

**Feminising Schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, UAE: Cause for Concern!**

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Schools in the UAE have been undergoing radical educational reform over the past six years. Government schools are currently gender segregated from grade 1 and staffed by either male or female teachers, but not by both genders in the same school. In 2011 the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC) announced plans to completely feminise primary schools in the emirate. Emirati male teachers represent a small minority, but one which potentially has a very powerful significance, both culturally and educationally. This paper intends to explore male pre-service teachers' perceptions of this issue. Six male Emirati pre-service teachers were interviewed. Our findings show that during internship, they felt that their being male and Emirati was significant and positive, and that pupils were relating to them in a unique way as a result. We found that all had been extremely positively influenced by an Emirati male teacher as school pupils. Most thought that employing a system of feminization would be detrimental to young males seeking male role models and gave examples of the way in which they had observed this. The findings of this small-scale study have potentially significant implications for educational policy-makers in Abu Dhabi and other regions in the Gulf considering school feminization.

Keywords: males teachers, United Arab Emirates, feminisation, primary schools, teacher-training.

**تأنيث المدارس في الإمارات العربية المتحدة إمارة أبو ظبي: أهي حالة تستدعي الاهتمام!**

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كلية الإمارات للتطوير التربوي، الإمارات العربية المتحدة

لقد خضعت المدارس في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة ، على مدى السنوات الست الماضية لعمليات تطوير . المدارس الحكومية في الوقت الراهن تفصل بين الجنسين ابتداء من من الصف الأول الابتدائي ، ويتألف الطاقم التدريسي لهذه المدارس إما من الإناث أو الذكور ، ولكن ليس من كلا الجنسين في نفس المدرسة. وفي عام ٢٠١١ أعلن مجلس أبوظبي للتعليم عن خطته لتأنيث المدارس الابتدائية تماما في إمارة أبو ظبي. يمثل المعلمون الإماراتيون الذكور حاليا أقلية صغيرة ، والتي يمكن أن يكون لها تأثير قوي جدا ، على الصعيدين الثقافي والتربوي. وقد حاولت هذه الدراسة الكشف عن تصورات الطلبة/المعلمين الذكور لفكرة تأنيث المدارس. وتم إجراء مقابلات مع ستة طلبة/معلمين (قبل الخدمة) من الذكور الإماراتيين. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أنه خلال فترة التدريب العملي ، كان تأثير المعلمين الذكور ايجابيا على التلاميذ والتلاميذ بدورهم تعاملوا معهم بشكل مميز وفريد. يعتقد الأغلبية أن تطبيق نظام التأنيث من شأنه أن يضر الطلاب الذكور ، الذين يبحثون عن نموذج ومثال من الذكور. إن نتائج هذه الدراسة الصغيرة لها تطبيقات هامة بالنسبة لمتخذي القرار ورسمي السياسات التعليمية في أبوظبي وفي مناطق أخرى في الخليج تفكر بتطبيق سياسة تأنيث المدارس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المعلمون الذكور ، الإمارات العربية المتحدة ، تأنيث ، المدارس الابتدائية ، تدريب المعلمين.

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There are large bodies of research which demonstrate that male school pupils may benefit greatly from having a male teacher, particularly if the teacher is a member of their own particular culture and community (e.g. Holland, 1996, Dee, 2006). This is contrary to the latest guidelines of the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC) which is beginning to call for the 'feminisation' of government primary schools in the United Arab Emirates. Worldwide, schools (especially primary schools) record a high percentage ratio of female to male teachers, even when there have been government sponsored campaigns to actively recruit more males into the profession. It is important that the perceptions of Emirati male pre-service teachers (PSTs) and teachers are considered amidst a time of rapid educational development and reform in the UAE, and as the process of Emiratisation gains momentum to increase the number of Emiratis in employment, particularly in the public sector. This paper explores the announced governmental proposals to feminise primary schools within the local cultural context of the UAE. It further shares and analyses the perceptions of Emirati male final year PSTs.

