

## **Teachers' Perceptions of Diversity and “Others” in United Arab Emirates (UAE) Schools**

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## **Teachers' Perceptions of Diversity and "Others" in United Arab Emirates (UAE) Schools**

This paper seeks to examine and unpack cultural diversity and 'Others' in United Arab Emirates schools through the lens of teachers and school leaders as Culturally Responsive Teachers (CRT). They discursively construct schools, government or private, as not just heterogeneous because of students of Emirati and non-Emirati origins, but as very diverse along the overlapping lines of language, race and ethnicities, and socio-economic status. Students come to school with different varieties of Arabic but are also privileged or Othered depending on their proficiency in Arabic and English. Biliterate and biracial students are discursively constructed as experiencing marginalization because of their association with non-Emirati identities. Students are also socioeconomically differentiated, even those who are of Emirati identities but without citizenship status. For CRT to be genuinely effective and transformative, it is imperative for teachers to locate understandings of diversity and Others within specific configurations of language use, race and ethnicity and socio-economic status. CRT should not simply rely on simple and unhelpful dichotomies such as the 'dominant' Emirati students and the non-Emirati students as 'Others'. CRT will succeed if teachers look at students as individuals with unique configurations of diversity, with many of them experiencing multiple layers of Othering.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, culturally responsive pedagogies in the UAE, postgraduate education in the UAE, culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy

For the past two decades, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has animated and shaped discourses related to multicultural (Banks, 2015; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006) and inclusive education (Trainor & Bal, 2014; Schiuchetti, 2017). Educational institutions are expected to be more culturally responsive not just in teaching but in research endeavors (Alsharari, 2018). Johnson (2011) contended that cultural competence is achieved by teachers facilitating the development of both positive ethnic and cultural identities, and a critical consciousness that gives space for the critique of social inequities. Educators and school leaders are mandated to make the school a safe

space to allow students to interact with each other and develop a collective identity that is not marked by divisions in socioeconomic stratification or influenced by ethnic and identity-based policies (Stephenson & Rajendram, 2019). In addition, teachers who ascribe to CRP believe that:

.. all students are capable of success, see their pedagogy as evolving, believe that they are part of the larger community, see teaching as a way to give back to the community and believe that instruction includes the mining of knowledge... encourage students to learn collaboratively with responsibility for *others*.  
(Johnson, 2011, p. 12, italics ours).

In this paper, we examine how teachers and school leaders in the United Arab Emirates (who attend a doctoral program at a higher educational institution and taught CRP in their course module) perceive cultural diversity and ‘Others’ in United Arab Emirates (UAE) schools.

While it can be argued that teachers’ perceptions of cultural diversity and the ‘Others’ are not necessarily equated with their competencies or practices of CRP, research indicates how teachers’ perceptions of ‘Others’ in the classroom can potentially influence (or devalue, for that matter) embracive and culturally responsive practices (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; author, 2021). In essence, the ‘Others’ are marginalized individuals and communities whose cultures and ideologies have been largely excluded (Tshida et al., 2014, p. 28) from classrooms, history, literature, and popular discourse, because of the privileged positioning of largely White-centric, English-speaking, middle-class, and heteronormative identities and worldviews (Fylkesnes, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)**

Banks (2015) and Gay (2015) refer to culturally responsive pedagogy as an “outgrowth of multicultural education” (Gay, 2015, p. 124) especially since schools are now perceived as the primary space for interethnic contact and where interethnic relationships are formed (Schwarzenthal et al., 2018). Although the concept behind it is not really new, the term CRP can be traced to Ladson-Billings’ (1995) landmark article which argued the significance of making teaching and learning culturally relevant to the increasingly diverse student demographics of the changing educational landscape around the world. Thus, culturally responsive teachers are expected to possess skills that enable them to efficiently integrate knowledge of their students’ cultures into the curriculum (Habli, 2015; OECD, 2020), and to respond to students’ individual academic needs (Kumar et al., 2019). Competence may also be manifested in the teachers’ ability to communicate effectively, using appropriate language and respectful body language (Habli, 2015), while addressing the needs of linguistically diverse learners (OECD, 2020).

There are scholars (see Paris & Alim, 2014), however, who seek to “shift the term, stance, and practice” that CRP is foregrounded on, to that of “more explicitly pluralist outcomes” (p. 87) through culturally-sustaining pedagogy (CSP). The objective of CSP is to reframe conversations by focusing on “sustaining pluralism through education to challenges of social justice and change in ways that previous iterations of asset pedagogies did not” (p. 88). In other words, there is a need to acknowledge and reflect the highly dynamic and constantly evolving recombinations of cultural and linguistic repertoires brought by the students in the classroom. These repertoires are not static entities but are, in fact, ever-changing forces and experience which thus complicate our understanding of teacher and student identities, relations of power and

cultural knowledge. Culturally responsive practices must sustain and affirm, but not essentialize and stereotype, all forms of difference in the classroom.

