The Role of School Leadership in Changing

Parents' Attitudes Towards Student Evaluation

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2021

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# Abstract

The current Covid19 epidemic as well as the latest technological advances have brought with them new teaching trends and thus new evaluation systems that would address the new developments on the global as well as the local levels. The distance learning, already in place for many years, has gained more momentum in the last two years. This new evaluation and teaching techniques have brought with them lots of benefits, but also many challenges. Assessment, traditionally seen as the drive behind learning process, has taken various forms and it has been perceived differently by various stakeholders. Parents are confused about the evaluation process in terms of feasibility, comprehensiveness, and its tools. This confusion should not be left unaddressed. This research paper aims at investigating the role of educational leaders in changing parents’ attitudes towards students’ evaluation. The researcher has conducted a number of interviews with 8 cycle one educational leaders in RAK. The interviews addressed a number of issues related to evaluation such as assessment tools, school leaders’ new roles, evaluation of virtual learning environments, parents’ perceptions and expectations of distance learning assessment, communication challenges, and developing assessment. The researcher concludes that assessment in the digital era should be different in scope and type. The researcher also provides a number of suggestions to develop evaluation and communication in distance learning and to help parents catch up with these new trends.

# Introduction

## What is research?

 Bassey (1999) defines research as a ‘systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry which aims to contribute towards the advancement of knowledge and wisdom.’ (Miller, p. 5). With this in mind, my research topic will concentrate on a topic widely applicable and closely relevant to my position as an educational leader within the context of today’s transforming education climate. Gaining a better understanding of parental attitudes towards student evaluation is an essential aspect to student achievement. It also serves to provide school leaders with the “knowledge and wisdom” needed to better fulfil their roles and expectations. Research into distance learning, although not altogether a new study, is a necessary line of enquiry in this current climate.

 Teachers face many challenges when communicating complex assessments to both parents and students in the virtual classroom in comparison to the more traditional face-to-face method within a brick-and-mortar setting. It is up to school leaders, therefore, to identify these challenges and design strategies to overcome this problematic issue. Specifically, most schools do not have a standardized communication method with parents. This issue can ultimately cause confusion and it becomes time consuming for parents searching for the relevant information needed pertaining to their child’s assessment. In relation to this, language barriers can also add to the confusion. This is most relevant to parents, who speak Arabic and have little knowledge of English, especially those who send their children to international schools. Another significant challenge is the limited knowledge of the distance learning platforms and technological knowledge required from parents, notwithstanding the added time constraint on parents to learn these new expectations of them. Taking that into account, it is my goal as a researcher to identify the key attitudes, assumptions and additional challenges that school leaders face in closing the parental knowledge gap.

 In addition to that, this research specifically aims to identify and explore the role of Cycle One school leaders in Ras Al Khaimah within a context of distance learning to achieve a greater understanding of the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement which goes in alignment with developing a new educational system within the UAE that deals with external factors such as the IT revolution, developing a knowledge-based economy, educational quality, globalization, and preparing students for the modern world (Aldhaheri, 2019). Moreover, gaps pertaining to parents’ knowledge are related to these external factors. This paper, essentially, serves as a proposal on how to collect, process, and analyze research data to ultimately understand the role of Cycle One school leaders in Ras al Khaimah toward closing the parental knowledge gap in distance learning assessment.

# Background Context and Literature Review

 Essential to student achievement is the type and strength of relationships between schools, parents, and communities. Stakeholder relationships are heavily influenced by school leaders. It is their responsibility to build strong relationships and links between them by providing communication platforms and channels, as well as promoting positive parental influence within the educational process. As S. Glasman (1984) points out, school leaders (specifically school principals) are in charge of the evaluation/ teaching process and, therefore, accountable for student performance. Essentially, she focuses heavily on the principal-student achievement link in her article. A shift in accountability from the parents’ involvement to that of educational leaders has become apparent. Furthermore, parents’ own educational beliefs, experience, and expectations in relation to their child’s schooling plays a major role in their involvement and attitudes.

 Research into the effectiveness of parental involvement in homework has concluded that this involvement has had a major impact on student success. V. Hoover Dempsey (2001), et al. provides research from a wide range of literature supporting this perspective, and further proposes school practices to improve parental involvement in homework to produce effective student outcomes. From research and studies provided in their paper, parental perspectives towards homework become positive and they get involved when homework invitations from their child or child’s teacher makes them feel like an essential part of the process. In addition to that, educational leaders must cultivate a climate of interaction between schools and parents to reinforce the desired behaviors from students, promote engagement in homework activities, and develop performance strategies. In essence, this paper argues that leadership goals should focus on the parent-school relationship to enhance student homework performance to ultimately achieve better student outcomes as well as to make parents feel involved and wanted in the homework process.