The UAE is a country in the Gulf region where only around 10% of the residents are Emirati nationals, and the remaining majority are expatriates, of which the majority hail from South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Other expatriate residents come from non-Gulf Arab States such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and a minority of expatriates emanate from Western countries, in particular from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and the USA. The increasing expatriate population means that concerns are often raised about the traditions and cultures of the UAE being able to survive amidst the influx of diversity and multiculturalism. Emirati households still run along fairly traditional lines, where the extended family is important and the males are considered the traditional heads and providers of these households (Bristol-Rhys, 2010). Decisions tend to be made as part of the wider family network, considering consequences to all and not only to the individual. The concept of schools, in particular primary schools, being heavily dominated by females, is not unique to the UAE, or even to the Arab world, for a

diversity of reasons such as the traditional perceptions of teaching as being a caring, gentle, profession to which women are generally better suited. Teaching is not a popular career option for young Emirati men for a number of reasons, such as the desire and possibly the need to earn a salary quickly to contribute to the large family household. It is therefore vital that policy makers take the already fragile recruitment and retention of the Emirati male teachers very seriously as they may provide professional male role models in education.

In 2005, 100% of the teachers in pre-primary education in the UAE were females and 16% of teachers in primary education were males (nationalities not specified in the report) (UNESCO, 2011). In Dubai in the UAE, only 5% of the teachers in Cycle 1 schools are males, and only 14% of those males are UAE nationals. Considering all cycles (primary and secondary too), a total of only 0.7% of the total number of teachers in the UAE teachers are male Emirati nationals (KHDA, 2010). Interestingly, by contrast in the Sultanate of Oman, the immediate neighbour of the UAE and a fellow GCC (Gulf Co-Operation Council) member, during the school year 2003-2004, 29% of teachers in early primary school (Grades 1-4) were male (Rassekh, 2004). Oman is also undergoing an 'Omanisation' program, but has a much higher ratio of Omani nationals to expatriates to begin with. An earlier survey for the academic year 2001-2002 carried out by the Ministry Of Education for Oman showed that 67.2% of teachers (both male and female) were Omani nationals (Oman Ministry of Education, 2003, in Rassekh, 2004).

### **Feminization of primary schools in Abu Dhabi**

The statistics in the previous section points to a serious shortage of male Emirati teachers working in the current educational system in the UAE. It is worthwhile exploring briefly why this should be a concern in serious need of immediate address. How, according to the literature, are young boys affected by the lack of male teachers in schools?

In the UAE, students in public schools are gender segregated from grade 1 to 12. Boys in middle school (grades 6-9) and secondary school (grades 10-12) are taught only by male teachers, which, given the dearth of Emirati

male teachers, means that there is a heavy dependency on Arab expatriate teachers from countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt to meet this male teacher shortage (Ridge, 2009). Whilst these teachers speak in the boys' own language and certainly there are similarities such as some cultural traits and religion across the Arab countries, this is surely not an equivalent substitute for being taught by a member of one's own community within the context of the unique Gulf culture and heritage of the UAE. Ridge also reports on a lack of substantial hands-on training in the countries from which these expatriates originate, meaning that the quality of education provided in boys' schools as a result is at times questionable and below international standards (Ridge, 2010).

In favour of encouraging more males into teaching, a wide study carried out in the UK on behalf of the Teacher Development Agency showed that boys taught by a male teacher are more likely to work hard, and that male primary school teachers are vital role models for boys. A survey commissioned by the same UK agency which looked at the effect of a male primary teacher on boys found that almost half of men say that a male teacher has been a fundamental role model in their life and that more than a third (35%) felt that having a male primary teacher challenged them to work harder at school. The results from this commissioned survey gave impetus and credibility to a TDA campaign which was at the time encouraging more men to consider teaching as a career (Lipsett, 2009).

