

# The Influence of Culture on Early Childhood Education Curriculum in the UAE

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**Najwa Alhosani** (نجوى الحوسني)

United Arab Emirates University

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article provides an overview of how childhood curriculum in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is designed to serve cultural values.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** The framework of kindergarten curriculum adopts the uniqueness of children laying the foundation for their cultural identity. This paper provides a description of how this is achieved through a case study of the kindergarten curriculum in the UAE.

**Findings:** The core elements of Emirati culture are delivered in the early childhood education (ECE) curriculum, which is influenced by global practices. Islamic studies is a key component in the Emirati kindergarten curriculum, which is designed to help children practice principles of religion, with the main Islamic values of gratitude and charity as aspects that are deeply embedded. Similarly, through social studies, children learn about Emirati heritage and culture. In addition to exposure to world communities, the learning experience engages children in authentic stories that relate to their personal lives, families, and community to build national awareness.

**Originality/Value:** This paper sheds light on ECE in the UAE. Although the topic is of interest to UAE policymakers and educators and the global audience interested in UAE education, there is no study to the researcher's best knowledge that has examined the influence of the UAE culture on ECE curriculum.

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## Corresponding author:

Najwa Alhosani, Department of Curriculum & Instruction, College of Education, United Arab Emirates University, United Arab Emirates.

Email: n.alhosani@uaeu.ac.ae



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## Keywords

Cultural influences, curriculum, early childhood education, islamic values, national identity, united arab emirates

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## Education in the UAE

### *Education system*

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is located in the Arabian Gulf and is made up of seven Emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Sharjah, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah, and Ras Al Khaimah. In 1971, under the direction of the late leader H.H. Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emirates became unified, forming, what we now know as, the UAE. The population of the UAE is currently approaching ten million (Global Median Insights, Dubai, 2021), and the country is in a relatively unique position of the majority of the population being non-UAE nationals, with expats making up 89% of the population. The population of the UAE is relatively young in age, with a median of 33.50 years, and, in fact, 24% of the population are under the age of 18 (Global Median Insights, Dubai, 2021). To cater for this large proportion of the population, the UAE simultaneously operates two large educational systems. Schools in the UAE can be divided into government schools, which provide education, free of charge, for UAE nationals, and private schools, which are fee paying and open to both expatriates and UAE nationals. The Ministry of Education (MOE) administers the educational affairs in the UAE, with full management of the government schools in the seven emirates forming a unified structure, which all follow the same curriculum. Private schools, on the other hand, are managed by local authorities, such as the Abu Dhabi Education and Knowledge Department (ADEK) in Abu Dhabi and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in Dubai, which work with the guidelines of the MOE (UAE Government Portal, 2021). These private schools offer a diverse range of curriculums, for example, British, American, and Indian, to reflect the needs of the expatriate populations.

Education is a key priority in the UAE, and the education system has undergone many improvements and restructuring in recent years. Education is firmly positioned as the foundation for the development of the abilities and potential of young people, leading to the prosperity of the nation. There is a high level of investment in education from the government to support the growth of children to enable them to play an active and participatory role in the future of the UAE. This is overseen by the MOE and is central to national agendas such as Vision 2021 (UAE Vision 2021, 2018c). Laying the foundation to work toward the aspired outcomes is achieved by incorporating the values of Vision 2021 into the objectives, methods, content, resources, and assessment of teaching and learning. These very values have their core in the culture of the nation.