Hence, it becomes even more important to understand how cultural diversity and CRP are conceptualized from outside Western contexts, given how “work in this area outside the USA is only just beginning to gain traction” (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 25). Moreover, there exists an implicit, unquestioned understanding of cultural diversity as perceived exclusively from the lens of Whiteness (author, 2021), resulting in a ‘racialized Other’ binary oppositional construct representing a homogenized conceptualization of non-White cultural groups. This necessarily requires a shifting of the “White gaze” in the understanding of CRP. As pointed out by Paris and Alim (2014, p. 86): “What would our pedagogies look like if this gaze weren’t the dominant one? What would liberating ourselves from this gaze and the educational expectations it forwards mean for our abilities to envision new forms of teaching and learning?” (p. 86). As pointed out in a study conducted in the UAE (Alsharari, 2017), there is a need to “challenge such notions as ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity’ which are themselves ideological concepts” (p. 376). This paper shifts the ‘gaze’ of cultural diversity by surfacing teachers’ perceptions of diversity and otherness in the UAE.

### **Cultural Diversity in UAE**

Aside from being relatively an under-researched context when it comes to CRP, the UAE presents itself as an ideal country to examine CRP given the recent report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020) citing the country as having “the largest populations of immigrant students of all the countries assessed in PISA 2018” (p. 7). This is, in part, due to the temporary or permanent movement of labour migrants to the UAE and other countries in the Middle East. The International Organization for Migration (2020) noted that the stable and continued rise

of the economy made UAE and its neighboring countries an increasingly attractive place for so-called 'skilled' workers and professionals to migrate with their families. As of 2018, 89% of the total population of the UAE consist of immigrants or foreign-born nationals (Global Media Insight [GMI], 2018) who are further divided across occupational status, resulting in a marked distinction among foreign workers across national or ethnic lines (Stephenson & Rajendram, 2019). This is evident with skilled workers from OECD countries working in fields related to "oil and gas, education, finance and investment sectors" (Malit Jr and Al Youha, 2013, p. 1) whereas the low-income migrants work as laborers or domestic helpers.

This reliance on expatriate labour is not always supported by UAE nationals who feel that these different lifestyles "pose a threat to traditional Emirati values and customs" (Crabtree, 2010, p. 93). This is also reflected in policy campaigns on Emiratisation, prioritizing the employment of Emirati national citizens, resulting in an increase to 36% of teachers in state schools being Emirati citizens (Gallagher, 2019). However, it is important to point out that only 0.3% of teachers in private schools are national citizens (Statistics Center of Abu Dhabi, 2017). Thus, there is a disparity in the educational landscapes of government and private schools in the UAE when it comes to the ethnic or racial profiles of both students and teachers. There is also the evident tension between the drive for globalization and appreciation of diversity on the one hand, and the fierce preservation of local norms and cultural identity on the other. This refers essentially to the need for UAE to manage "continuity versus change such as in preserving elements of traditional society while embracing modernization" (Kirk & Napier, 2009, p. 134).

Given this conflicted landscape, this paper explores in greater depth how expatriate and local teachers and school leaders who are pursuing their doctoral degree

in the UAE articulate notions of diversity and “Otherness” in schools in UAE, particularly the way respondents challenge the notions of homogeneity within one’s own culture.

### ***The ‘Problem’ of Cultural Diversity in UAE Schools***

The UAE, described to be a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious society, owing to the presence of a very large transient community (Al Qasimi, 2017) has English, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, and Tagalog among the many widely spoken languages (Lacina et al., 2010). As of 2018, the population estimate is at 9.54 million with only 11% comprising Emirati citizens (GMI, 2018). Expatriate workers form the large majority of the population with no channels for naturalization (Stephenson & Rajendram, 2019) until recently when the UAE cabinet announced the opening of citizenship for investors, scientists, professionals, and creative talents such as intellectuals and artists, along with their families (Mansoor, 2021) in the efforts to transition to a knowledge-based economy. For this transition to be successful, students are expected to be global and multicultural learners who are not only comfortable with their own culture but are also able to encompass diverse learning processes that enhance creativity and innovation (Hamdan Alghamdi, 2014). Hence, this recent governmental initiative constitutes a bold and unprecedented move in the UAE given the prevailing national discourse on how the Emirati’s cultural identity would diminish, being a minority in their own country, if expatriates gained citizenship (Stephenson & Rajendram, 2019).