Dee (2006), concluded his study on the effect of teacher gender on students by saying that "girls have better educational outcomes when taught by women and boys are better off when taught by men", and that this effect was partly due to initial engagement between students and teachers (i.e. that boys were more likely to engage more quickly and effectively with a male teacher than with a female teacher) which then indirectly lead to an increase in student attainment. Skelton and Hall (2000) argue that the absence of men sends out a message that only women are involved in the emotional and social development of young children. Thornton's (1999) expressed concern about the under achievement of boys during compulsory schooling has been linked to the scarcity of male role models within primary teaching and was influential in current initia-

tives at the time in the UK to attract more men into primary teaching. Mulholland & Hansen (2003) believed that male elementary teachers were needed for positive role models. Patrick's 2009 study of male pre-service teachers found that "an overwhelming majority of the respondents stated that male teachers were needed to be positive role models in the lives of elementary students" (p. 88). Hansen and Mulholland (2005) suggest that more male teachers are needed in schools in order "to restore to elementary teaching the gender balance and diversity reflected in the wider society to offer children a more balanced education through a recognition that women and men operate differently as classroom teachers" (p. 120).

An increase in the educational attainment of boys starting from primary level is critical, and if having a male teacher may be one of the ways to improve this, then this would appear to be an important reason not to feminize primary schools in the UAE, and to make efforts to increase the enrolment of males in teacher-training institutions. The findings on a male teacher linking with a positive impact on student attainment are important, because if they were to be applicable in the UAE, then male teachers are sorely needed. Girls in the UAE are out-performing boys in every subject in the UAE – even in those subjects which have been traditionally thought of as 'male subjects' such as Mathematics (NAPO, 2007). The CEPA (Common Educational Proficiency Assessment) is a test which assesses English and Mathematics levels in grade 12 students. CEPA results from 2011 show a marked difference in boys' and girls' scores, with the mean girls' scores outnumbering the boy's significantly (NAPO, 2011). Could the potential feminization of education be advantaging female students and further disadvantaging males as reflected in these CEPA score outcomes?

Data from the UAE Ministry of Education reveals that 30% of boys in grade 10 in the academic year 2007-2008 failed their end of year exams, and either had to repeat the year or simply drop out of education altogether. 22% of male Emiratis in Dubai had dropped out of school prior to completion, which is double the percentage as recorded in other developed nations (Al Karam, 2010). Natasha Ridge, who has carried out extensive research into the reasons for lack of male participation in education in the UAE, was quoted as making the

following recommendation during a newspaper interview: "The Government must make teaching a profession that is attractive to Emirati males, who could then become important role models for the children they teach" (Shaheen, 2010). An article published by the Telegraph, a prominent British newspaper, fuelled the then topical discussion by declaring that "Feminising education is of benefit to no-one, not even girls .... it is no offence to excellent women teachers to say that boys also need male role models in the classroom" (Telegraph View, 2007).

There are arguments for both sides of the teacher gender discussion. Some researchers argue that the quality of a teacher is more important than his/her gender. The question of whether boys need male role models was also studied for boys in a sample of schools in the UK (Bricheno, 2007). The researchers concluded that ".....despite assertions to the contrary, by government and the media, male teachers are not seen as role models, in general terms, for boys in this sample of schools." However they did assert that although the role of teacher per se did not seem to be particularly looked up to by young boys, roles such as that of a footballer did. A study in Dutch primary schools concluded that teacher sex had ".....no effect whatsoever on the achievement, attitudes or behaviour of pupils" (Bricheno, 2007, p.183; Driessen, 2007). Carrington, Tymms and Merrell (2008) carried out a quantitative data to test the hypothesis that "male teachers produce more positive attitudes amongst boys and female teachers amongst girls" using data including attitude measurements, attainment scores and cognitive measures. They concluded that "the results gave little support for those who advocate recruitment drives with role models in mind" (p. 315). Haase (2009), upon studying the experiences of male primary teachers in Australia, found that his findings "send a warning to policymakers that *the employment of more male teachers may not be in the best interests of gender justice* (our italics) unless such strategies designed to attract more male teachers are informed by sophisticated understandings of gender and social power" (p. 597). Male teachers and PSTs themselves have, in some studies, given weight to the school of thought that indeed, perhaps primary schools *should* be feminised, making comments such as "Females would be better, you know, suited, for

doing those sorts of things with students ('artsy parts' he described as 'cutesy')" (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p. 106). Sabbe and Aelterman (2007) concluded upon a review of research on gender and education that most empirical research indicates that the gender of the teacher has little effect on the achievement of pupils. Other authors, whilst not directly advocating for the feminisation of schools, have criticised those who call for more male teachers in primary schools, going so far as to say that "media construction of boys and male teachers as the "new disadvantaged" is in fact a defensive response to broader social and cultural currents regarding non-normative families and male subjectivities that threaten traditional and hegemonic masculinities" (Martino and Kehler, 2006). Drudy (2008), too, states that rather than encourage a particular gender to enrol as teachers, the quality and calibre of entrants to the profession should be the focus of policy-makers.