 J.L. Baker and M. Soden, additionally, discuss and examine empirical studies that explore how parental achievement affects student achievement in which over 200 articles are analyzed. They begin by putting this topic into a social context through highlighting the change in educational policy which has made parental involvement in their child’s education a national priority within America. However, they also highlight the confusion concerning the most effective strategies to achieve this, given the lack of scientific research and the data required. They further point out that this can give rise to unrealistic expectations on parents’ involvement and outcomes.

 Closer to home are two research papers that have been recently published within the UAE that pertain to localized educational leaders that I found most helpful. (Aldhaheri, 2018; Nasr, 2017). Both works provide an informative overview of the country’s education system, cultural perspective and context, leadership theories, and research structure and methods, and therefore, acted as a great resource in construction of this proposal as well as an effective revision tool. The outcomes and findings of these published studies, additionally, support my research with a benchmark and some form of research comparison that is relevant and contextual to my topic and location. Furthermore*, Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management* is a resource that I found most useful when constructing this research proposal. Essentially, it is an introductory guide for students engaged in educational research that specifically deals with leadership and management. From exploring key definitions to providing an overview of research tools, this resource has really aided me in understanding the components and approach methods for my research.

# Conceptual Framework







Student achievement





Parent beliefs

Socio-economic factors

 



Parent Attitudes

Parent Expectations

Capital



Role of leadership

 A conceptual framework is a structural diagram that is employed in research as an outline of possible courses of action in addition to a way of presenting a preferred approach to an idea or concept. In other words, a conceptual framework is used as a guide that illustrates where your research findings should take you. As seen in the above conceptual framework, an exploration of the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement is significant in ascertaining this research goal. As you can see, the boxes to the left are comprised of the factors pertaining to parent involvement in their child’s assessment. Attitudes, beliefs, and expectations all contribute and determine the amount and type of involvement that exists for each individual parent. Epstein’s (1994) proposal of six types of parent involvement are identified as: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. These are central to an all-encompassing understanding of the factors involved in parental involvement and how that affects student achievement and outcomes. In other words, this typology acts as a guide to identifying the key factors that determine parents’ changing attitudes towards student evaluation and how this affects and defines the role of leadership within distance learning. These factors will heavily influence the type of research questions I will be proposing to research participants. In addition to that, external factors such as, socio-economic and capital (i.e. resources, skills, and support) all contribute to student outcomes.

# Research Questions

This research paper aims at understanding the Role of Cycle One School Leaders in Ras al Khaimah toward closing the Parental Knowledge Gap in Distance Learning Assessment. The major questions that would guide me in this study are:

1. What are the challenges Cycle One School Leaders in Ras al Khaimah encounter when communicating distance learning assessment to parents and/or guardians?

2. What are the perceptions of parental expectations toward distance learning assessment among Cycle One School Leaders in Ras al Khaimah?

3. What do Cycle One school leader in Ras al Khaimah perceive to be their roles in educating parents and/or guardians about effective distance learning assessment?

These three questions were formulated for the purpose of gaining a deeper insight of the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement which is significant in ascertaining this research paper’s goal. It will also give an exploration opportunity to examine how parent-school relationship supports in enhancing student homework performance to ultimately achieve better student outcomes. Furthermore, these questions were created from a topic arising from a professional and academic point of interest and incorporates clarity, focus, and complexity.

# Research Methodology

 Developments in research methodology have made it more accessible to educational practitioners and leaders to enable and facilitate reflection on their own practices. Research within education is a pivotal part of reform and improvement. ‘Joyce (1991) identifies school-based research as one of the five ‘doors’ to school improvement. Investing their own practice provides teachers and leaders with the evidence to justify change and increases the likelihood that they will embrace innovation because they have been directly involved in identifying the need for it.’ (Miller, p. xi).

 This research will follow the qualitative approach, because the topic area will focus on commonality of lived experiences within a particular group. In addition to that, it will provide empirical data which will be interpreted and examined to discover meaning. Corbin (2015) identifies the following key reasons why researchers choose to use qualitative over quantitative research methods:

* To explore the inner experiences of participants
* To explore how meanings are formed and transformed.
* To discover relevant variables that later can be tested through quantitative forms of research.
* To take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena

The participants in this research will be Cycle One public school leader located in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. Those participants will be selected based on accessibility and purposive sampling in which they will be chosen because of how they relate to the research objectives (Given, 2008).

# Data Collection Tools

 There are numerous types of research methods that fall under the categories of quantitative or qualitative methods that are used for data collection. The most applicable research tool for the research conducted for this topic is the interview method, as it allows for an exploratory investigation into specific topics. The qualitative data will be solicited through semi-structured interviews that are conducted in Arabic to facilitate a means by which participants can freely express their perspectives and lived experience through open-ended questions. The semi-structured interview format has been chosen for this research instead of an unstructured interview framework to ensure reliability and validity within a structure of set questions. Furthermore, the use of pre-determined but open-ended questions allows for a certain degree of flexibility to dig deeper into the research topic as well as facilitating further discussion on unanticipated topics.