In government schools, Emirati citizens still comprise the majority (around 80%) of students (Gallagher, 2019). This contributes to most beginning teachers’ views that “there isn’t much diversity in [Emirati] schools” (Ibrahim, 2012, p. 546). However, Ibrahim (2012) pointed out that expatriate pupils form a noticeable percentage of

student body in government schools - as many as 20% (Gallagher, 2019) - owing to their lower fees in comparison with most private schools. Moreover, there is an increasing number of Emirati national citizens, who have traditionally attended state schools, now attending private schools (Arabian Business, 2017) that offer an array of curricula "including American, Australian, British, Canadian, French, German, Indian, Pakistani, and international hybrids of these" (Gallagher, 2019, p. 8). This changes the educational landscape of the UAE considerably. Yet, Ibrahim (2012) observed that "Emirati teachers still carry the legacy of a past education system in which government schools were only intended for nationals of the UAE. The dilemma is that most teachers in the UAE think that they should teach only to the *majority* group of pupils" (p. 548, italics supplied).

Moreover, there is the prevailing assumption that the "majority" is essentially a homogenous group, not taking into account the possible diversity in socio-economic status, linguistic patterns and practices, and abilities or special educational needs among the students. Gay (2018) observed that teachers often need to "look closely to see *individual differences within ethnic and cultural groups*" (p. 253, italics as original). Hence, there is a need to examine teachers' articulated views on cultural diversity because as pointed out by Gay (2018), these personal beliefs "drive instructional behaviors. If teachers have positive beliefs about ethnic and cultural diversity, they will act in accordance with them, and vice versa" (p. 250).

### **Context of the Study**

The study is based on a successful course module offered to PhD students enrolled in the College of Education of a UAE university (obtaining an overall 4.68 out of 5.0 score in the Course Evaluation and a 4.64 out of 5.0 score in the Instructor Evaluation by students – higher than the department, college, and university mean scores). The course



*Teaching Learners with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds* is a 15-week, 45-hour teacher training module designed to prepare doctoral students for the diversity of students they will encounter in classrooms, schools, and communities. Participants are taught CRP and ways to design and deliver strategies to work more effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse learners in educational settings in their first semester in the program. The course learning outcomes include evaluating components of prejudice and an exploration of the impact of disability, class, gender, religion and culture of individual students on teaching and learning – among others. The course module also seeks to deconstruct socio-political power relationships and exploring macro historical and social forces that helped establish relations of dominance and subordination between groups of people and institutionalized inequities that impact the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

## **Method**

### ***Research Participants***

There were eleven students enrolled in the PhD course. Ten out of the 11 consented to be part of the study one year after the course module was completed and participated in the online survey questionnaire. Nine out of the ten took part in focus group interviews facilitated by the lead researcher and a Co-PI. The participants are no longer students of the research team at the time that the research study was initiated and had no forthcoming course modules under the faculty members who are part of the research team. Three out of the ten participants specialize in Language and Literacy, three in Special Education, two students in Leadership and Policy Studies in Education, and two in Mathematics Education. The participants consented to participate in this study as stipulated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approved by the

University's ethics board. They were informed that their participation is voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any time.

The mean age of the PhD participant respondents in the study is 33.3 (n = 10), with a range of 30 to 48 years of age. The participants had an average of 6 years experience teaching different types of students across Cycles 1-3 (Grade 1 to 12) in the UAE, higher educational institutions, international students, and volunteer-teaching-role for adults who are English-language learners in the UAE. The range of teaching experience is from three months (volunteer work) to 18 years of teaching experience.

### ***Research Question***

The study focuses on answering the research question: How do teachers and school leaders characterize student diversity and 'Otherness' in UAE classrooms? There is a need to unpack deep-rooted and changing perceptions on diversity which are embedded in systems of thought which, in turn, shape our professional practices and identities. Addressing this question hopefully will provide more textured understanding of both the prevalent and transforming perceptions embedded in their work as Culturally Responsive Teachers.

### ***Focus Group Interviews***

Nine out of ten respondents consented to be interviewed for the study. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with the participants' consent for transcription purposes. There were three students who participated in the first focus group interview which lasted for 57 minutes. Three students participated in the second focus group interview which lasted for 62 minutes. Two students joined the third focus group interview with two FGD facilitators and lasted for 56 minutes. Only one student was able to join the fourth interview (the other student cancelled on the scheduled day itself) with the interview lasting for 63 minutes. The respondents were essentially asked

about their background in teaching and whether the classrooms they taught were diverse and to explain their responses, and follow-up questions were asked based on responses given by the participants.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis***

The FGD transcripts were sent by email to the participants with follow-up questions for missing information and clarification. Respondents were given a week to check the accuracy and validity of the transcripts and all nine respondents elaborated on their responses as requested within the time frame provided.

The research team members were provided the validated transcripts for repeated close reading as part of the *preliminary exploratory analysis* in qualitative research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). This entails openly coding the transcripts for recurring key words or phrases representing the most elemental unit of meaning such as a thought, feeling or action (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) pertaining to *diversity and Others*.