It is not clear how these discourses apply to boys in the UAE where, as mentioned earlier, the Emirati male role as the head of the family appears to be so well-respected and entrenched in culture and tradition. No research has been carried out in this specific field in the UAE, this being one of the impetuses for carrying out this research in the first place. We can only extrapolate international findings and attempt to place them within the UAE educational setting while always keeping the unique cultural context in mind which is vastly different from comparable western settings. One might suggest that the Emirati male teacher could possibly be the role model equivalent of 'the UK footballer' for young boys. Xuehui, Hannum and Sargant (2008, p. 303) found a positive correlation between student outcomes (measured by test scores and engagement indicators) and their teacher's birthplace, suggesting that this effect may be attributable to ".....local teachers being better able to understand local children, communicate with them or serve as role models for them" (p. 303). These results from this extensive longitudinal Chinese study indicate the importance of children being taught by teachers from their own culture and gender as positive role models as explored in this paper.

#### **The future of male Emirati teachers in the UAE**

At the time of writing, ADEC had employed English Medium Teachers (EMTs, the majority

of whom were recruited from the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand) to teach in primary schools, phasing out the employment of non-Gulf Arab expatriate teachers to do so. Primary schools are either staffed by males or females, but not both. The male EMTs and few remaining non-Gulf Arab male expatriates working in primary schools must of course be concerned about the plans for feminisation in terms of their own job prospects, but the impact of the plans on Emirati pre-service teachers is the focus of this paper.

Langeveld in the Year Book of Education (1963, p. 24) emphasized that ".....no country should pride itself on its educational system if the teaching profession has become predominantly a world of women." Yet, if the plans set out by Abu Dhabi Educational Council in 2011 that all primary schools in the Emirate are to be staffed entirely by women are to come to fruition, then *'a world of women'* is what primary education in Abu Dhabi will become.

The perception of teaching as being a *'feminine profession'* carries the risk of males being or becoming endangered of being marginalized further by Arab society in which males are regarded as protectors and leaders of the family, not necessarily roles one would automatically associate with teaching. A researcher who was gathering data on behalf of the International Bureau of Education was told by a representative from the Ministry of Education in Oman that the "concentration of female teachers in the first cycle of basic education is predominantly due to the natural tendency of women to assume a maternal role. Almost exclusively, female teachers are emotionally focused and have shown more care and understanding towards the younger generation, compared to male teachers who may be more rationally or cognitively focused". (Rassekh, 2004). In an article in a prominent UAE newspaper, an instructor from a local university was quoted as saying that boys' schools would benefit from feminisation: "According to studies, young boys' interest in education is piqued when they are taught by women," she said. "Logically, kids in Cycle 1 want motherly figures at that stage of life and it is better if they find teachers who can treat them that way" (Ahmed, 2011). Dr Lynne Pierson, then Head of P-12 Education at Abu Dhabi Educational Council, was quoted in the same article as saying that "Staffing primary schools with female teachers was common throughout the

world .... The initiative (to completely feminize primary schools in Abu Dhabi) will also support the New School Model that is being rolled out in the schools." Such prevailing stereotypes make entering the teaching profession even more challenging for a young Arab male. It is also confusing to speak of completely feminizing schools when in the same newspaper only two years earlier, preparation for a large research study into the rarity of Emirati male teachers cited one of the reasons for carrying out the award-winning study as enabling a 'long-term strategy to battle an acute shortage of male Emirati teachers in government schools' (Bardsley, 2009).