 As such, data will first be transcribed verbatim in Arabic. Likewise, open coding will also be undertaken in Arabic. The axial codes will first be assigned in Arabic and subsequently translated to English. These English translations will be translated back by at least two fluent experts in the field. Once consensus is reached concerning the translated meaning of axial codes, the researcher will continue coding in English. This process is imperative for data collected in one language and subsequently published in English.

 The participants’ contributions to the interview questions will be analyzed to extract information related to the research questions. As this study’s objective is seeking out school leaders’ perspectives on their roles in changing parents’ attitudes towards students’ evaluation, they will be asked on the purpose, function, limitations, and effectiveness of distance learning assessments. The utilization of the interview method in this instant allows for exploratory research that should expose the participants’ underlying perceptions.

## Data Analysis

 Like collecting data, data analysis is a crucial part of any research project. The coding approach will be implemented to analyze the data in this search through three main steps. Firstly, open coding will be conducted to identify the important data, concepts which are relevant to the topic. They will be taken from the video recorder and interview scripts of the school leaders answers. Secondly, the axial codes will be used to organize the open codes into axial codes in order to reach saturation in which no new information is found. Lastly, the thematic coding approach will be followed to categorize the axial codes into theme which will be outlined through a narrative form.

 To ensure the validity of this research, the data sources will be varied by the number of participants in order to reach the credibility of the collected data. In addition to considering the trust factor in the implementation process, the trust between the researcher and the participants will start at the beginning of the research period and will be maintained until the end. Building trust and rapport with the participants is an important component of an effective interview. Approaching the interview with an open and curious attitude, stating specifically why you are interested in the participant’s specific point of view will enable this. (Jacobsen, 1993). In addition to that, McGrath (2018) suggests drafting a short summary of the research project to send to participants in advance to the interview to inform them of what to expect in the interview process and why it is a relevant and important topic to discuss.

# Ethics

Brown (1993) states: ‘Control of personal information is viewed as an expression of autonomy and as an individual’s right to protect his or her social vulnerability and identity’. Research ethics will be taken into consideration by keeping the participation of individuals private and confidential. This will be applied by informing the participants on the purpose of the research and data tools by sending them a consent form for them to complete and send back. This will occur at the beginning of the research when the researcher will be assigning an interview appointment with the school leaders. The participants’ privacy was guaranteed by the informed consent, so that they will feel assured that they are protected from any harm or exposure of the data. The data will be anonymized, so the chances that the participants will be exposed to harm is minimized. Moreover, the videos will only be analyzed and translated by the researcher and destroyed after the necessary data is gathered. Significantly, the participants will not be obliged to contribute or continue participating in the research. As well as having the right to withdraw at any time in the process if they want to cease their participation. This step will be reminded verbally before recording the interview and non-verbally in the consent.

# Findings

The study investigates the role of school leadership in changing parents’ attitudes towards students’ evaluation. The researcher conducted a number of 8 interviews with educational leaders: Afra, Hessa, Moza, Mariam, Aisha, Asma, Shaikha, and Azza. The major questions that guide the researcher are:

1. What are the challenges Cycle One School Leaders in Ras al Khaimah encounter when communicating distance learning assessment to parents and/or guardians?

2. What are the perceptions of parental expectations toward distance learning assessment among Cycle One School Leaders in Ras al Khaimah?

3. What do Cycle One School Leaders in Ras al Khaimah perceive to be their roles in educating parents and/ guardians about effective distance learning assessment?

In response to the question: “What assessment tools does your school uses to assess distance learning?”, 50% believe that they include continuous training, projects and tasks and electronic test via Swift Assess. 25% think that, in addition to tools mentioned earlier, rating cards and questionnaires can be feasible tools for assessing students via distance learning. Another 12.5% projects and tasks are good assessment tools in the digital era. One leader out of 8, namely Afra, believes that electronic test via swift asses and parents’ satisfaction measurement scans, and activities and duties at the gate interaction, attendance and participation are also possible assessment tools in distance learning.

When asked “What do you believe is the role of a school leader in distance learning assessment?”, 25% believe that the roles include organizing, supervising, monitoring, and forming committees to follow up and measure progress. 50% of those interviewed thinks that the role of the school leader should be big enough to include duties like developing a methodology and evaluation policy at his school and teachers apply the methodology as well as training teachers who need support, promotion, and development in tools. Moza and Mariam, add that the roles could also include publishing this policy for parents and students as well as follow up on the effectiveness of tools, accounting for 25% of the those interviewed.