The next phase involved the development of preliminary codes or themes to describe and develop a more general picture of the data, including subcategories or themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021), for example *diversity and Others in language* and *diversity and others in race and ethnicities* to cite a few. The third phase entailed the copying and pasting of specific interview segments that fit said subcategories or themes for validation and modification from the entire research team. This requires an iterative process of frequently going back and forth across the identified recurrent themes and raw transcripts until a consensus is formed among all team members, a point of saturation is reached regarding identified themes, and subcategories are merged to reduce overlap and redundancy of codes. The advantage of doing this is that the categories and themes emerge from the data themselves, thus in the process of

unpacking the respondents' discourses on diversity and the 'Others', we see 'diversity' and the 'Others' as concepts taking on localized configurations of meaning.

## **Results and Discussion**

As pointed out by Gay (2018), "teachers need to deconstruct and transform some longstanding pedagogical assumptions, beliefs, and practices" (p. 277), particularly in reference to students who are considered as Others in the classroom. In fact, Johnson (2011) highlighted that one of the key driving principles of effective CRP was not only the teacher's conception of self, but also their conception of Others.

Qualitative responses from the FGD transcripts on how the respondents characterize diversity and Otherness in UAE schools are presented across the following themes, mainly: (1) diversity and Othering within one's culture, (2) diversity and Others in language, (3) diversity and Others in race and ethnicities, and (4) diversity and Others in socio-economic status (SES).

### ***Diversity and Othering within One's Culture***

By and large, participants challenge the conception of homogeneity in UAE schools. This is also a key point in the study of Hamdan Alghamdi (2014) in reference to students coming from Saudi Arabia: "One might assume that Saudi Arabia is a relatively homogenous society (Arab, Islamic, Sunni) yet diversity here refers to students' learning styles, cultural background, home and family values, and traditions, etc." (p. 215). Such challenging of homogeneity, however, also brings forth another layer of cultural differentiation from within, such as when one respondent locates diversity among the Emirati as coming "*from their families, their backgrounds, if they are Bedouin or not Bedouin.*" The Bedouin-tribal culture as historically constitutive of Arab people's past nomadic life and the practices that went along with it (Akinci, 2020) is mobilized in the UAE as a centralizing national identity marker (Hawker, 2002),

although at present this is now seen as more in reference to Emiratis who live in rural areas as opposed to those who live in big cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi. This centralization of Bedouin-tribal culture as inherently Emirati is not uncommon, especially since most “GCC countries choose to focus on Bedouin heritage at the expense of seafaring heritage” (Derderian, 2017, p. 24). The Gulf Cooperation Council consists of neighboring countries that rely primarily on an oil-based economy, inclusive of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. This is further compounded by the fact that there is the prevailing discourse in both media and the academe that UAE, being a fairly young country, had no inhabitants, institutions, or cultural practices before the establishment of the nation state in 1971, “as if those living there did not exist before they could be formally designated as Emirati citizens following the creation of the Emirati nation” (Derderian, 2017, p. 15). This is brought about by the observation that “everything is ‘brand new,’ and that little is organic or native because so much has been imported” (Derderian, 2017, p. 15).

This ideation of multi-layered diversity can be seen in another teacher’s response, as she differentiated between those who identify as part of the Bedouin-tribal group whom she described as “*those who live in the desert, more of a nomad kind of tribe*” and the Emiratis who live in the coastal side of the city:

*They have a completely different culture, mostly Emirati but they all have a different kind of mentality. So for me, even as a human being, as a person, it was very, very challenging to get along with the teachers, and the society, also the parents, and even the students – they are very sensitive. In the Bedouin society, I would never hear a student say the word anxiety or insomnia, or I am depressed – you can never hear that. But when I moved to the coastal side, I heard that a*

*lot. Like “teacher, I feel depressed today” or “this thing gave me anxiety”. So it’s a whole different culture, really. - Hafsa*

Thus, complicating Emirati culture as *not* homogeneous simultaneously liberates historically obscured and glossed over cultural differences among the people, but also constructs a new layer of differentiation from within the culture where being marked as *not* part of Bedouin-tribal culture is a strategy of Othering.

This differentiation within ‘the same’ culture is also articulated by four participants who surfaced issues related to hierarchies of citizenship and belonging (Derderian, 2017) by mentioning students whose families have lived permanently or long-term in the UAE but are not able to claim citizenship, hence they are not *Emirati Emirati* (Derderian, 2017, p. 23, italics ours), but what we refer to in this paper as *Honorary-Emirati* or what is termed in the literature as “unofficial or substantive citizens” (Vora, 2011, p. 125). It is important to point out that this is not an official terminology used in the UAE, but used only in this study. More often than not, these students blend in quite successfully. As one participant noted:

*We had a lot of non-Emiratis who had been born and bred here, so they do act a lot like Emiratis ... I could detect some differences based on family names, or how they spoke to each other, but it is not always apparent. I had to go back to their records to know if that student was an Emirati or not or to understand exactly what their background was, if their parents were from different countries. - Ayna*

We see here that there is still an attempt to mark them as ‘Others’ by virtue of their lack of official citizenship. But then again, such Othering is also complicated by the fact that those who are deemed Others by virtue of citizenship are also slowly being perceived as

culturally Emirati in practice. For example, another participant described the *Honorary-Emirati* students as being even more representative of *Emirati-ness*.

