United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

The National Agenda of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) emphasizes the development of a world-class education system for a knowledge-based, pioneering, and globally competitive society. The aim is to promote lifelong learning and continual skills development in line with the UAE Centennial 2071 plan.[1]

At the federal level, the Ministry of Education (MOE) oversees the education system in the UAE through policies, strategies, regulation, accreditation, and development of curriculum and national assessment frameworks that emulate global best practice.[2] The Emirates Schools Establishment (ESE) works closely with the MOE to ensure excellence in student outcomes through the implementation of policies and strategies in the Emirati School Model.[3] Governing bodies regulate, and work with, private schools and charter schools at the Emirate level to improve the quality of education, while still receiving policy and direction from the MOE. The governing bodies are The Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK, Abu Dhabi), Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA, Dubai), and the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA, Sharjah).

Schooling begins with Early Childhood Education (pre-Kindergarten and KG1–2). Basic Education is from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 (Grades 1 to 8), and Advanced Education is in Cycle 3 (Grades 9 to 12). The Emirati School Model has two education tracks, Basic Education and Advanced Education.[4] In Cycle 3, students specialize in learning programs according to their capabilities and interests, following either the Academic track or the Technical and Vocational track.

The constitution of the UAE states that the country's official language is Arabic, which is also the language of instruction in public schools. The National Agenda has set goals that students rank among the best in the world in reading literacy and that students have a high level of language and reading skills in Arabic, according to national test data. The National Literacy Strategy[5] and the National Law for Reading aim to ensure that a substantial proportion of the UAE population is literate.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

The UAE first began participating in PIRLS in 2011. Participating schools receive a report (a summary of the national report) and are trained in how to read the report and how to identify

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performance gaps. As a result, anecdotal evidence suggests that schools are increasingly aware of the PIRLS framework.[6]

The PIRLS framework also has informed curriculum framework reviews. In 2017, the existing language and reading frameworks were reexamined; through the alignment with international standards, the review ensured that the MOE's reading literacy goals are internationally benchmarked. Furthermore, international literacy standards are integral to the Curriculum Framework for Excellence (CFE) 2021, which highlights Developing Global Competencies (DGC) as a key driver. PIRLS data, on the relative performance of reading literacy in Arabic and English, have informed cross-curricular reading literacy strategies in the development of the CFE components of literacy and communication, and critical thinking.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Public schools in the UAE follow the MOE's *National Language Curriculum Framework*. The language of instruction is Arabic.[7] In addition, English plays a central role in the UAE's knowledge-based economy.

The Arabic curriculum framework aims to develop Arabic as a first language and to build a strong linguistic foundation. The focus is on promoting language from early childhood education. Cycle 1 promotes literacy, language, and communication development across all Arabic-medium subjects (AMS). The Arabic language is developed through an integrated curricula approach across the AMS (humanities); the aim is to focus on cross-curricular literacy and critical thinking skills. A digital library supports curriculum content. In Kindergarten (KG) and in Cycle 1, mathematics and science are taught primarily in Arabic. Integral to Arabic language development is the National Literacy Strategy,[a] which develops reading literacy through independent reading and authentic Arabic literature that promotes culture and values.

English is taught as a second language. English-medium subjects (EMS) include technical and health science subjects. The aim of EMS is to focus on cross-curricular literacy skills and to equip learners with the competencies to participate effectively in further education, the workplace, and the community. In selective Cycle 1 to 3 streams, mathematics and science are also taught in English. In 2017, the MOE undertook a comprehensive review of the KG–12 English curriculum framework, resulting in the new national curriculum framework that was implemented in 2018. The curriculum aligned with international assessment frameworks and aimed to shape global citizens while promoting Emirati culture and values. The framework outcomes describe levels of language learning benchmarked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

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[a] See https://uaecabinet.ae/en/details/news/mohammed-bin-rashid-on-presidents-directives-2016-is-uae-reading-year for more information.

The national Arabic[8] and English[9] language curriculum frameworks follow a skills-based approach to language learning. In fourth grade, the four language domains are speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Within the domains are strands, such as phonological awareness, comprehension skills, and reading strategies. Learning in Arabic and English reading is mapped from KG to Cycles 1 to 3. The curriculum defines language proficiency (functional language, grammar, and lexis) according to cycles and levels. Level outcomes describe what learners are expected to master and are spiraled to ensure outcomes are revisited. Functional language is mapped against each level according to levels of difficulty, and is context and theme specific. Level descriptions are designed to serve as a guide and to provide a general overview of language and reading abilities, along with the type and range of content. For example, in fourth grade English, levels range from 1 to 3 and describe what learners will be expected to do according to domains and strands, as well as what learners know and can do at each domain level. Language level descriptors describe what students should understand, and understand and use, aligned to international benchmarks in language progression (CEFR levels). The Supporting Syllabus provides the detail and scope of the language and reading content within each level and sublevel. Language is integrated into the Supporting Syllabus and provides details of when learners are expected to understand and use language.