Primary teaching has internationally become an increasingly feminized profession, not necessarily because of any specific or explicit government policy as is the projected case in Abu Dhabi, but for a variety of reasons such as that the profession simply having become less attractive to men in terms of status, salary, etc. Interestingly, this marked feminization appears to have done the few men who do choose to enter into the profession no harm – in fact, the promotion patterns worldwide have become even less equitable; now scarcity seems to further advantage any male teachers who apply for the job (Burn, 2001). Globally, there is an incredibly disproportionate ratio of males in promoted positions such as vice-principals and principals. One Australian study found that even though 21% of teachers in primary schools were males, 43% of leadership positions in primary schools were held by males (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). So, it would appear that 'the feminization of primary school staffing does not equal feminist' (Coffey and Delamont, 2000). The same effect is observed markedly in the UAE in terms of the rapid promotion of Emirati males (Ridge, 2010) in schools, in contrast to their female counterparts. One could argue therefore, that a feminization plan would simply push existing Emirati male teachers even more quickly into administrative roles and away from the classroom.

### **Interviews with male Emirati pre-service teachers**

#### **Aim and rationale:**

The research questions to be explored during the interview were as follows:

1. What are the opinions of the PSTs about the proposed feminisation plans?
2. How have PSTs been received as Emirati males in their teaching placement/ internship experiences so far?
3. How important do they think the Emirati male is as a role model to young school pupils?

## METHOD

### Data collection and Analysis

This paper draws upon interviews with six males, all of whom are Emirati nationals and who are studying in the final year of a Bachelor program in primary education at a teacher-training institute in the UAE. They were all aged between twenty-one and twenty-four years old at the time of interview. Internationally, most research on male teachers has focused on the experiences of in-service teachers who are already employed in schools. While this focus has provided “invaluable insight into the experience of male teachers, the perspectives and experiences of male student teachers have been relatively marginalized” (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p. 98). PSTs were specifically selected for this particular research based on the assumption that they may be slightly more objective than serving teachers, who would have more of a vested interest and naturally defensive ownership of their current employment. The perceptions of serving teachers would require a completely separate examination, though an important one, and will be the work of future research. PSTs’ experiences, also, might “illuminate challenges to the recruitment and retention of males” (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p. 97) set against the framework of possible school feminisation. All of the males in the sample were from Abu Dhabi, and would, should they choose to teach upon graduation, in theory be teaching in ADEC schools where the feminization was proposed to take place.

The interviews were recorded manually as notes and later transcribed. In order to test our interviews for validity or credibility, we carried out member-checking, i.e. the transcript was administered post-interview for verification by the interviewee that these were his words and intention. Interviews were carried out one to one. For some of the questions, a semi-structured interviewing method was used to gather data in a way which allowed the interviewees to elaborate in a narrative

style if they wished, and where the interviewer had opportunity to ask further probing questions which come up as a natural flow of the dialogue. Two of the questions were framed as structured questions to be answered in a Likert scale- style, designed to generate some trends or patterns. These were read aloud, and repeated for clarity as necessary. On of the questions related to their future teaching plans, such as – Very likely to teach? Likely? The second question asked about their optimism for the future of Emirati males in education, in terms of happiness and confidence levels (approximately very confident and happy, quite confident, etc). The interviewees were briefed in advance of the study both verbally and in writing about the nature, purpose and procedure of the interviews, informed consent was obtained and signed and assurances of confidentiality were provided. The responses were coded into categories using a strategy of constant comparison coding, carried out by the authors which involved assigning concepts to important passages and the recursively reducing codes to generate themes across the participants’ interviews and observations (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). These connected directly with the research questions to enable us to answer them.

### Findings - Interview responses

#### Feelings about becoming a teacher

The PSTs were first asked to rate their overall feelings about the future of teaching for them as Emirati males from a choice of four. Four out of six said that they felt ‘*Generally reasonably confident and happy, though I have some reservations*’, while two rated their feeling as ‘*Unhappy and worried, at times regretting my career choice – I am not sure if I will teach when I graduate.*’

Some went on to explain their reservations:

*“I have reservations about the nature of working as a teacher, long hours, etc. Salary is not really an issue, but that depends which Emirate you work in, compared to the Northern Emirates, Abu Dhabi pays teachers well. The other problems for the future of teachers are all the changes from ADEC – such as, they gave us the standards but no resources. So the teachers have to prepare everything, which is a challenge and you must be very patient as the level of the students is low.”*