*We had people from different cultures. But still Arab cultures – Egyptians, Syrians. Mostly they were born here, in that specific area, Falaj Al Mualla, so they were kind of part of the society. Those kids, they do not really represent their culture, they represent the Emirati culture even more. So, they are from different countries, but they acquired the same culture, the same kind of mentality. And they feel under a massive pressure of the Bedouin society, or the nomad society, so they adapt quicker. - Hafsa*

This phenomenon can be linked to identity constructions and reconstructions whereby “the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘others’ is gradually redrawn by individuals in both groups, so that more members of the other group, respectively, are accepted as approaching or actually belonging to ‘us’” (Schneider, 2007, p. 41).

In the UAE, Boyle (2012) shared how “many thousands of non-Gulf Arabs and other foreigners...who were born in the UAE and such people write letters to the newspapers in which they express their love for the country, which is the only home that they have known...” (p. 322). Hence, what Hafsa shared above is not uncommon to most *Honorary-Emirati* residents of the country. Here we see the ‘Others’ as *Honorary-Emirati* taking on a complex identity role which breaks down the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy.

In the following sections, we map out further the configurations of diversity and Othering within Emirati culture among students through the lens of the respondents’ perceptions of diversity and ‘Others.’

### ***Diversity and Others in Language***

Diversity within Emirati society as perceived by the respondents in the earlier section finds specific form in language use as well. Such linguistically shaped diversity is highly complicated as well since it involves discursively multi-layered Othering. Internal diversity pertains to dialectal differences among Arabic speakers, but the speakers are also bound collectively to safeguard their national identity through the use of Arabic in the context of bilingual and biliteracy practices in Arabic and English. However, the ability to speak in Arabic does not link automatically with national identity formation since there are those who do not carry official Emirati citizenship who speak Arabic fluently. In the process, non-Emirati children are sent to government schools by their parents to leverage on curricula which focus on the teaching of Arabic. However, since the students underperform in the learning of Arabic, they are misplaced in classes meant for students with special needs.

Thus, in terms of language use, the teachers perceive cultural diversity and Others in UAE schools based on (1) dialectal differences in Arabic use, (2) the ability – or lack of it -- to codeswitching between English and Arabic, and (3) fluency – or lack of it -- in Arabic.

#### *Dialectal diversity*

While initially the participants viewed the speaking of Arabic as largely homogenous, further conversations reveal discursive configurations as the respondents started to acknowledge and recognize manifestations of dialectal diversity, particularly in the way Arabic language is spoken even among so-called native speakers (or students whose mother tongue is Arabic):

*When they speak in Arabic, it's easy to tell some accents from others and you can easily tell... just from the accent or the words that they use, so even simple things like swear words, and you go, "no, this family does not swear with these*



*words, this family will use these words” even the choice of words that they use, they are different... When they use proper Arabic, you can’t hear it, but when they’re amongst each other, and they start talking, and you hear the slang, that’s when you know, this is where the diversity is. - Anisah*

Other respondents talked about “*differing dialects*” among native Arabic speakers, depending on whether colloquial or modern Arabic is used.

#### *Diversity and Othering through English, biliterate and bilingual practices*

Superimposed upon dialectal difference, however, is how Arabic speakers navigate their trajectories of globalization and national identification because of the increasing dominance of English (Hopkyns, 2014). The current contested terrain in language use is shaped by “connections between the power of English and cultural fragility in the UAE” (p. 12). There is, for example, a symbolic and material push towards English in the UAE although this is also increasingly taking the form of class-based practices.

*If I go back to memory lane, even in the younger generation and in the university, it is “cooler” to code switch to English that “maybe” makes you more vibrant and recent. The globalization factor has an impact on the way Arabic is perceived so the more English you know the more “status” you have. - Aleah*

Evidently, among social circles, this ability to code-switch between English and Arabic is seen as a status symbol of sorts, which is also in keeping with what is found in the literature about English being viewed as a “prestige subject” or that one needs to have a “special ability” or to be “excellent” in order to become an English teacher (Clarke, 2006, p. 228). Moreover, two respondents also pointed out that not all Emiratis are fluent in Arabic. This is a growing concern among Emirati citizens, particularly

those who send their children to private institutions. One of the participants expressed concerns as to how her own Emirati nephews and nieces are more fluent in English than in Arabic:

*... my nieces and nephews are studying in a British school, they are talking English fluently, but they don't speak Emirati. And I tell my sister, my dear, yani, what is going to happen to them in the form of their identity? Where is the national identity? We're facing this problem. Ok, they talk fluently in English, but when they go to society, they are expected to talk Emirati, they are not expected to talk English. So, there's always this fight I think, just because of globalization, expectations from a very young nation. - Alea*

It appears then that while the facility to speak in English enjoys a measure of prestige as “the language of a colonial power” (Boyle, 2012, p. 320) and language of modernization (Davidson, 2007), there exists the tension articulated by the respondent as to whether this could also pose a threat not only to the Arabic language, believed to be inseparable from nations-statehood (Findlow, 2006) but also, as academics noted, “the religion of Islam, its values, its principles, and its centuries-old traditions and heritage in the region” (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015, p. 6).