Leaders’ responses to the third question: “How different virtual learning environments are evaluated versus real-life learning?” come as follows. 50% of interviewees believe that virtual learning environments should be evaluated electronically during distance learning while 25% think that they can be evaluated through a variety of evaluation tools during real life learning. Two leaders, Azza and Asma, that realistic learning is the best evaluation tool to measure virtual environment because it is accurate and credible.

In response to the question, “What expectations do you think parents have about assessment in distance learning?”, 62.5% believe that distance learning is an inaccurate tool for measuring the student's level and there is a large intervention from parents in the solution of electronic tests. 12.5%, namely Aisha, adds that students will be limited to submitting projects and tasks without any tests. Findings reveal that 25% of those interviewed thinks that remote evaluation is suitable for parents to directly supervise the evaluation process. Findings also reveal that the evaluation period is available to the student for a longer period and this flexibility is the responsibility of the parents.

In response to the fifth question, “How do parents’ expectations of assessment compare to the school’s expectations of assessment in distance learning?”, findings reveal that two leaders, namely Afra and Azza, believe that the school is having a hard time managing electronic tests. 50% of the interviewees think the results don’t measure what they intend to while few parents believe that electronic tests are feasible. Another 25% of the interviewees say that the assessment must be easy and flexible to suit the emergency conditions we live in. While the school's expectations are committed to the ministerial evaluation policy, which opts for electronic tools.

Leaders’ responses to the sixth question communication challenges are varied. Findings reveal that 75% of the interviewees believe that the main challenges include technical glitch due to poor internet or from the same rating platforms, lack of awareness and knowledge of the use of electronic programs by some students and parents and the many complaints of parents about the pressures and their association with the jobs and the multiplicity of stages of children in the same house. However, 25% of the interviewees believe that the major challenges include failing to inform parents of the publications regarding the evaluation and the lack of willingness of some to attend meetings with the school administration. They also add technical problems and failing to attend meetings to address such technical problems as major communication challenges.

Leaders’ perceptions differ as how to improve communication about distance learning assessment between schools and parents. 50% of the interviewees say they can improve communication via holding meetings and training workshops for parents, increasing channels of communication, developing a system to motivate parents, and increasing guidance sessions. 37.5% of the interviewees think communication can be developed via creating Telegram Group to spread the culture of evaluation. 12.5% of the responses show that communication can be improved by uploading the explanation of the assessments at the platform and on the MS Teams.

In response to the question about helping parents better understand assessment in distance learning, 75% of the interviewees believe that they can do so by making parents aware of the need not to interfere during the student's evaluation, preparing a good student for electronic tests and holding meetings to introduce the tests and how they are applied. 25% think they can organize counselling sessions for parents to clarify matters related to evaluation and respond to their queries.

# Conclusions

A number of conclusions could be drawn from the findings as follows:

* Technology in the digital era is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity.
* Assessment tools in the distance learning should be different from those of traditional learning.
* Assessment tools should be varied enough to evaluate the various aspect of the learning process in the digital era.
* The roles assigned to the educational leader in the distance learning should be wide enough to include, but not be reduced to, developing new assessment techniques as well as new teaching methodologies and communicating it to their teachers.
* Alternative assessment tools such as portfolios, computer literacy, experiments, interviews, attendance, discipline, and projects should be developed to fit into the new learning environments.
* Awareness among people of the significance of the distance learning and its evaluation tools should be raised in such a way as to cover the new roles assigned to students, teachers, and parents.
* Evaluation should not solely be done by teachers, but educational leaders and school administration should take part in the evaluation process.
* Parents should be regularly informed of their parents’ performance and behavior in the distance learning. They should be encouraged to closely observe and guide their children during classes.
* Teachers’, parents’, and students’ literacy should be developed via holding training sessions administered by school administrations and the technical staff in charge.
* New communication channels between schools, parents and teachers should be established to keep all these stakeholders informed of the latest developments.
* Distance learning should be constantly evaluated, and the results should be communicated to the higher educational leaderships and to the other stakeholders.

# Limitations of research

A number of limitations have been identified in this study. These limitations include the following:

* The small sample size is one major limitation which could be ascribed to the limited number of educational leaders available for the interviews. The larger the sample size, the more credible the results are.
* Generalization could be another limitation in this study. The educational leaders interviewed work in the public sector and the results of the study would apply more to this sector. I don’t know if they could apply to the private sector with both Arabic and non-Arabic syllabi. Having this in mind, I would say that the findings could not generalized to other educational settings with various student population, parents from various cultural backgrounds and different curricula.
* The current health situation made it hard to conduct face to face interviews. Conducting online interviews would not enable the researcher to establish rapport with interviewees and to read the facial expressions clearly and thoroughly.

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