A level-based approach to language learning facilitates flexibility in mapping learning pathways and proficiency levels to the expected standards, and supports learners in achieving their potential. Although learning outcomes support the ages and stages of learning per cycle, fourth grade learners are not restricted to studying at one grade level. Students are grouped according to their language and reading levels, and the curriculum allows students to progress across the levels. There are various starting points, which allow learners to progress at different paces and reach their maximum potential in their language learning journey. As progress is made through the levels, the outcomes increase in difficulty to reflect the learners' increasing language and reading proficiency. While learning outcomes are stand-alone, they are designed to be combined with the content from the Supporting Syllabus to create outcomes that are lesson specific. Cycle 1 teachers follow course books that are aligned to levels. For example, in the fourth grade English curriculum, students who are "Emerging" language users follow the Literacy Skills course, students at Stage 1 follow the Access course, while students at Stages 2 to 4 follow the Bridge to Success course.

The aim of the reading curriculum is for students to learn to be independent critical readers with skills for lifelong learning. The fourth grade reading curriculum describes outcomes, language proficiency levels, and performance indicators. The aim is for students to develop language skills through reading, and for all students to be literate and able to comprehend a variety of both traditional print-based and electronic texts. Reading materials that are culturally relevant and age appropriate are used to stimulate learners' interest. Reading texts and language levels target young learners, and grammar is taught in context. Comprehension processes primarily focus on the skills of retrieving information and making inferences; however, learners at the higher reading levels

also are required to interpret ideas and information and critique content. Students read a variety of literary and informational text types, and there is a focus on authentic "real-world" texts, such as scientific, ethnographic, biographical, and historical texts. There are a variety of continuous and noncontinuous texts, which incorporate diagrams, illustrations, and tables. Reading context and purpose have been developed along the lines of domains and situations defined within the CEFR. A research unit is integrated into the fourth grade Arabic curriculum and the English Supporting Syllabus.

Approximately 40 percent of the UAE's population attend private schools. While national private schools implement the MOE curriculum, international schools offer the curriculum of the expatriate population's home countries. The preferred types of curricula in the UAE are the U.K., U.S., Indian, and International Baccalaureate (I.B.). International curriculum frameworks aim to develop critical reading; for example, the U.S. curriculum requires fourth grade students to interpret information from interactive elements on webpages, while the U.K. curriculum focuses on evaluating how authors use language. In addition to international curricula, private schools offer programs in Arabic as a second language for non-Arabic speakers. The curriculum goals for non-native speakers are to appreciate the Arabic language, read Arabic literature, and be introduced to Arabic culture and values.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The Teacher Licensing program aims to ensure a high quality of education through standards in pedagogy and subject specialization.[10] Teacher Licensing focuses on the continuous development of the teacher and raising the level of teachers' professional competency. Accordingly, the Department of Training and Professional Development delivers training programs—for in-service and newly appointed teachers—to certified professional standards.[11] Fourth grade teachers undergo 100 training hours per academic year through specialized training and ongoing training programs. Specialized training aims to support teachers' subject knowledge and skills, while ongoing training is a weekly professional learning community in the form of a two-hour collaborative study group. Training is conducted by certified trainers, both within schools and across learning communities. MOE employees also have the opportunity to attend national and international conferences organized by the MOE.

Professional development programs in language and reading are available for practicing fourth grade teachers in the Emirate. The Language Teaching Program offers courses in advanced English language skills and in reading, while The Reading Supervisors Preparation Initiative[12] targets 600 language teachers to enable them to support reading and achieve the MOE's reading as a lifestyle target. The MOE also organizes conferences such as the Reading Forum. The Reading Forum encourages reading habits and interests with an aim to develop teacher pedagogy in reading comprehension skills and to improve analytical reading and critical thinking.[13] Furthermore, the

MOE offers language teachers literacy skills training. The training program targets literacy strategies across the curriculum through the development of teacher resources aligned to international reading literacy standards.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Student progress in reading is monitored according to level descriptors aligned to the Arabic and English curriculum and assessment frameworks.[14] Learning outcomes (LOs) are assessed through a variety of assessment tools, in the form of an examination, quizzes, tests, and rubrics that align to each level within the assessment framework.[15] Guides and marking rubrics are available to assist teachers in identifying which reading LOs are covered in each assessment, and as indicators of how students can demonstrate the outcome. Assessment tools are implemented at the start and end of the academic year to identify the learner's level of language and reading. In addition, there are a set of online diagnostic tests and progress checks that are pitched at multiple levels. Continual and summative assessments are used to indicate readiness to study at the next level; success at one assessment level indicates a student's readiness to progress to the next level. The Supporting Syllabus informs curriculum pacing, which ensures that appropriate learning outcomes are covered. The Supporting Syllabus outlines the time-bound language and reading assessments. To differentiate assessments between the sublevels, functional language, grammar, and vocabulary are embedded in the Supporting Syllabus and the reading skills assessments.

