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Unifying school culture through a shared vision: effectiveness of continuous professional development for newly hired teachers in Egypt

Marwa Ahmed Atteya, Egypt

Unifying school culture through a shared vision: effectiveness of CPD for newly hired teachers in Egypt

School context

The school is a private international school located in New Cairo, Egypt. Founded in 2016, it has rapidly expanded to around 1500 pupils mostly from the local area, with a few international pupils. Staff members come from diverse backgrounds, which affects the emerging school culture. The school faces the challenge of developing its culture through a shared vision which aligns returning teachers and newly hired teachers recruited every year to lead pupils' teaching, learning and well-being.

The action research will assess the effectiveness of a CPD programme for new teachers on building a shared vision and unifying the school culture. The CPD committee will plan workshops and online courses for upper primary and lower secondary staff members. The research topic will be explored after the 2023–24 Induction Week and action will be implemented on CPD days during the academic year. This will be evaluated to continuously improve the programme for future years.

About the author

Marwa Ahmed Atteya is the Vice Principal for Upper Primary and Lower Secondary at Capital International School in New Cairo, Egypt. She has a background in engineering, a PGCE from the University of Dundee, a Special Diploma in Education, and an IB certificate in Leadership Practice. Marwa has over 15 years of experience in education across Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt, she has taken on various leadership roles. She is pursuing a Master's degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Dundee.



Key learnings

This research assessed the effectiveness of a CPD programme, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), to enhance pupil well-being and sense of inclusion at school.

- Staff members needed an understanding of SEL before implementation: the benefits and how it positively impacts aspects of life, including academic achievement, mental well-being, and healthy behaviour.
- The programme needed to be levelled according to staff background.
- All staff members, not just teachers, should be included in the programme to unify school culture.
- While the initial setup and intermittent activities were important, it was essential to allocate time to ensure SEL was integrated into daily school life.
- SEL helped staff and pupils become more aware of themselves and their actions to build better relationships, foster empathy, understanding and open dialogue in the classroom.

Expected outcomes

- Unified school culture with a shared vision of leading pupils
- Supportive learning environment
- Improved learning outcomes for pupils
- Improved pupils' academic results
- Promotion of continuous school improvement



Figure 1: Meeting with CPD Committee

Action research rationale

The primary aim of this research is to unify school culture in Capital International School through a shared vision and build a positive learning environment for pupils, by aligning newly hired staff members through professional development.

To build a positive learning environment, pupils need to have a clear idea of how things are done in their learning environment. They need to receive the same message from everyone in the school to feel safe and be able to belong to the school community. This is hard to accomplish when school teachers do not share the same vision about the school culture.

Unifying school culture would create a homogeneous environment for pupils' learning, which would promote their sense of belonging to the school community, and subsequently positively influence pupils' learning, results and well-being.

Building a shared vision that reflects teachers' everyday practice will improve teaching and learning, create a supportive learning environment for pupils, and promote school improvement.

Exploratory research questions

1. Why do I think that professional development could build a shared vision to unify school culture?
2. a. What is teachers' perception of the PD sessions?
b. What kinds of CPD activities do other schools have for teachers to achieve unity of purpose in their school culture?
3. What are the pupils' perceptions of the school culture? Do they perceive it differently from their teachers?

Methodology

The research's methodology employs a multi-method approach to investigate community members' perspectives.

First, we recorded informal conversations about whether professional development could create a shared vision with the school CPD committee.

Surveys of 10 to 15 recently hired teachers were conducted to explore their opinions on how professional development during induction weeks has affected the school culture and how well they have aligned with it.

Pupils' surveys explored how satisfied they are with different components of the school culture, given to a sample of 20 to 30 pupils.

After observing classroom camera recordings for 8 to 10 distinct sessions of newly hired teachers, CPD committee members completed an observation tool for a comprehensive view of the culture aspects of the classroom.

Lastly, we explored how other schools bring their school culture together through professional development by analysing the notes from one-on-one interviews with two to three leaders.

Before commencing the research, each participant had their consent obtained, a meeting was conducted to inform pupils about the goal of the research, an email consent form and a comparable information page were issued to parents, and we obtained agreements from parents of participating pupils. Every participant received information regarding the usage, storage, and security of their data. All information gathered is kept private in school to protect participants' privacy, and all identifiable information is anonymised.



