

Policy Commentary



# The Action Research Network: A Collaborative Initiative Driving School Improvement in the UAE – Implications for Policy and Practice

شبكة بحثية تعاونية تدفع تطوير المدارس في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة: دلالات للسياسات والممارسات التعليمية

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## Abstract

This policy commentary examines the implementation and impact of the Action Research Network (ARN), a collaborative research initiative launched by the University of Birmingham Dubai in October 2022 to drive school improvement across the United Arab Emirates. The ARN empowers educators to investigate their own teaching practices, design interventions, and evaluate their impact in real-time, fostering continuous educational improvement. Drawing on a systematic review of presentations from the 2024 ARN Conference, the study identifies seven key themes reflecting current education priorities in the UAE: Interventions for Emirati and Arabic Learners, Data-driven Approaches and Impact Studies, Innovative Teaching Methods and Technology Integration, Information Literacy and Exam Strategies, English Language Learner Interventions, Student Engagement and Wellbeing, and Coaching and Professional Development. The research highlights the importance of contextualizing educational practices to local needs, balancing technology with traditional teaching methods, implementing data-driven approaches with emotional intelligence, prioritizing student wellbeing as a mechanism for academic success, and fostering collaborative knowledge sharing across educational institutions. The study demonstrates how the ARN model offers a sustainable approach to school improvement by equipping educators with the tools and confidence to lead their own research, thereby enhancing individual practice while driving systemic change across the UAE education sector and beyond.

## المخلص

وهي مبادرة بحثية تعاونية أطلقتها جامعة بيرمنغهام في دبي في أكتوبر ٢٠٢٢ بهدف تعزيز تطوير المدارس في جميع أنحاء دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. تمكّن شبكة ARN المعلمين من دراسة ممارساتهم التدريسية بأنفسهم، وتصميم تدخلات تعليمية، وتقييم أثرها بشكل فوري، مما يعزز من التحسين المستمر في العملية التعليمية. وبالاعتماد على مراجعة منهجية للعروض المقدمة في مؤتمر ARN لعام ٢٠٢٤، تحدد الدراسة سبعة محاور رئيسية تعكس أولويات التعليم الحالية في دولة الإمارات: التدخلات لمتعلمين الإماراتيين والعرب، المناهج المبنية على البيانات ودراسات التأثير، أساليب التدريس المبتكرة ودمج التكنولوجيا، مهارات الثقافة واستراتيجيات الامتحانات، التدخلات الخاصة بمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، مشاركة الطلاب وصحتهم النفسية، والتوجيه والتطوير المهني. و تبرز الدراسة أهمية ملائمة الممارسات التعليمية مع الاحتياجات المحلية، وتحقيق التوازن بين التكنولوجيا وأساليب التدريس التقليدية،

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وتطبيق المناهج المعتمدة على البيانات مع مراعاة الذكاء العاطفي ، وإعطاء الأولوية للصحة النفسية للطلاب كآلية لتحقيق النجاح الأكاديمي، وتعزيز تبادل المعرفة التعاوني عبر المؤسسات التعليمية. توضح الدراسة كيف أنّ نموذج ARN يقدم نهجاً مستداماً لتحسين المدارس من خلال تزويد المعلمين بالأدوات والثقة اللازمة لقيادة أبحاثهم الخاصة، مما يساهم في تحسين الممارسات الفردية ودفع التغيير الجذري في قطاع التعليم في دولة الإمارات وخارجها.

**Keywords:** Action research, School improvement, Teacher professional development, Education innovation, UAE education, Collaborative learning

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** بحث الفعل; تطوير المدارس; التطوير المهني للمعلمين; الابتكار التعليمي; التعليم في دولة الإمارات; التعلم التعاوني

## 1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has positioned “First Rate Education” as a foundational pillar for the country’s future as a competitive knowledge economy (UAE, 2017). In this context of rapid educational reform, innovative approaches to school improvement, such as the Action Research Network (ARN), represent one of these pioneering initiatives, empowering educators through collaborative inquiry and evidence-based practice. This policy commentary presents the implementation and impact of this model across UAE schools, and discusses implications for policy and practice in the region and globally.