### **Educational reform**

The reforms in the education system reflect the UAE's continuous efforts to arrive at a world-class level of education. Vision 2021 states that "the UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda emphasizes the development of a first-rate education system, which will require a complete transformation of the current education system and teaching methods" (UAE Vision 2021, 2018b). There is a high level of importance placed on culture and religion within this vision, with the government noting that one of the vision's goals is to "promote(s) an inclusive environment that integrates all segments of society while preserving the UAE's unique culture, heritage and traditions and reinforces social and family cohesion" (UAE Vision 2021, 2018a). Therefore, these strands can be tied together through the country's educational system as it seeks to build active participants in the future of the nation. The balance between reinforcing the cultural identity and achieving a level of excellence globally is a goal that the nation has been and is working to achieve (Matsumoto, 2019). Following the future envisioned by the founder of the nation, the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, great consideration has been given to the field of education as one of the pillars for the development of the UAE. Since the UAE was founded, in 1971, there has been a focus on building educational infrastructure and engaging with initiatives, which are aimed at increasing the standing of education and encouraging the local population to reach their academic potential (MOE, 2021a). The improvements to curriculum design and teacher education have grown exponentially, and the focus has shifted to setting of long-term aspirational goals in line with the vision of the nation (Dickson, 2012). These goals do not negate culture, but rather bring culture and curriculum to the forefront and seek to develop the curriculum whilst incorporating the local culture.

### **Early childhood education (ECE) in the UAE**

The importance of development during the years from birth to the age of five is well established in the literature, and advancements during these years in the areas of physical development, cognition, language, and the social-emotional domain, alongside skills of self-regulation, set the foundations for later development to adulthood and beyond (Trawick-Smith, 2014). The personal experiences that a child is exposed to early in life determines her/his emotional, social, cognitive, language, and physical development, as demonstrated in longitudinal work by Melhuish et al. (2015), examining the long-term effects of ECE and care. Socio-emotional learning in school improves a child's competencies with regards to social and emotional development, as well as helping with "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (Carroll et al., 2020). It also helps children form affective awareness and establish sustained positive relationships with others (Nutbrown, 2011). Similarly, much research has demonstrated the importance of quality early childhood educational provision and the positive impact that this can have on

educational achievement throughout the educational career (Melhuish et al., 2015; Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Research shows that high-quality educational provision is essential to maximize positive outcomes in education, with a positive first start to school setting the tone throughout the rest of the school career. Factors influencing this have been investigated in the UAE (Takriti, 2019; Takriti et al., 2019) as well as internationally (Hugo et al., 2018). Therefore, ECE can be seen to be pivotal to the education system of any country and is vital not only for academic achievement but also the holistic development of the child.

### *Government initiatives*

Within the UAE, the term “early childhood” covers the “Preschool stage (which) includes any form of education and organized care for children from birth until the age of 6” (MOE., n.d.a). The framework of the “Emirati School” describes the ideal start for every child, which can be provided through the provision of high-quality education and care, viewed as part of a national strategy (MOE, 2019b). Within this, early childhood development is expressed as a comprehensive and holistic process that is concerned with all developmental domains within an ecological and temporal system. As an integral component of this, collaboration with families, communities, and other institutions is seen as key (MOE, 2018b).

The “Emirati School” project placed high emphasis on high-quality educational provision in the early years. Education in the early childhood period is characterized by a curriculum content that is directly related to the child’s environment. The content is designed and delivered to children with an aim to develop their understanding of themselves, the significant people in their lives, and the community in which they live (Gerver, 2010). The culture as a defining element of the community’s traditions and lifestyle is thus an integral part of the early childhood curriculum. Bruner (1996) adds that “learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting” and Fleer and Richardson (2004) argue that children can be better assessed in educational settings when the surrounding culture is taken into account. However, the policies of curriculum development are affected by international trends and market demands, and thus the inclusion of cultural elements in the curriculum targeting Emirati children is restricted due to various factors (Baker, 2018). Ridge et al. (2017) state that the import of standards from foreign education systems and the reliance on consultation from expatriate experts can be lacking consideration for the Emirati context in certain domains. Such factors have had an impact on the cultural dimension of educational reforms in the UAE.

### *Early childhood entities*

In recent years, a number of government organizations in the area of early childhood development and care have been established, including the Abu Dhabi Childhood Authority, Dubai Early

Childhood Development Centre (DECDC), and the Early Childhood Learning Center (ECLC) of Zayed University. All these seek to lay a strong foundation within the field of early childhood, whilst providing the best possible care within culturally appropriate contexts.