### Feminising schools

The PSTs were asked their opinions about the future for male teachers in the UAE in the light of the recently unveiled proposals to feminize primary schools in the country. Many comments focused on their perceptions that women would be unable to control boys' classes:

*"I think it's not a good strategy. We'll lose our traditions. Imagine females teaching grades 5+6! Impossible! Did they think about this? Men should teach the boys in grades 4, 5 and 6 because they are old and sometimes have bad behaviour which some women can't control, like running away. They won't listen to her, females find it hard to control boys. Men can threaten and manage in this way to control them. No-one listens to women in schools and the big boys wouldn't do their homework etc."*

*"They will feminize the schools for 4 or 5 years max. Then, they'll put the men back. Females can't handle the kids. The Emirati women are not patient and they get angry very fast"*

*"I am an Emirati and I experienced what it looks like in our schools, and I am worried that feminising will not work. Male students always need male teachers."*

*We asked ourselves, so if they will feminize the schools, where will they put us?"*

One student, however, had a completely different response to the plans to feminize primary schools:

*"It's a great idea because we have lots of girls studying the BEd who didn't get a job. They are very emotional with kids, patient with kids, more so than men are. I think that in our culture, we think that women make better teachers, and teaching is the best job for women because it keeps them away from the male environment."*

It is worth noting that this particular PST had earlier stated that he probably would not teach upon graduation. One could argue, therefore, that not having a vested interest in the position allows for a more relaxed, generous, attitude. Again, the suitability for women to be or not to be, teachers of male pupils, is strongly tied into the PSTs' perceptions of female emotional characteristics, even if they are contradictory ones. So, one states that women are unable to teach young boys because they get *'angry so quickly'* while another says that women would be better to teach young boys because of their *'emotional'* and *'patient'* ways. This PST also said that it would be better to

leave the teaching to women because men *"have much more experience in life, talking to different people and going around many places, so we have a better background to make a decision about which job we will take, the women have less experience."*

He made an interesting observation that, in his opinion, one of the reasons that women are better teachers for young boys is that:

*"Women make the classroom environment look nicer with pictures and these things; they spend their own money to buy posters and things for the rooms but men will not spend their money on these things. Personally I would not."*

This observation corroborates a finding by Ridge (2010) that "all female teachers reported spending their own money on photocopying and lesson materials, while none of the male teachers reported spending their own money ... Girls' schools in general were much more pleasing to the eye in terms of classroom decoration and overall school appearance. As stated above, female teachers were observed to be using more worksheets and other materials in the classroom, probably paid for by the teachers or the students" (p. 23).

So, it is clear that a range of responses came out during the interviews, only one who directly verbalises what it means for their future – i.e. where will they go upon graduation if schools are feminized? However the majority of the responses concern the proposal itself and the potential (perceived) effect on school pupils. The overall perceptions are fairly negative, with the general sentiment that women are unable to control young boys, or have certain characteristics (such as being angry or impatient) rendering them unsuitable for the task.

### Emirati male role models

All of the PSTs articulated a sentiment that young boys need strong Emirati male role models, and that Emiratis should take a prime role in educating future generations of children. When asked about their own experience of having male teachers as role models as school pupils themselves, they each had a story to share about a teacher who had strongly inspired them and whom all of the PSTs looked up to – in all cases, an Emirati. They discussed their own experiences of having been taught by an Emirati male. Many had felt

inspired by this experience and felt differently about this particular teacher than any other.