Launched in October 2022 by the University of Birmingham Dubai, the ARN is a collaborative network of research practitioners that brings together educators across the UAE through a series of structured workshops, online resources, and professional networking opportunities, culminating in a conference to share best practice and knowledge generated to enhance education through research.

Action Research, as defined by McNiff (2017), is a process conducted by educators for educators. It allows practitioners to assess, reflect on, and improve their teaching approaches by designing and implementing interventions tailored to their specific classroom or school context. Literature consistently highlights the effectiveness of Action Research in promoting teacher agencies, professional growth, and improved student outcomes (Lambirth et al., 2021). It is particularly powerful in complex, fast-changing environments like education, and in understanding culturally and contextually specific needs in education (Mertler, 2024), where localized and timely responses are critical.

The ARN empowers educators to investigate their own teaching practices, design interventions, and evaluate their impact in real-time, to drive continuous improvement in education. Each year, six workshops are hosted to guide educators through the process of conducting individual action research in their educational context. Participants are supported through a vibrant online network that includes research resources, a Padlet to refine ideas, and a community space to share findings. To date, over 300 educators from more than 75 schools in the UAE have engaged with the Network over three years, including teachers, support assistants, curriculum leads, and senior leaders.

The impact of this approach was visible at the 2024 Action Research Network Annual Conference, held on May 25<sup>th</sup> at the University of Birmingham Dubai. The conference brought together over 200 attendees from 81 schools and educational institutions across the region. Attendees included school

principals, teachers, researchers, and policymakers. The conference was opened by an expert panel, including leaders from the British Council, the Al Futtaim Education Foundation, and British Schools in the Middle East, all of whom highlighted the value of research-led teaching in transforming school environments. The ARN offers a powerful and sustainable model for school improvement. By equipping educators with the tools, support, and confidence to lead their research, the network not only enhances individual practice but also drives systemic change across the education sector in the UAE and beyond through showcasing a myriad of research projects, interventions and investigations, and collaboratively considering these results to improve education in the region.

## 2. Methodology

A systematic review was conducted on all presentations from the 2024 Action Research Network Conference to identify the key themes that reflect the current policy and practice priorities of schools in the region. The systematic review of conference proceedings was guided by the methodological approach suggested by Feng and Wang (2020). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used as the primary analytical method due to its reflexive approach, which emphasizes flexibility and researcher interpretation in representing complex realities. Following the six-phase framework, the process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Each presentation was reviewed independently by members of the research team, who then coded and grouped data based on recurring topics, areas of focus, and stated outcomes. This rigorous, replicable, yet adaptable approach allowed themes to emerge organically, providing insight into the shared challenges and strategic areas of development across UAE schools. The methodology's flexibility was valuable in capturing the contextual complexities of classroom-based research in the region and beyond.

## 3. Results

Across the conference, there were seven key themes that were discussed, each with at least four different research projects for each, contributing to a body of regional understanding on these topics across a range of schools and a wide diversity of students in the UAE. These themes include: Interventions for Emirati and Arabic Learners, Data-driven Approaches and Impact Studies, Innovative Teaching Methods and Technology Integration, Information Literacy and Exam Strategies, English Language Learner Interventions, Student Engagement and Wellbeing, and finally, Coaching and Professional Development. Each theme addressed a pressing educational challenge and showcased innovative, context-specific solutions.