The government entity of the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority (ECA) was established in 2019, to provide conditions for optimal development for all children in the Emirate. An ecological, community-based philosophy is central, with the ECA working to empower families and communities in adopting a child-centered and child-supportive mindset to meet the needs of children and maximize developmental outcomes (Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, 2020). Therefore, by equipping families and communities, culture is integrated and utilized in ECE.

In Dubai, the DECDC aims to ensure the provision of early intervention for children up to six years old, where necessary, that is delivered in a family-centered manner, in collaboration with community organizations (The Community Development Authority, UAE, 2021). The center strives to educate and support families and communities of children with special educational needs. This is a community focused initiative on the part of the UAE government, in which families are valued as a source of input in the early development of the child.

The ECLC at Zayed University serves as an example of how a child education and care facility can best interface with a higher education institution informed by faculty who are experts in the field (Zayed University, 2021). The ECLC adds another dimension to its societal contribution by organizing workshops to raise awareness and educate families and the local community about issues and topics that concern the welfare of young children (Dillon, 2019; Zayed University, 2021).

## **Serving the culture: Unique role of ECE curriculum in the UAE**

### *The relationship between curriculum and culture*

A major and defining component of any educational system is the curriculum, which is an umbrella under which falls the educational experiences provided for a learner. Ross (2000) defines curriculum as “a definition of what is to be learned.” Another definition is “a school’s curriculum consists of all those activities designed or encouraged within its organizational framework to promote the intellectual personal, social and physical development of its pupils. It includes not only the formal program of lessons, but also the ‘informal’ program of so-called extracurricular activities as well as all those features which produce the school’s ‘ethos,’ such as the quality of relationships, the concern for equality of opportunity, the values exemplified in the way the school sets about its task and the way in which it is organized and managed” (The Department of Education and Science, UK, 1985). Despite being an older definition, it is an explanation that still stands today in the modern school of the UAE. First and foremost, culture can be seen as the source of the “hidden curriculum,” that is, the experiences that are related to learning but are not explicitly manifested in the description of the curriculum (Reimers & Chung, 2016). According to Ross (2005),

transmitting knowledge and learning from students' culture can sometimes overpower learning from the intended outcomes that were set by the schooling system itself. Culture is a vital domain in a human's life and has been increasingly perceived as a major element in the processes of designing education and interpreting social and educational issues. Jerome Bruner's interest in discovering the effect of culture on education was elicited by looking at the effect of poverty and racism on students' mental development (Moore, 2003). Bruner reaches a conclusion that one's culture profoundly affects learning and that cultural practices and learning styles are related. Bruner states that "education is not an island but part of a continent of culture" (Bruner, 1996) and that one's culture profoundly affects learning. Culture has also been shown to have influences on how children play (Fleer & Richardson, 2004). Bruner, in his book entitled *The Culture of Education*, highlights the cultural-psychological perspective on education. He points to the fact that education needs to be considered within the context it is situated. Culture helps individuals make meaning of their surroundings and could be a lens through which knowledge is seen (Bruner, 1996). All knowledge is, therefore, filtered through an individual's culture before an understanding is reached (Bruner, 1996). In addition, many scholars have noted that culture is an important element in teaching a second language (Ali et al., 2015; Oxford & Gkonou, 2018; Piasecka, 2011), which is another important factor that contributed to ECE within the UAE.

Culture is the theme that a society holds as a representation of its core traits and values, alongside its tangible and intangible prospects. Thus, the civilizational value and all that pertains to it, in terms of the beliefs, concepts, ethics, and attitudes, is represented by the culture (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). Bruner (1996) says it is "culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways." Therefore, as culture and curriculum interact, it is at this point that children begin to make their own meanings. According to Pekarsky (1998), genetics, early childhood experiences, and surrounding culture are the three critical variables that shape the moral character of human beings. By focusing on the third variable, which is the surrounding culture, our pre-existing morals and values as adults adapt to the surrounding culture. Children, on the other hand, adapt those values, which they are in close proximity to, as their own because they do not have pre-existing ones (Miller, 2001). Pekarsky (1998) thus suggests that we can only maintain a commitment to certain values and morals if the culture surrounding us supports them as desirable social norms, thereby encouraging positive behavior patterns. This, however, leads to the suggestion that if there were no cultural values to guide the population, people would act in a self-serving way, often in ways considered reprehensible by others. Bruner (1996) adds that children are keen to adopt and imitate what they see around them. This provides a strong moral justification for focusing on the cultural values that surround children and are communicated to them. In practical terms, for any government looking to preserve cultural values, the obvious target is the education system. Children spend the majority of their time during the week in

