names or their importance. For example, the symbolic force is used in our school but I wasn’t aware about its importance (Alanood).

A similar view was held by Sumaya:

As a result of my leadership studies I don’t think that I will change too many things about my personal leadership style. I feel that I have been a good leader. But before studying I didn't know how to shape it and how to apply it in real life. Perhaps the one thing I would try to work on is using shared leadership in my organization (Sumaya).

Emergent Leadership Perspectives from Cohort Two.

Metaphors and Narratives of Leadership

One of the differences between Cohort One and Two’s statements was a tendency for several of the latter to use metaphor and narrative to reflect on their construction of leadership identities. Kaltham, for example, used a story about a team of warriors in Japan who faced terrible challenges and demands that ultimately made them question their leaders. As she drew links between the narrative and course material she concluded that:

…the team began to question their fate - the pressure was building up until the mission was terribly failed. What, why and how? Now I was able to answer all those questions after experiencing this leadership course. The story highlights many issues we discussed in class (Kaltham).
Others in the cohort used metaphors to express their perception of leadership work. Mona, for example, likened it to creating a complicated work of art:

*Finally, I believe that the leader needs to realize the true meaning of real leadership which is like an Art work drawing, coloring then displaying the picture in a way that attracts the viewers (the followers and other stakeholders) (Mona).*

A similar view of leadership as a creative experience was highlighted by Sabah:

*Follow-up and feed back are necessary to maintain the group on the right track. It is like leading an orchestra or even a jazz ensemble. (Sabah).*

Ahlan’s metaphor reflected the concept of leadership as an ongoing journey:

*Leadership looks like an ocean - it’s navigating has no end. (Ahlan).*

And Suhaila likened her role as a teacher-leader to a political metaphor:

*In my opinion the teacher is a leader in his class. His class is like the government and the students are the followers. Therefore, as a teacher I have to use what I heard and learned about leadership and use it in my class and with my students. (Suhaila).*

**Women and Leadership**

The issue of women and leadership was not specifically mentioned in any of the Cohort One statements but two of the second group made particular comments about it. Alia was aware that opportunities for women were changing and she wanted to take advantage of that herself.

*One of the things that I am concerned about is the role of women in the UAE. In these day women have taken their chance to hold different positions. In fact, we can see a woman as a [government] minister where before this position was only for men. These changes in our society make me want to develop myself in order to help my country in some way (Alia).*

Majida’s experiences in the leadership course had focused her thinking in more specific ways and changed some of her views about opportunities for women leaders

*A new idea I am interested in is the idea of empowering women in leadership in the UAE. The course created a shift in my ways of thinking about leadership (Majida).*

Like Alia she was aware of changes in society, but was also aware that more work needed to be done:

*Women face unique challenges. The Quran stress that men and women are equal [but] I feel that [until recently] there weren’t training programs or study programs to engage and prepare women for leadership (Majida).*

She was also clear about the style of leadership which was needed:

*In a time of history where a rapid change is challenging our country and many young women are in powerful positions, I believe that transformational leadership is that kind of effective style which fits (Majida).*
Discussion

The two cohorts developed identities of self as they engaged in discussion and leadership practices throughout the course with their teams. There is a clear resonance with aspects of Wenger’s (1998) model of identity development which highlights the interplay between “the remembered past and the anticipated future [which] are constantly integrated into and renegotiated in the ever-changing negotiated, dynamic present” (Clarke, 2005:35).

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of situated cognition which is concerned with how learning occurs in practice and context and explores the situated character of human understanding and communication also provides a window to examine the ways in which the graduate students operated in the program. It views action as situated in individual roles as members of communities.

The concept takes on multiple meanings in relation to the learning of these two groups of graduates. Within the leadership program they were engaged with the kind of ‘situated curriculum’ described by Gherardi et al. (1998). Some of the group were on the ‘periphery’ of the ‘leadership’ community of practice in the sense that they were not currently occupying leadership roles in their respective institutions, while others were actively engaged in current leadership roles. For the latter, their learning was thus occurring both inside and outside the specific institutional context. Here the process seems more akin to Lemke’s (1997) view of ‘situated cognition’ which appears to have particular relevance in an analysis of the leadership perspectives of these Emirati graduates. According to Lemke (1997), it is in the larger system of interdependent networks of activities and communities of practice that meaning making and learning occurs.

We embody our past, as our environment embodies its (and so our collective) past, and in our interaction not only memory but culture and historical and sociological processes are renewed and continued, diverted and changed (Lemke, 1997:10).

As with the first cohort, many references were made to early role models and include home and family, workplace and societal leadership roles. These references reflect the high cultural value placed on family roles and obligations which often come first before other societal duties. The references formed a powerful continuum which, where juxtaposed and interwoven with more recent and current leadership perspectives in the UAE enriched the interrelationship of ideas.