### 3.1. Interventions for Emirati and Arabic learners

Supporting Emirati and Arabic learners was a principle driving force for this conference, and the collaborative approach across both private and public schools allowed for innovative discussions to promote educational improvement for this group of students. One research study employed structured, engaging reading practices in early education to promote fluency, and this successful intervention led to a measurable increase in reading speed, enjoyment, and motivation. A fluency-focused reading intervention for Grade 3 students led to significantly faster reading speeds, greater motivation, and more enjoyment. Another study explored Quran memorization strategies among Year 6 non-native Arabic speakers, comparing repetition, gamification, and mind mapping, and found that repetition proved most effective, with students showing greater progress. Interestingly, this elevates the importance of traditional learning approaches in this context. While the conference highlighted innovative technologies throughout to improve education, one study examined how using mini whiteboards affected classroom engagement for Grade 10 Emirati boys and found that nearly all students were more actively involved during lessons, reinforcing the value and utility of simple interactive tools in education, alongside technology. Lastly, research into English language progress among Emirati foundation and primary students in UAE private schools highlighted the importance of academic support and parental involvement together to create measurable improvements across all year groups. Collectively, these studies highlight the engaging practice happening within diverse UAE education systems to celebrate the integration of diverse learning approaches suitable to the context and needs of Emirati and Arabic learners. Furthermore, these studies highlight the success of more tailored, culturally relevant interventions, while also demonstrating the value of parental involvement, consistency, and data tracking in enhancing outcomes.

### 3.2. Data-driven approaches and impact studies

Among schools within the UAE, teaching methods that take a data-driven approach have demonstrated strong potential for raising both student achievement and guiding school improvement. One research study employed an intervention targeted at Year 11 students with the highest CAT data scores. Results showed that there would likely be an increase in GCSE percentages, and the attainment of the top GCSE grades was expected to rise by 13%. Another study that explored emotional regulation among school leaders found that 16.5% used positive reappraisal techniques. This finding supported the importance of emotional intelligence as part of the leadership approach. Lastly, an intervention targeted at Year 3 math students investigated interventions designed to aid problem-solving, which could in turn improve academic achievement. Findings were explored across subject knowledge, accuracy, and confidence. Considered together, these studies demonstrate that data-informed strategies, when they are combined with emotional insight and more targeted support, can significantly enhance outcomes for both students and educators. Overall, such research findings support the notion that there is a need for flexible, data-driven teaching, which is adaptable and sensitive to a range of student ability levels.

### 3.3. Innovative teaching methods and technology integration

Various tools and teaching methods delivered across schools in the UAE and presented at the conference have demonstrated improvement across engagement, reflection, and performance. At universities, the integration of technology has significantly improved students' problem-solving and technical skills, however, this required adequate faculty training. Similarly, across primary and secondary settings, the use of tools such as AI tutors and platforms like ClassPoint led to improved participation in discussion and increased engagement. In a study exploring students from a KS3 cohort, it was found that the use of AI tutors aided students in completing their tasks faster and with higher levels of confidence. Furthermore, the use of iPads and Apple TVs has promoted student motivation, and students found the use of such technology favorable for portability and accessibility. Such research findings are indicative of the need for a combination of technology use, as part of a suite of educational approaches, resulting in greater educational outcomes.

### 3.4. Information literacy and exam strategies

An exploration of different strategies used in reading and exam preparation has found that these strategies significantly benefit students' engagement and academic outcomes. A study examining the concept of reading for pleasure revealed that many students were unaware of how to access library resources, underscoring the need for a more teacher-led cultural shift, rather than relying solely on additional tasks in the curriculum. In a study focusing on the use of the Accelerated Reader program to explore improvement in proficiency and engagement for KS1 students, reading ages were increased by an average of 8.3 months. A further study examined the implementation of "starter tasks" within UAE secondary schools, with findings demonstrating that these tasks contributed to increased student confidence. However, anxiety concerning grade attainment was still prevalent, despite higher student grades, and it was clear that students still needed direct instruction on how they could relate what was done in the starter task to what they were expected to do in their exam. In summary, this is indicative that to achieve effective literacy support requires a blend of inclusive practices, teacher support throughout, and continuous monitoring.