Often, they could only recall having been taught by one or two Emirati teachers, or in one case, by none at all at primary school, which affected his perception of the profession being accessible to him as an Emirati male:

*"We had an Emirati teacher who we respected, and he respected us too. Who knows our religion, our culture, he knew our way of thinking and also he knew our families, he also taught my uncle and he knows information about us."*

*"We had one Emirati teacher, he was an Islamic Studies teacher, a good teacher, with many different styles and strategies, and gave us good advice, told us to think of the future, that we would be nothing without a Bachelors at least so we should work for this."*

*"When I was in KG and in primary school all of the teachers were foreign, so we didn't think about this idea that we could be a teacher. I thought it was a job for foreigners. We need more Emirati role models."*

These responses reiterated the perceived importance of Emirati children having male Emirati teachers in school. The comment that the Emirati teacher *"knew our families, he also taught my uncle"* highlights the uniqueness of the Emirati male teacher's position as being from their own community and perhaps the heightened sense of accountability this results in. Seeing an Emirati male teaching dispelled the myth for one that teaching was *"a job for foreigners"* and suddenly, it was a possibility for him as an Emirati male. This strongly suggests that having more male Emirati teachers could enhance the cycle of recruitment into the profession as they realise the profession is a possibility for them, too. It corroborates the research reported earlier in this paper.

### **Positive experiences of being an Emirati teacher during internship**

The PSTs were questioned about their experiences of 'teaching practice' at government schools in Abu Dhabi, of varying time periods from 3, 4 and 10 week periods respectively over the course of their four year Bachelor's of Education degree. All of them were placed in schools which had only male pupils. All of the PSTs felt that they were respected and received more warmly, perhaps, as Emirati males:

*"It made a difference that I was an Emirati, someone from their own culture. An Emirati teacher is much more understanding, has clearer communication, community knowledge, the teacher knows what he needs from the student and what the student needs from them, the students have more respect for Emirati teachers"*

*"They were very different with me as an Emirati man. One day they were supposed to be listening to their teacher and they were chatting and playing. I said quietly to that group 'Listen to your teacher, listen!' They were shocked and immediately fell silent! They respected me more than their teacher I think"*

These observations of respect from own-culture pupils reiterate the importance of within-culture male role models in education, as presented by some authors in the literature review earlier. Despite being a minority in teacher numbers in UAE schools, it seems from these PSTs' experiences that male teachers potentially have a powerful significance, both culturally and educationally for Emirati children in schools.

References were made to perceptions of improved student behaviour when they were in the classroom, which they attributed to their being from the same culture and being able to speak their dialect:

*"Their class teacher said 'they (the school pupils) are much better' maybe because I was there and students know that I will understand every single word they said, so they were more careful about their behaviours. For me, I know how to treat students from my own culture, compared with foreign teachers who don't know."*

*"The students were very polite to me, more than to the EMT. The EMT asked me to stay with him please! I was controlling the boys easily, no need to shout etc and he was shocked. I think this was because I wear the ghutra and kandoura (The National Dress for male Emiratis) and they see us more like a father, one of their families. Language is important too of course. It's impossible for them to understand English sometime."*

*"They ignored their regular class teacher because they can't communicate with him. They showed more respect to us, partly because we are from their culture, partly because we have the same language. The main barrier to them studying is that it is in their second language."*

It seems, from the respondents' perspectives, that the boys looked up to them and behaved

better when they were teaching or even merely present in the room, observing the classroom teacher. Part of their reasoning for this is that they are members of the boys' own culture and possibly even immediate community (pre-service teachers generally request to be placed for teaching practice near their own homes), they wear the same dress, use the same dialect, etc. They also mention language as being part of the perceived change in behaviour; in that they were able to help by translating some requests, or teaching certain points bilingually.

### Implications and limitations

The dominant themes from this research study were related to the importance of male school pupils having males as teachers, and then the importance of having specifically Emirati males as teachers. All of the males interviewed in this study mentioned the positive effect of having had an Emirati teacher whilst growing up, and alluded to the values instilled by that individual, one also, significantly said that until that moment he had thought that teaching '*was for foreigners*'. All of them felt that their pupils whilst on internship has particularly looked up to them, some comparing themselves favourably to their mentor teachers in terms of the respect which they appeared to automatically command from the boys by virtue of being from their country and community. Both of these themes have significant implications for Abu Dhabi Educational Council, the first being that it suggests that a cycle of having more Emirati male teachers would encourage more male teachers, and so on, thus increasing the numbers of Emirati male teachers. The second implication is that if it were true that Emirati male teachers have more command over, and greater respect from, their male pupils, this may have important implications for male pupils' attitudes towards and attainment in school.