Thus, the pedagogical response has been to complicate the language of the school through the cultivation of students' biliteracy skills (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015) and bilingualism (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011) as opposed to the perpetuation of the hegemony of English as part of post-colonial education policies (Brock-Utne, 2007; Hopkyns, 2014). Thus, Arabic speakers who are themselves dialectally differentiated find themselves collectively engaging in bilingual literacy practices by virtue of English's dominating presence and, at the same time, the need to solidify national identity formation through the fluent use of Arabic.

### *Diversity and Othering through Fluency in Arabic*

Fluency in Arabic is also complicated by the *Honorary-Emirati* discourse. One teacher observed that there are times when it is difficult to distinguish cultural groups from each other because of the fluency in the language by those who are not Emiratis, but have been living in the country for a long time:

*They are Indians but their parents lived here for more than 20 years and they were born here in the UAE, and they could speak Arabic so fluently with all those dialects, and you couldn't even realize they are Indians, because they are so trying to imitate the local people, and to be friends with them. - Aizere*

Another teacher referred to this as being like *kandura* or like a local:

*... they think that when they talk like Emirati, that it would benefit them in their lives. Like for example when they enter any establishment, any ministry, any government establishment, they will be like kandura, like a local, then the employee will think that he is a local... But sometimes they say some words, and discover that they're not local.*

### *Othering through Arabic*

According to the respondents, the above quote is the reason why some non-Arabic speaking parents insist on enrolling their children to government schools, even though they are aware that the government schools have a curriculum that is taught primarily in Arabic, which can make lessons very challenging for students who do not speak the language. In fact, this can result in some students being labeled as a student with special needs, even among Emirati citizens:

*I had a couple of students who did not speak any Arabic, even though they are Emiratis or they were born here, or parents were born here. Their Arabic was very weak, and they were put in Special Needs classes because they couldn't*

*Speak Arabic, but when I taught them Math, they understood everything, they had no problem mentally or cognition-wise, it was just the language barrier. And government schools are in Arabic, so they couldn't understand Arabic classes or Science classes. - Ayna*

Another teacher mentioned how non-Emirati parents are responsible for the inability of non-Arabic speaking students to adjust to the curriculum, or their being labeled as a student with special needs:

*I think their parents have the responsibility about that because the school curriculum is not prepared for them. For example, when I have a student who is talking at home - not Arab but Urdu, other language, and he joined our school, how he will learn Arabic?... This is happening now, and I saw many cases like this. I wonder why their parents bring them to Arabic schools. When one time, I asked a parent, he said "I want him to learn Arabic" but not in this way. You are destroying his future. Because the curriculum is not designed for them. - Assad*

When asked whether there are after-school lessons designed to teach Arabic to said students, similar to additional lessons provided to English learners or linguistically diverse learners in American schools (Hall et. al., 2019), the teachers unequivocally stated that this is not being done in UAE government schools. The onus is on the parent to ensure that their children can cope with the demands of a curriculum taught primarily in the Arabic language. In fact, when prompted as to what advice the teachers usually give to the parents in such cases, one teacher stated:

*Sure, I give them advice. Why not join the Pakistani school, for example. But maybe in their minds, they want their children to learn Arabic so that.. they can be considered locals. But you are not locals. - Assad*

Another respondent affirms the same observation:

*... if they see they achieve low mark in Arabic, they would just include that student into special education program, without addressing that Arabic is just a new language and that student may need more time to learn the language. And it is even more damaging than helping, because when they are sent to the special education resource room, they receive simplified curriculum. Which means they will not improve, in fact they will degrade. And I'm not sure how they manage to pass at the end of the year, but I can see that it took them forever to develop the language. - Hafsa*

The disproportionate representation and inappropriate referrals to and placement in special education classes for culturally and linguistically diverse learners is not uncommon in educational settings (Klingner et al., 2011). In fact, Schiuchetti (2017) noted that educators need to develop an understanding of differences between culturally based behaviors and those that are a manifestation of disability and to use this information to make informed instructional and assessment decisions as a concrete demonstration of culturally responsive practice. However, as mentioned by Assad in this study: *"...there is a big gap between them and the other normal students. We are trying to help them, but I have like 25-30 students. I have a curriculum, and I have to finish it."* The use of the word "normal students" is also quite telling, demonstrating how linguistically diverse learners are perceived in the classroom.