Figure 2: Meeting with pupils

Key findings from exploration

For question 1: The interviews involved five participants from the CPD Committee, and all agreed that Induction Week PD sessions have effectively established a unified culture particularly when paired with follow-up accountability.

Most of them expressed concern that heavy workloads might lead to a gradual deviation from cultural adoption. Suggested enhancements include empowering teachers to formulate aligned visions and scheduling culture refreshers.

For question 2a: Ten newly hired teachers were surveyed about their perception of CPD sessions conducted during Induction Week. All agreed that induction week CPD sessions helped them understand the school's culture and values and that brought staff together with shared experiences.

Recommendations for improvement included that all staff members who deal directly with pupils should attend sessions to unify school culture. Equity and inclusion, social-emotional learning, and stress management sessions were suggested as ways to reach a unified school culture.

For question 2b: Three leaders from other schools were interviewed about their CPD activities for teachers to achieve unity in their school culture: 33% offer on-site workshops while 67% reported mixing between on-site workshops and online sessions. Of the participants, 67% agreed that initiatives reinforcing and sustaining culture for both newly hired and returning teachers are effective in their schools by applying a levelled CPD programme, while 33% of participants lack this area in their school.

Some potential pitfalls to avoid are designing the same programme for all without a diagnostic assessment to level the programme, and the timing to be during induction weeks only without follow-up sessions. School leaders also shared that methods to measure/evaluate the effectiveness of CPD are surveys for teachers, pupils, and parents, other than classroom observations for teachers' applications.

For research question 3: More than 30 pupils were surveyed about their perceptions of the school culture (the ideas, procedures, and way we do things) and most of them found it to be good or very good. One thing that pupils asked to improve about the school culture: some pupils asked for better communication with supporting staff and more space for how to apply the school rules. Bullying was mentioned as it affects their acceptance of their daily practice at school or feeling satisfied.

Figure 3: Teachers' perceptions about school policies reinforcing school culture

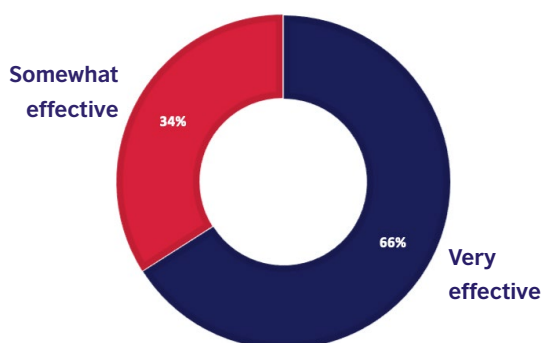


Figure 4: Pupils' perceptions of inclusion

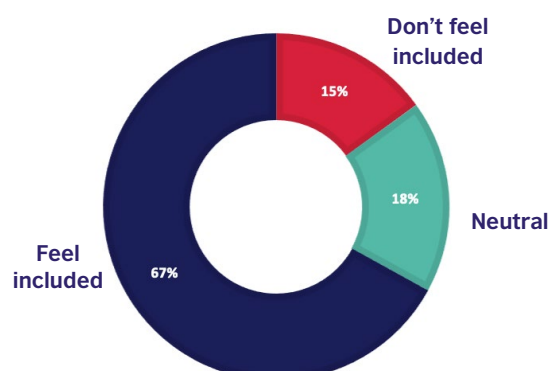




Figure 5: Staff members receiving their completion certificates for the SEL training

Action plan

Looking at all the findings, we concluded that the following actions would cover most aspects mentioned by teachers, pupils and other school leaders.

1. Revisit the workload of teachers to allow for more time for reflection on teachers' and pupils' well-being.
2. Compile case studies from different departments showcasing cultural values to utilise post-induction levelled training refreshers.
3. Create Professional Learning Communities that bring together returning and new teachers.
4. Create a PD programme for staff members focusing on Social Emotional Learning for a more inclusive learning environment.
5. Safeguarding and child protection training is to be launched for all staff members and evaluated consistently.


Action plan implementation

All actions we have discussed are very important, however, we needed to focus on fewer actions due to time constraints. So we decided to create a levelled professional development programme to unify school culture with the following criteria: a CPD programme focused on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Safeguarding to enhance pupils' well-being and sense of inclusion.