There are a few limitations that need to be addressed whilst considering this study. An initial limitation of the study was in the sample population of male PSTs. In part, they were selected due to researcher proximity, although in actuality, the dearth of male PSTs in the UAE would have made it extremely difficult to select a different sample. Studying PSTs out-with the emirate of Abu Dhabi would have abstracted the discussion about perceptions of the concept of feminisation of primary

schools. A wider study, though, might look at PSTs in other emirates, focusing on their perceptions of how they were received by their pupils during internship and how influenced they were by Emirati role models, if they had them, during their own schooling. As explained earlier, the choice of sample as PSTs was deliberate, but it might also be conceivably be viewed as a limitation given that college students are not guaranteed to follow their degree path into career, meaning that data could potentially be biased - someone who had no plans to go into teaching can afford to be magnanimous with opinions of feminisation, as we have seen. A further limitation, of course, is that this study has been based on individuals' experiences and perceptions. To address the question of whether boys fare better under Emirati male teachers (compared with either non-Emirati male teachers, Emirati female teachers, non-Emirati female teachers to allow for a proper comparison and isolation of the effect of the teacher's gender and culture) a study of comparative data of attainments and attitudes of school pupils would be necessary.

### Synthesis and recommendations

*Feminising schools in the UAE emirate of Abu Dhabi: Cause for concern?* Feedback from prospective Emirati male teachers reflect indeed a concern for male students without Emirati male role models in UAE primary schools amidst an influx of western (predominantly female) expatriate teachers into Abu Dhabi government schools as part of the educational reform.

However, it needs to be stated that the situation is more complex in Abu Dhabi in terms of the reform taking place. Of course it is difficult to draw comparisons between relationships between pupils and teachers where language is no barrier, and relationships where language is indeed a barrier towards effective teaching and learning. The often poor training and pedagogical knowledge of many male teachers from non-Gulf Arab countries may have meant a compromised education for many young boys in the past (Ridge, 2010). However, it feels intuitive that young boys would respect a member of their own community and culture, one who they could look up to as a father figure, elder brother, uncle role model, which would be less likely with a non-Emirati Arab speaking male teacher, let

alone with a female teacher. The PSTs who took part in the interview have corroborated this intuition in no uncertain terms. In an interview with a local newspaper, one of the males in this study was quoted as saying that the major benefit of having Emirati men in the classroom is a "better understanding of the pupils and local culture". He said primary education is "the most important stage" for a child, laying the foundations for the future: "When I stood in front of the class, I could feel they respected me ... they looked up to me. Even beyond the teaching, if something's bothering them at home or at school they feel they can trust you and talk to you, tell you their problems" (Swan, 2010).

It seems that the following recommendations could be taken up Abu Dhabi Educational Council.

The reasons behind the feminisation proposals were not clearly articulated in local media or council public communications, so it is uncertain upon which theory the decision was based. However, as discussed earlier, a very justifiable concern is that of the consistently lower achievement of boys than girls in Abu Dhabi government schools – again, not a unique situation to Abu Dhabi. It is suggested that such policy decisions with potentially enormous impact should be based on empirical, locally based research data, for example – observations of lessons and surveys of attitudes of those pupils who have male Emirati teachers, and those who do not. We also argue that comparing achievements of boys in schools with very few male Emirati teachers to achievements of girls in schools with a much larger number of female Emirati teachers is unfair and gives no consideration to the influence of a teacher's culture on student outcomes. Our findings show, albeit for a small sample, that Emirati male pupils may be positively influenced by having an Emirati male teacher, therefore, based on this, we would recommend that everything possible should be done to encourage more Emirati males, of a high calibre of course, into teaching.

We close with a question: Does the large influx of western expatriate teachers in an attempt to professionalize and provide a quality world class education in Abu Dhabi schools, coupled with the proposed feminization of primary schools, serve the need for quality gender-specific and culture-familiar role models; es-

pecially for Emirati boys in primary schools? Perhaps there are lessons to be learned in the fastest developing part of the world from China's New Curriculum reform policies for its millions of school children in their New School Model, as reported by Xuehui *et al.* (2008, p. 331): "Having local teachers matters."

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