Over-all, aside from highlighting Othering academic conditions of non-Emirati pupils learning Arabic in government schools, the discourse also places the blame on parents for sending their children to these schools. It does not explicate the problem as systemic in nature which involves the need for the local curricula to accommodate this increasingly growing group of pupils in the first place. What is important to highlight

here though is that respondents surface internal diversities which are linguistically shaped. Arabic dialects, Arabic, and English construct a heterogenous Emirati culture in the schools in ways that complicate the functions of languages in the first place.

Through the lens of the discourses of the respondents on Emirati culture, the use of Arabic and English includes and excludes depending on the material and cultural circumstances of specific groups of pupils.

### ***Diversity and Others in Race and Ethnicities***

Aside from language, race and ethnicities also shape internal diversity in schools. According to the respondents, the school population is diverse because even in government schools, there are pupils who are Emirati by nationality but one or both of their parents are not of Emirati origin. Biracial or multiracial children, however, are noted by participants to experience discrimination and racism because of their skin colour and other presumably undesirable attributes. Such problems faced by dual heritage or multiracial children expose the prevalent dominance of essentializing practices among the wider school population in UAE, thus contributing to our “evolving understandings of the ‘Other’ (Dillon and Ali, 2019, p. 86). This is a phenomenon which is present in other education and social contexts around the world as well (Burns and Danaher, 2020; Mosanya and Kwiatkowska, 2021). Categorization of people according to fixed cultural boundaries is a form of essentialization because it ignores or devalues what Mosanya and Kwiatkowska (2021) refer to as multicultural or cross-cultural identities, thus resulting in such experiences of marginalization and stigmatization among these socially vulnerable children.

All the respondents noted that there is greater diversity when it comes to race and ethnicities in private schools as opposed to government schools. According to one participant:

*... based on my experience teaching in a private school, yes, there is a big diversity of students from all over the world. Different nationalities, with different colors, yes. You can see it in the private schools and all over UAE. -*

*Maya*

However, the respondents also started speaking about multiracial students in government schools who are Emiratis by nationality, but may have mothers who are not of Emirati origin:

*I do remember teaching students that had a Russian mother, Filipino mother, Indian mother in school and in university. And I would know that maybe from the features, or sometimes from the fact that they used to bully them in schools. I remember, one of the girls came up to tell me that I have no friends because my mother is "that." It was a bit tough to deal with, and I tried my best to help. -*

*Alea*

Another respondent described said students and their experience in this manner:

*There were many students who are semi-Emirati, semi-Filipino, or other countries, like Egypt and so on. Really, sometimes, I feel that they are bullied by the pure locals from UAE. - Assad*

One of the understudied demographics in literature is multiracial (Williams, 2011) or biracial students (Rozek & Gaither, 2020) - the latter technically defined as those who have "two racial or ethnic backgrounds" (Rozek & Gaither, 2020, p. 2). This is especially true in the UAE, where discussions of this sort are considered taboo. One respondent even noted that simply talking about one's non-Emirati mother can be considered a provocation of sorts, especially among male students. What little there is to be found in the literature demonstrates that biracial students indeed face unique identity-

related threats and belonging issues (Rozek & Gaither, 2020) which clearly need to be addressed by culturally responsive educators.

Another respondent also mentioned the presence of students coming from different nationalities in government schools:

*... we had different people from different nationalities, and some of them were refugees from Syria, so they're coming from totally different culture or background, and perspective in life. - Hafsa*

Hafsa also candidly shared some observations about racism based on skin color being outrightly expressed by teachers which caused heightened feelings of discomfort and which eventually led to the respondent reportedly not fitting in with the other teachers in the government school. She only found the courage to speak out when another teacher also expressed the same view:

*So then, my friend, who is from the same culture as mine, Bedouin one, we started to talk back to the teachers. Like how can you say that in front of the students?... So we started talking back, and we found ourselves like the minority when it comes to these things in that specific school. I don't want to generalize, but I try to take position, and I started taking the side of the students, because at the end of the day I leave my mark on the students, not on those teachers. -*

*Hafsa*

Thus, there exists a moral imperative to adopt “embracive” (Chmela-Jones, 2017, p. S1049; Mukwambo et al., 2018, p. 2) pedagogies towards those who are considered as Others, even when it is unsettling and not deemed to be popular among colleagues who do not adopt such practices.

***Diversity and Others in socio-economic status (SES)***



The UAE, being an oil-rich country, is known for local people benefiting substantially from the growing wealth of the country (Al Fahim, 1995; Boyle, 2012).