It was apparent that there were three tiers or interwoven layers of experience that influenced the current leadership perspectives of the group: internal (current beliefs based on early influences and Islamic beliefs), external, (current beliefs based on more recent workplace experiences and contemporary leadership examples and imperatives) and access to new theories and ideas (challenging beliefs and previously held assumptions based on the impact of course readings and class discussion). The emerging leadership perspectives indicated their readiness to take on increasing leadership roles as change agents in the region.

Similarly to Cohort One, the second group’s developing leadership identities were strongly rooted in internal moral values based on culture, Islamic beliefs and practices embedded in their understanding of the life and work of the Prophet and inherent in the Holy Qu’ran. Fullan’s (2004) concept of ‘moral purpose’, aligned with ideas of ethical behaviour by leaders, resonated strongly with the majority of the second cohort and one or both of these ideas were evident in all of their statements. Charismatic leaders were mentioned by several of the participants. These leaders were typically perceived as exceptional or extraordinary in some way and as such, set ideals of leadership practice that participants could relate and aspire to in this cultural context.
The second tier was strongly focused on recent or current workplace experiences with specific leaders. Cohort Two participants were clearly aware of what they believed made an effective leader and of what was necessary to ensure an effective workplace culture. In this context it was evident that the participants’ views had been influenced by both positive and negative leadership practices and their reaction to these experiences related closely to their internalized beliefs. Positive leadership practices were largely interpreted as being closely aligned with their own current and emerging leadership identities of self, whereas the negative practices were clearly mismatched with their perceptions of selves as leaders. These interpretations served as a basis for how the participants saw growth and improvement in their own leadership practices. Thus both their professional identities and understanding of leadership were enriched.

The third tier developed during the leadership program and was focused on the extent to which exposure to new ideas, theories and practices impacted on participants’ views and beliefs. Members of both cohorts commented on how their understanding of leadership had improved as a result of the program but there were individual differences in how their beliefs had been affected. It appeared that for all of them their core beliefs were strongly grounded in early cultural and religious leadership exemplars and that their work in the third tier involved making links between the ‘old’ and new ideas (Wenger, 1998). This linking from the first and second tiers occurred in ways that allowed them to retain and enrich their original and past beliefs and assumptions.

Such interwoven-ness and content of these tiers of identity relate strongly to Wenger’s (1998) theories of identity construction as indicated in many of the comments described earlier in this paper. For example the social aspect of identity construction was evident in the strong links between the participants’ Islamic cultural experiences and the values that they saw as critical for effective leadership. The multiple complexities of identities were shown in their comments about the development of their views in relation to home, school, workplace and academic contexts. The interplay between global and local contexts was indicated by the way in which they made links between their current views constructed from a Middle Eastern perspective to new material from wider international practices. The incorporation of past and future into the present was evident, for example, where participants drew on positive and/or negative earlier experiences and then, looking forward to how they intended to practice leadership, linked these ideas to their present context. An examination of comments about how leadership identity was changing or had changed as a result of the leadership course also highlights the links between those explanations and several of Wenger’s (1998) elements of identity formation.

There are links also to Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop’s (2004) concept of identity as growing from interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences so that individuals understand who they are and who they wish to become. Through interacting as a community of practice in the class setting, sharing and receiving feedback about personal experiences, and critically analysing leadership experiences from wider contexts, the interpretation/reinterpretation process was an integral part of the participants’ learning about and constructing themselves as leaders now and in the future.

One aspect of the participants’ leadership learning that was not really revealed by either cohort was the extent to which the social interaction of collaborative learning and teamwork within the program impacted on members’ practice and perspectives of leadership and followership. Although several referred to the value of teamwork in a broad sense, they did not draw on examples from their program or course experience. This lends support to Gheradi’s (1998) notion that a person may also be socialised into the norms of an organisation or a unit without being aware of what the organisational norms are or of what or how they are learning. This highlighted the need for a sharper focus on “learning the leadership” within the class program and providing opportunities for making this explicit.
Conclusion
The initial analysis of leadership statements of the two cohorts of graduates highlight complex, rich and multi-layered views of leadership and a high level of confidence in their ability to effect change in their leadership roles. The data are ‘thick’ and rich and require further analysis to tease out further themes and aspects worthy of further investigation (e.g. what in particular has impacted on changes in their leadership philosophy, and how particular Master’s learning contexts have impacted on their views).

This paper, which is a follow up to one delivered at the 2006 AARE conference, has shown how statements from the second leadership cohort revealed their individual content learning within the course and also described their views on the process of leadership. Like the first cohort they all documented changes in their views across time by making some tacit knowledge more explicit, challenging or consolidating other views in relation to international ‘best practice’ and doing this within a strong cultural and religious framework.

A key goal of the MEd Leadership program is to improve participants’ understanding of effective leadership practice and the data discussed in this paper provide clear evidence that this is happening. In addition the process of reflecting on, and writing about their current perspectives as leaders provides supporting proof of how their experiences fit with current theories of identity development.

REFERENCES


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