### 3.5. English language learner interventions

The implementation of targeted strategies specifically for English Language Learners has demonstrated significantly improved outcomes across a range of research projects. One study explored the use of explicit vocabulary instruction, which found this approach aided Year 8 ELLs in better understanding subject-specific content and resulted in improved comprehension and achievement. Another study found that the simplification of language used in math exams also helped to improve student comprehension without compromising content rigor. When implementing these strategies in the classroom, it is important to note that student attitudes are crucial to the effectiveness of interventions. But importantly, it was shown that withdrawal from class to attend specific ELL support was viewed by students as positive in improving

their language development. In a separate study, when exploring the effectiveness of ELL strategies, peer collaboration emerged as the most effective support strategy, with 57% of students achieving exit-level English proficiency. In contrast, overreliance on tools like Google Translate was found not to be effective when comparing student responses and the subsequent test scores. Collectively, this signifies that a balanced and individual student approach is needed, considering individual student perceptions and feelings about their learning. Additionally, innovative teaching methods that combine peer learning, scaffolding, and explicit instruction seem to be most effective, whilst warning against the development of overdependence on translation tools.

### 3.6. Student engagement and wellbeing

The UAE is a global leader in its focus on and value of student wellbeing in education, and this was reflected in conference proceedings. There were a series of studies that aimed to develop specific techniques for improving student wellbeing for different groups of students. One study explored how to enhance engagement among Year 3 students and found that morning snacks, flexible breaks, and movement-based lessons supported student enjoyment, behavior, and participation. Other studies focused on enhancing academic engagement and wellbeing through debate coaching to improve oracy and confidence, and in another through small group art sessions for students with special educational needs to achieve behavioral and academic benefits. Differentiated instruction was shown to improve wellbeing and engagement for Year 12 math students, particularly those with lower ability.

There were other studies that highlighted the importance of student wellbeing for their education overall. One study examined the impact of student wellbeing on academic attainment, highlighting wellbeing as one of the most critical factors. Another study in a primary school found that 30.8% of teachers indicated that they lacked confidence in managing student anxiety associated with climate change education, suggesting a need for targeted training to support positive education and its integration with student wellbeing. For younger students in this school, sustainability initiatives boosted confidence and a sense of environmental responsibility; however, older students reported they had concerns regarding the effectiveness of their actions and climate anxiety overall.

### 3.7. Coaching and professional development

Both student and teacher progress have been found to be enhanced through the use of coaching and reflective teaching methods. One study found that when mentors of PGCE iQTS student teachers received coaching training, there was an improvement in both the mentors' confidence. After the training, it was found that all student teachers preferred coaching as a feedback style. Additionally, the implementation of coaching, specifically as a professional growth tool, provided educators with the opportunity to reflect, explore personal priorities, and further develop leadership skills in a safe and supportive environment. Teachers reported that coaching improved their practice, and quality assurance reviews demonstrated

a rise in teaching and learning standards. These findings provide support for the value of coaching in professional development and offer evidence on how coaching can contribute to improved student outcomes. Extending career-related professional development to students was also found to be effective. One study utilized a problem-based learning approach (PBL) within a Grade 7 science class, finding that it helped assist 23% of students identified as gifted and talented, especially through collaboration and real-world problem-solving. These studies overall suggest that schools should aim to expand the use of coaching across various roles, including its application as professional development and learning support.

## 4. Policy and Practice Implications

The UAE continues to be a global leader in educational innovation, as highlighted by the contributions presented at this conference. It is critical, then, that local and regional education policies should support the value and insights of research to drive educational improvement and should promote the continued collection and dissemination of research to guide effective policy implementation. The many research studies presented in this conference point to several key policy suggestions, and these are aligned with other published research supporting these considerations.

(i) Contextualizing the application of educational practices, policies, and recommendations to local needs and achievements is critical throughout all educational activities (Gemink et al., 2021). Celebrating regional expertise in Arabic and Emirati education, as well as inclusive practices that support education for the uniquely diverse population of students in the UAE, provides unique insights to promote education for all students regionally and globally. Education authorities should establish curriculum adaptation committees that include both local experts and international consultants to ensure educational frameworks are tailored to the UAE's unique cultural and demographic while maintaining global standards.