However, as pointed out by some of the respondents in this study, there are also students who are coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds:

*I think there's a lot of diversity, more than we imagine in government schools.*

*It's not just about tribes, it's about backgrounds, socio-economic status as well.*

*Because I had students who came to me who couldn't afford certain things and because they were not Emirati, they did not have privileges where they will be given these things that are given to Emirati students in government schools. -*

*Ayna*

This is compounded by the fact that there are also students from royal families in government schools, in addition to refugees or students who may not have official papers, and those coming from impoverished backgrounds, leading one of the respondents to note that:

*There is hierarchy inside the classroom, an unspoken hierarchy... the problem is there are also other teachers who believe that according to culture, people have to be in ranks, and it is normal that there is hierarchy... Like, for example, the social worker, it is normal to come in the middle of the class to give those students who are poor.. to give them envelopes with the money supposed to be provided by the government or charity. I think these procedures need to be done in isolation, away from other eyes, not to embarrass the students. - Hafsa*

What makes UAE especially unique is how the local population are a minority, which has led to what is referred to as: “an ambiguous ‘tiered system’ of economic, political, and social rights among permanent residents (including a reversal of rights for some), and a fluctuating, informal hierarchization of migrant communities” (Jamal, 2015, p.

602). In fact, Jamal (2015) also referred to UAE residents “who are technically unregistered former nomads” (Jamal, 2015, p. 602) and are displaced residents.

In the FGD, the respondents have made mention of these displaced residents as especially in need of support and attention, and how the largely unspoken nature of their status contributes to the difficulties encountered by teachers in providing better services for them. It is one of the taboo topics that are often not openly discussed for fear of repercussions, particularly among educators. Such taboo topics is not unique to UAE. In fact, it is similar to what is referred to as “Out of Bounds” markers in Singapore (Baildon & Sim, 2009, p. 415) which teachers make sure not to cross. However, as Gay (2018) pointed out:

Culturally responsive teachers also ‘go where they have not been before’ by expanding their pedagogical repertoires, sometimes into novelty and unorthodoxy. Teaching to different ethnic and cultural learning styles demands this. Additionally, teachers have to be willing to experiment, to use novel approaches, to engage in ‘leaps of faith’ in instructional practices.” (p. 289).

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to map out the changing landscape of diversity in UAE schools, with the specific intention of unpacking diversity and Others through teachers’ perceptions of these. As referenced in the earlier parts of the paper, teachers and school leaders must articulate and practise culturally responsive teaching, but this can be done effectively if one is able to critically reflect on the meanings and functions of diversity. Through their perceptions, this paper has mapped out an intricate configuration of diversity in the schools, especially locating spaces where Othering and Others are constructed.

We found that culture in schools, government or private schools, is very diverse, but such diversity in language, race and ethnicities, and socio-economic status is not straightforward. This is because of the multi-layered nature of diversity in UAE schools today. Emirati culture in schools is diverse because there are Emiratis who are of Bedouin-tribal and non-Bedouin-tribal origins, with the latter potentially experiencing a greater sense of isolation and cultural othering. However, such cultural differentiation is complicated by the fact that among Emirati nationals, there are those who are biracial or multiracial, who have not acquired Emirati citizenship, who do not speak Arabic fluently and are more proficient in English, and who are not economically well-off. These are the Others in present-day Emirati schools.

Collectively, respondents demonstrate sophisticated understandings of cultural diversity in UAE schools. Their discourses reveal a multi-layered configuration of diversity which deconstruct Emirati culture as homogenous. In fact, it is far from being homogenous. The cultural Others in Emirati schools complicate the diversity further since Othering does not simply marginalize individuals according to one social variable. For Culturally Responsive Teachers to be genuinely effective and transformative, they must locate their understandings of diversity and Others within specific configurations of language use, race and ethnicity and socio-economic status. CRT should not simply rely on simple and unhelpful dichotomies such as the 'dominant' Emirati students and the non-Emirati students as 'Others'. If the discourses of teachers and school leaders as respondents in this paper are to be believed, CRT will succeed if teachers look at students as individuals with unique configurations of diversity, with many of them experiencing multiple layers of Othering. This paper, thus, joins Gay's (2018) call for teachers to treat pupils as individuals who are different in many ways within their own ethnic and cultural groups (p. 253).

The broad implications of the findings in this paper have conceptual and policy-centered dimensions. Embracing cultural diversity and greater sensitivity to presence and needs of ‘Others’ in the classroom, as well as in society at large, has penetrated educational policy-making and teacher education both in UAE and overseas. However, there is a need to complicate the notion of cultural diversity and Others lest they become empty terms which lull us into believing that all is well in the classroom because they ground our practices. What this paper has found is that educational policies must recognize that cultural diversity is context-bound, thus its specific configurations within cultural and institutional contexts must be acknowledged and operationalized. This means that in teacher education, both teacher educators and student-teachers must be sensitive to and be sensitized into the dynamic nature of cultural diversity and processes of Othering. In the classroom, there are no fixed dominant majorities and Others, but rather their fluid relationships are shaped relative to the kinds of pupils of students in the classroom. Processes of Othering, as discussed earlier, are of course historically and politically shaped, but ‘the Others’ have multiple identities too based on their complex socioeconomic and cultural positionings in school and, more generally, in society. Educators, institutions and policy makers that respond to various forms of inequality in the classroom will succeed only if they view and treat students as real complex individuals.

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