school environments, and this is a valuable opportunity to reinforce desirable cultural values in children and communities. Yang and Li (2018) consider ECE in both the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong SAR. They find that the kindergartens all had commonalities due to the impact a shared culture had in influencing educational practice. Teachers play an important role in teaching and influencing the traditional values in the classrooms. Therefore, the position of teachers in classrooms cannot be underestimated when considering the transfer of cultural ideals. Pekarsky (1998) highlights the need for re-examining the school ethos and the impact of teachers as role models, and in China, the teacher is often seen as a role model of traditional values and moral development (Choy, 2017).

### *The Arab culture and curriculum in Arab countries*

The Arabic culture is a unique and highly complex one. The Islamic religion is the dominant source of beliefs, values, and practices in the majority of Arab countries. Within the social practices of the Arab societies, there is an evident commitment to behavioral principles and, being collectivist in nature, a perception of the good of the group rather than the individual's desire, which is evident in all domains of life (Hammoud, 2011; Klein et al., 2009). Education, as a key element in people's lives, reflects, affects, and interacts with the variables of the Arabic culture. Tabari (2014) states that the challenges of the spread of international schools, which adopt foreign curricula, and the existence of non-Arab expat teachers add to needed efforts by the government to strengthen cultural values within the education system. Although this phenomenon of globalizing education is discussed in many countries around the world, the special state of the UAE as a country that is economically advanced and is increasingly present at the international levels in numerous domains adds to the complexity of the state of culture and education (Baker, 2018).

One of the ways in which culture is integrated in the curriculum is through the language of delivery. The UAE government recognizes that the teaching of the Arabic language is an important priority (Thomure, 2019). In Arab countries, the language of instruction is not limited to Arabic, with English and French also being used in some schools and, more commonly, for certain subjects such as those in the STEM field, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (Gobert, 2019; Loo & Magaziner, 2017; Roux, 2017). Because language is part of the culture, using other languages in Arab countries has raised a debate surrounding whether the use of languages other than Arabic in education has negatively impacted the transmission of the Arab culture (Hopkyns, 2017). Advocates of using English as a medium of instruction were part of a study in Saudi Arabia that showed a generally positive attitude about using English as a main language in private schools because of its importance as an international language (Al-Qahtani & Al-Zumor, 2016). Aljohani's (2016) study shows that, for Arabic native speakers, there was no relation between

using English as a medium of instruction and students' performance in Arabic. On the contrary, another study highlights that as students increased fluency in English, this resulted in a weakening in fluency of the Arabic language, which in result threatens the cultural identity (Belhiah & Al-Hussien, 2016). Within the UAE Vision 2021, as well as focusing on education, health care, and infrastructure, one of the six national priorities is "cohesive society and preserved identity," which states that "The UAE's distinct culture will remain founded on progressive and moderate Islamic values and endowed with a rich Arabic language, to proudly celebrate Emirati traditions and heritage while reinforcing national identity" (UAE Vision 2021, 2018d).

Research studies show that the Islamic belief has its print on curriculum in Arab countries. This transcends Islamic Studies as a subject area and is focused on the integration of Islamic ideas and values in other subjects as well. For instance, a study by Al-Hooli and Al-Shammari (2009) shows that subject content in moral studies in Kuwait contained lessons that are directly connected to the Islamic belief system, such as the concept of reward for good actions and punishment for bad behavior by God. Another study by BouJaoude and Nouredine (2020), which examines the content of science textbooks in eight Arab countries, finds that in six of these countries, scientific textbooks evidently referred to Islamic culture, that is, the inclusion of some verses of the Holy Book, *The Quran*, in relation to the scientific topics. The rationale behind it was explained as a tool to expand students' scientific thinking and to consider the religious context in science (BouJaoude & Nouredine, 2020). Bruner (1996) also points out that the culture places certain "demands" upon the education system, and in the case of the UAE, there needs to be consideration toward the religious aspect of culture and education, which the UAE holds in high regard.