In 2017, the MOE introduced the Emirates Standardized Test (EmSAT),[16,b] a national test to measure students' knowledge of Arabic and English, as well as mathematics and science. EmSAT tracks the development of students during their general education and provides policymakers with data about the performance of students. EmSAT includes three types of test: the Baseline test for first grade; the Advantage test for Grades 4, 6, 8, and 10; and the Achieve test for twelfth grade at the end of general education. Reading tests are constructed using the CEFR and aligned to curriculum standards. In fourth grade, EmSAT reading is reported as an achievement level in both Arabic and English, according to national criterion referenced scores.

Special Reading Initiatives

There are multiple national reading initiatives within the Emirates. For example, the Year of Reading initiative[17] was launched with the aim of fostering a culture of reading by instilling literacy skills from early childhood, in the belief that reading develops critical and creative skills. Following the Year of Reading, the UAE announced the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and a framework to develop a generation of readers.[18,19] In addition, the Reading for Pleasure in Partnership with the Emirates Literature Foundation aims to encourage a love for reading in both the Arabic and

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[b]   See https://emsat.moe.gov.ae/emsat/Default.aspx for more information.

English languages. The focus is on developing vocabulary, grammar skills, text comprehension, and a better understanding of other cultures through reading. The Arab Reading Challenge (ARC) is the largest-ever Arab reading initiative. It was launched in the UAE and challenges students from Grades 1 to 12 to read books. The challenge involves reading 10 Arabic books and summarizing their content in ARC passports.

The UAE's National Law for Reading states that reading is the right of all members of society from early childhood. The aim is to ensure that all Emirati youths are literate. The law outlines legislative frameworks and programs to develop reading within the Emirate. For example, the government of the UAE strongly supports education and learning services for people of determination (students with special education needs). The Department of Special Education aims to integrate people of determination into public schools. Thus, starting from Kindergarten, the MOE provides expert teachers, adapted curricula, and inclusion programs that offer guidance and support.[20] Appropriate technology and learning materials target language and reading development; for example, integral to the National Law for Reading are the necessary funds to publish reading materials for people of determination.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

On January 29, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in the UAE, and in March, the MOE announced that all schools—both public and private—should close. Students continued their education via distance learning. On August 30, fourth grade students returned to schools; however, in January 2021, after a surge in cases, all schools reverted to distance learning once again. In total, COVID-19 restrictions resulted in about 10 months of school disruption. There were some exceptions, as some private school students returned to face-to-face learning earlier in 2021.

During the pandemic, public and private schools adapted instruction according to mandatory guidelines for social distancing and hybrid learning, in line with the MOE's COVID-19 policy.[21] The policy states that all schools had to develop a blended learning model for teaching online, and that online research and e-reading are to be encouraged. The MOE's policy specifies that the sharing of physical learning resources is to be avoided and that schools must develop a plan for delivering physical books to students. Accordingly, the *Al Diwan* and DARFA (an interactive reading platform) programs[22] were activated to facilitate the downloading of ebooks as an alternative to physical books. The MOE also provided laptops and access to Microsoft Teams to all students and teachers. Private school students without digital devices were provided with tablets. Furthermore, professional development was provided for teachers on the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to facilitate online learning.

The MOE's COVID-19 policy states that when students of determination (SEN) receive in-person instruction in schools, they must be distributed across teaching groups to ensure that they

are not in one homogenous group.[23] During distance learning, support is provided through (SEN) education platforms, and progress is monitored electronically. Support centers direct parents to appropriate support services for their child.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The MOE did not mandate any additional assessments to monitor the impact on learning progress during the pandemic; however, both public and private schools were encouraged to use diagnostic and formative assessments to measure learning gaps and develop targeted intervention programs.[24] In public schools, formative and summative assessments for fourth grade students took place as scheduled. Data on fourth grade student attendance and student and teacher physical health were collected to evaluate the impact of COVID-19.

Policy and Practice Changes

The COVID-19 pandemic led to some enduring changes in policy. For example, the Private School Reopening Policies and Guidelines document (ADEK) explicitly mentions that schools reevaluate their educational technology needs based on the experience of distance learning.[25] Accordingly, schools must recruit specialized staff to support any ICT-based issues, as well as an ICT trainer to provide relevant training to teachers, students, and parents. In addition, schools must continue to offer professional development in the areas of online learning, navigating and using e-learning tools, cybersafety, and student well-being.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The pandemic affected the PIRLS field test which was canceled due to distance learning and coders being unable to code under COVID-19 restrictions. For the main study, the test window had to be postponed from April to November 2021. Distance learning and blended learning in sample schools affected attendance, so the classes selected had to be changed according to the requirements of the sample size.

Suggested Readings

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