Three different programmes were implemented for a mixed group of returning teachers, newly hired teachers, and supporting staff members.

1. One for teachers and supporting staff members who had no previous knowledge in this area (25 staff members) held by Eduline for Educational Consultations: a mix of on-site workshops and online sessions, five sessions of two hours each. For further support, Wired for Well-being resources from Outside the Box Learning Resources have been provided to teachers to understand how to apply SEL in their classrooms.
2. The second was planned for staff members who needed follow-up and enhancement in this area (26 staff members): a self-paced eight-hour online course by Model Teaching titled Strategies to Support Social Emotional Learning.
3. The third was for Deputy Pastors (two staff members) who received a Designated Safeguarding Lead Level 3 training by High-Speed Training.

We decided to create a CPD programme focused on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Safeguarding to enhance pupils' well-being and sense of inclusion.



The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) professional development programme will play a significant role in fostering understanding, empathy, and open dialogue in the classroom.

Data collection procedure

First, I wrote a reflective journal on the foreseen challenges and benefits of implementing a professional development programme focusing on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to unify school culture for both returning and new staff.

We surveyed more than 30 staff members before the action implementation on the expectations and concerns of teachers regarding a professional development programme focusing on SEL on teachers' professional development and its impact on pupils' learning outcomes.

After action implementation, we surveyed more than 20 staff members tailored to gather information about the expected benefits of a Professional Development programme focusing on SEL in increasing pupils' sense of safety, building better relationships with teachers, and creating a stronger feeling of belonging to the school community.

Lastly, we interviewed a focus group of six staff members to discuss what support and resources school leaders provided to facilitate integrating the SEL programme.

Before commencing the research, each participant had their consent obtained, a meeting was conducted where they received information regarding the usage, storage and security of their data. All information gathered is kept private in school to protect participants' privacy, and all identifiable information is anonymised.

Key findings

- The Reflective Journal showed that the SEL professional development programme was an addition to our school community, as it focuses on enhancing pupils' and teachers' social and emotional skills. The fact that not only teachers have been trained in this programme and that other supporting staff members were involved made the programme more effective.
- Surveying staff members before implementation highlighted the need for increased awareness about SEL, its benefits, and how it can positively impact various aspects of life, including academic achievement, mental well-being, and healthy behaviour. Teachers' concerns indicated challenges in allocating time for acquiring and implementing SEL strategies alongside existing responsibilities, highlighting the need for guidance in this area and reflecting apprehensions about aligning SEL with current educational demands.
- The results of surveying teachers after implementation expected the programme to have a positive impact on creating a safe and secure environment for pupils' learning which highlights the programme's effectiveness in improving teacher-pupil connections. SEL will play a significant role in fostering understanding, empathy, and open dialogue in the classroom.
- The focus group's overall feedback indicates that while the initial setup and intermittent activities are important, the primary area for improvement lies in time allocation to ensure the SEL programme's effectiveness and integration into daily school life.



Conclusion

To unify school culture through professional development, the programme implemented needs to be levelled according to staff background, it also needs to include all staff members, not only teachers, to promote a unified culture.

Choosing a topic for professional development should consider the needs of teachers and pupils to choose the topic with the highest possible impact on the context and culture of the school.

The topic of social and emotional learning will highly touch staff members' and pupils' daily school life, promoting an enhanced school culture, where staff members and pupils are more aware of themselves, can manage their actions, and build better relationships within their context.

The enhanced healthy learning environment will affect pupils' learning and reflect on academic results.

Future actions

Integrate SEL more broadly through PLCs:

Ensure SEL principles are incorporated across all subjects and grade levels, fostering a more holistic approach. Grade level teachers to meet and collaborate through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to share ideas and strategies of implementation.

Broaden resource allocation: Include more diverse and interactive resources, such as SEL and well-being textbooks, online platforms, and real-life scenario kits. Allocate the necessary time in daily school life for implementation.

Utilise feedback effectively and compile case studies:

Establish a more robust and ongoing evaluation system for collecting and implementing feedback from instructors to continually adapt and improve the SEL programme and compile case studies from different departments showcasing cultural values.

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The topic of social and emotional learning will touch staff members' and pupils' daily school life, promoting an enhanced school culture, where staff members and pupils are more aware of themselves, can manage their actions, and build better relationships within their context.