### *ECE curriculum in the UAE culture*

The curriculum of kindergartens, which is concerned with the education of children aged 4–6, encompasses nine subject areas such as Arabic literacy, English literacy, Islamic studies, social studies, math, science, visual arts, computer sciences, and health and physical education (MOE, 2019a). The framework sets out a curriculum in which the child is the center of teaching and learning, that is, establishing all the elements in accordance with the child's needs, abilities, learning styles, and prior knowledge. In addition, children's safety, health, well-being, and learning are the concerns with the greatest importance (MOE, 2018b).

Following the guidelines of conduct in the UAE as stated in UAE Vision 2021 (2018c), the national agenda (The Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2021), the educational policy of the UAE (MOE, 2019a), the vision and mission of the MOE (2021b), and the document of Conduct and Ethics of the Emirati Citizen (The Federal Authority for Government Human Resources, n.d.), specific skills have been incorporated into the curriculum to fulfill the desires of the rulers. Skills such as thinking strategies and problem-solving, creativity, skills in citizenship and social responsibility,



expertise in information and communication technology, and workplace skills such as collaboration are included (MOE, 2019b).

The UAE government calls for ECE to be “holistic” and “integrated” in order to achieve learning goals, through children being active participators in their learning (MOE, n.d.b). The acquisition of skills should be typically aligned with the characteristics of children and occur when a safe and motivating environment is provided. The topics of the curriculum are centered around science as it is considered the most relevant subject area to the uniqueness of children’s tangible way of learning, whereas children’s development of language skills is manifested in and facilitated through the daily use of both Arabic and English languages in classroom activities and through an emphasis on reading (MOE, 2019a).

“The Emirati School” model recognizes that both parents and the local community are vital contributors to both preschool and kindergarten education within the UAE (MOE, n.d.b), leading to a holistic approach to ECE. The importance of families and communities can be linked to an ecological systems approach, such as that postulated by Bronfenbrenner (1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Within an ecological systems approach, each child is seen as uniquely individual, being both an actor upon their environment and being acted upon by it.

### *The cultural values and their implementations in the Emirati kindergarten curriculum*

The framework of the kindergarten curriculum adopts the idea of the uniqueness of children as individuals who are characterized with exceptional capabilities and learning attitudes. Among the priorities of the kindergarten curriculum is laying the foundation of the cultural, Islamic, and national identity of children (MOE, 2019b). The special elements of the Emirati culture are at the core of the early childhood progressive curriculum, which is influenced by excellent global practices (MOE, 2018a). In Hong Kong SAR, Yang and Li (2022) note that the local culture has a strong effect upon the early childhood curriculum. They find that strong Chinese principles influenced how children were taught and how the curriculum was developed and adapted to fit with the cultural values. Yang and Li (2022) highlight how the early years practitioners were able to incorporate both traditional Chinese values alongside a variety of curricular approaches. This incorporation of traditional values alongside modern ideas can also be seen in ECE within the UAE.

One of the key components in which this is clearly demonstrated, within the Emirati kindergartens, is Islamic studies. Fostering the principles and practices of faith is the aim of incorporating learning experiences where children learn about Allah, the Prophet Mohamad (Peace be Upon Him), the pillars of Islam, the worship practices of praying and fasting, and the rituals of the Islamic holidays. Children also learn the meaning of the main Islamic values, such as gratitude, patience, charity, and the virtue of giving. The domains of the Islamic studies’ curriculum include the Quran, Hadith, doctrine of faith, values, morals of Islam, worship, and the Prophet’s

life. Affiliation and identity are also among the domains of the Islamic studies' learning content (MOE, 2018a).