(ii) Technology integration is critical to advance education in the region (Granić, 2022), but must be accompanied by effective training for the teachers delivering it (Gomez et al., 2022). The studies presented at the conference highlighted a range of educational technologies, from iPads to Apple TV and AI tools, to enhance education, and the careful considerations that must accompany the enactment of these tools. Education authorities should implement a national technology-integration certification program for educators, including ongoing professional development credits and regular assessment of technology implementation effectiveness in classrooms.

(iii) High-quality, effective professional development is critical for enhancing school improvement across a range of areas (Alwaely et al., 2023), and coaching was highlighted as a particularly effective approach for students, teacher trainers, and experienced teachers (Ivanoca et al., 2022). Schools should be mandated to allocate a minimum of 10% of their annual professional development budget specifically for coaching programs and to document the measurable impact of these programs on teacher performance and student outcomes.

(iv) Data-driven approaches have demonstrated strong potential for raising both student achievement and school performance (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021), but importantly, several research projects

highlighted the importance of emotionally intelligent use of this data to drive school improvement (Kassawneh et al., 2022). Policymakers should develop national guidelines for ethical data collection and analysis in educational settings, along with establishing regional data centers where schools can share anonymized findings to create broader insights across the UAE education system.

(v) There was an evident importance of traditional teaching methods alongside technology (Alneyadi et al., 2023). This was demonstrated across a range of studies. For example, ELL learners benefited from a combination of inclusive and student-tailored traditional pedagogies, and their progress was hindered by an over-reliance on technology (Cummings & Anderson, 2025). The findings on literacy, reading, and exam strategies further highlight the teacher's critical role in providing continued support and monitoring of student progress, as well as the primary dependency of students on their teacher as a provider of knowledge and scaffolding to ensure their academic success, particularly in implementing inclusive practices. Educational authorities should develop a balanced instructional framework that explicitly values and preserves proven traditional pedagogies alongside innovative approaches, with clear guidance on when each is most appropriate.

(vi) Student wellbeing continues to be an important focus for advancing education in the region, and school improvement initiatives should aim to improve wellbeing as a primary mechanism for achieving increased academic performance, student engagement, reducing behavioral problems, and supporting educational attainment (Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Klapp et al., 2024). Schools should align their wellbeing initiatives with the National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031 (UAE, 2024) by developing institution-specific implementation plans that incorporate findings from action research to track progress on wellbeing indicators, with results feeding directly into the national framework's monitoring and evaluation system.

(vii) Collaborative work to investigate and disseminate knowledge across schools and school groups is a powerful way to advance education (Mertler, 2024). This conference and the important insights gathered demonstrate the unique value of collaborative and networked research approaches to embed innovative and sustainable education approaches in the UAE and globally. To enhance education for all, we must continue to work together in collaborative partnership for all education policy and practice innovations. Education ministries should create formal structures and dedicated funding streams to support cross-institutional research networks, with requirements for schools to participate in at least one collaborative research project annually to maintain accreditation status.

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None.

## Competing Interests

None.

## Author Biography

Philip Anderson is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham Dubai. He has a rich background in creativity and the arts, and brings a blend of practical academic insight to the field of education. His primary research interest is music in education, as reflected in his current PhD research at the University of Durham. Philip also runs the Action Research Network in the UAE, a community of teachers transforming the classroom experience through intentional systematic inquiry. Philip is an active member of the research committee at the University of Birmingham Dubai and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Dawn England is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham. Previously, she served as Head of the Dubai Education Department at Birmingham University Dubai, where she founded the Action Research Network in 2022. Dawn's scholarship focuses on understanding barriers to education globally, with particular attention to gender, parental beliefs, and peer experiences. She has conducted research in 17 countries across 4 continents and was awarded the US National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship for her international work. She is committed to advancing transnational education with a focus on educational leadership and social justice.

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