Similarly, the curriculum of social studies includes national education where children learn about the Emirati heritage and culture. It provides children with exposure to realistic learning experiences and engages them in authentic stories that relate to their personal lives, families, feelings, and community to build their national awareness (MOE, 2019b).

Teaching in the Emirati kindergartens is regulated by MOE (2018a) guidelines that aim to focus on nurturing whole child development through interactive learning experiences that are directed by the teacher in a developmentally appropriate environment. Children are given plenty of opportunities to construct knowledge, by engaging in meaningful play-based activity, where the teacher fosters and facilitates learning. The curriculum of early childhood aims to create a positive approach to learning among children. Such an approach is believed to lead to the ability to pursue life-long learning where children deal with the social and personal challenges with creativity and flexibility (MOE, 2019b).

In addition to the inclusion of instructional content that directly constructs children's cultural foundations in the subject areas of Islamic studies and social studies, practicing culturally approved behavior is encouraged in other ways in Emirati kindergartens, such as through the incorporation of traditional games and encouraging links with grandparents (MOE, 2018a). This knowledge is paramount for young children as they adopt these behaviors as their own, as culture denotes the "roles people play and the respect these are accorded" (Bruner, 1996); therefore, the development of culturally approved behaviors is important. Within Arabic literacy experiences, for example, the vocabulary and expressions that teachers include are derived from the local culture and often bring about conversations with children to reinforce their cultural awareness. Reading is another key element in the daily teaching of Arabic language and culture, that is, the selection of storybooks and digital stories that put words and ideas into contexts that young learners like and easily relate to (MOE, 2018a). The structure of the kindergarten day, which is directed by the MOE, includes a time when the teacher sits with children to talk about the thematic unit, reflecting on their learning and reading aloud a story that supports learning the desired content (MOE, 2019b). Furthermore, the early childhood classroom is equipped with a reading corner in which children are encouraged to read storybooks individually or with an adult or classmate or to listen to an audio book. Other learning corners such as the art corner, the writing corner, and the drama corner incorporate activities that integrate cultural beliefs and values that children learn as they interact with the tangible materials and with their peers.

The importance of daily discussions and informal instructions that teachers have with children on a variety of topics is not to be underestimated when conveying culture and national values. These could include discussions around cleanness, appearance, self-care, committing to morals, speaking to adults, behaving with parents, the treatment of siblings, and keeping good relations with

relatives. Such topics are intertwined in the teaching and learning materials as well as mindful practices of teachers, and they are considered a key cultural element in the curriculum of Emirati kindergartens and are described as “the hidden curriculum” (Ross, 2000).

## Conclusion

The United Arab Emirates is a modern, global society, which holds its traditions and culture in high esteem. Culture and education are inextricably linked, and it is clear within the UAE that the culture and heritage of the nation have gone some way to shape the modern ECE curriculum, which the UAE has today. This article has demonstrated how the childhood curriculum in the United Arab Emirates is shaped and designed to serve cultural values. There are clearly many examples of how the childhood curriculum in the United Arab Emirates is placing Emirati cultural ideals as building blocks for the Early Childhood curriculum, whilst aligning with the visions of the nation’s leaders. There are various elements of the Emirati culture at the core of the progressive early childhood curriculum, which is influenced by excellent global practices as well as Islamic principles. Through Social Studies and Islamic studies, foundations are laid in early childhood to build cultural values and have these concepts as central aspects of early education. Both English and Arabic are used in the classroom to allow children to develop confidence and skills in both languages. Early childhood entities within the UAE have demonstrated the desire to involve parents in education in early childhood, as well as seeing the community as a vital resource in the early years to allow the holistic development of the child. This paper sheds light on the ECE in the UAE, which has been part of a huge educational reform that has been undertaken in recent years. Although the topic is within the interests of UAE policymakers, educators, and teachers, there is no study, to the best knowledge of the researcher, that has examined the influence of the UAE culture on ECE curriculum.

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