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Promoting Arabic Proficiency in English-Medium Schools: A Qualitative Study of Leadership Challenges and Strategies in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores leadership strategies that enhance Arabic language proficiency in private schools across the United Arab Emirates. Recognizing the cultural and national significance of Arabic, the research examines how school leaders—principals, vice principals, and department heads—influence instructional quality and student outcomes in Arabic education. The study draws on frameworks from educational leadership and language policy implementation to investigate whether leadership practices support or hinder Arabic instruction. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 38 educational leaders to understand their perceptions, practices, and challenges related to promoting Arabic learning. Thematic analysis revealed three key findings. First, visible and sustained leadership commitment—through classroom observations, teacher mentoring, and instructional oversight—correlated with improved Arabic instruction. Second, participants identified several structural and cultural barriers. These included limited instructional time, low student motivation, inflexible curricula, and widespread perceptions that Arabic is less valuable than English for academic and professional success. Third, the findings exposed a gap between policy ambitions and school-level implementation. Many Arabic language initiatives lacked sufficient resources, coherence, or accountability mechanisms. The study concludes that advancing Arabic proficiency requires a multifaceted and strategically coordinated approach. School leaders must embed Arabic within broader school improvement agendas, support Arabic teachers through targeted professional development,

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adopt differentiated instruction, and elevate Arabic's status through culturally responsive leadership. These insights inform national efforts to strengthen language policy, preserve heritage, and promote equity in multilingual education.

Keywords: Arabic Language Instruction; Educational Leadership; Bilingual Education; Instructional Leadership; Curriculum Reform; Language Policy; Heritage Language Education; United Arab Emirates

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The United Arab Emirates presents a unique sociolinguistic context shaped by rapid globalization, economic growth, and cultural diversity. Although Arabic is the UAE's official language, the dominance of English in education, media, and business has significantly influenced language use, particularly among younger generations^[1]. In international schools, increasingly favored by Emirati families and expatriates, English frequently serves as the primary medium of instruction, relegating Arabic to a supplementary role in the curriculum. This linguistic environment has contributed to a notable decline in students' proficiency in Arabic. Educational reports indicate a growing disconnect between Emirati youth and their Arabic linguistic and cultural heritage, with many students struggling to use Arabic fluently and confidently in social and academic contexts^[2]. The pervasive presence of English, especially in international and private schools, has established what scholars describe as a language hierarchy, positioning English as the language of modernity and opportunity, while Arabic is perceived as less relevant to academic achievement and global employability.

The implications of this linguistic shift are substantial. Beyond individual language competency, declining Arabic proficiency threatens cultural continuity, national identity, and societal cohesion. In response, the UAE government has implemented initiatives aimed at revitalizing Arabic, including educational reforms by the Ministry of Education to strengthen Arabic instruction, professional development for Arabic teachers, and policy directives for more meaningful curriculum integration^[3]. Nevertheless, these initiatives exist within the broader tension between preserving national identity through Arabic and maintaining global competitiveness through English^[4]. This is a tension that positions educational leaders at the heart of a complex policy landscape, requiring them to negotiate competing expectations

while striving to promote Arabic proficiency within English-dominant environments^[5]. Understanding how school and middle leaders address this challenge is essential to informing effective strategies and sustainable policy implementation in UAE schools^[6].

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze how school and middle leaders in UAE international schools perceive and enact their roles in fostering students' Arabic language proficiency. Given the increasing influence of English-medium instruction (EMI) and the resultant decline in Arabic fluency, this study examines leadership strategies, their effectiveness, and the challenges encountered in bilingual educational settings. Limited research has investigated how school and middle leaders navigate Arabic language instruction within multilingual private school environments. This study is significant because it addresses both the challenges and existing interventions aimed at promoting students' Arabic language proficiency. Situated within the UAE's linguistic and cultural context, where Arabic is central to Emirati national identity but increasingly overshadowed by English, this study aims to generate insights into how educational leaders balance national policy objectives with global educational standards. It also explores context-sensitive and sustainable leadership approaches to Arabic language promotion within English-dominant school systems^[7].

1.3. Research Questions

This study investigates leadership practices related to Arabic language instruction by addressing four key research questions:

1. How do school and middle leaders perceive their roles in enhancing Arabic proficiency?
2. What leadership strategies are currently implemented by school and middle leaders to enhance students' Ara-

bic proficiency?

3. How do these educational leaders perceive the effectiveness of these strategies in improving students' Arabic proficiency?
4. What challenges and opportunities exist within the context of English-medium instruction?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study holds significant relevance for school improvement, particularly in language policy implementation and curriculum leadership. By analyzing the roles of school and middle leaders in promoting Arabic proficiency, the study highlights how leadership practices directly influence language outcomes, teacher development, and student engagement^[8]. In multilingual educational settings, such as international schools in the UAE, where English-medium instruction predominates, understanding effective leadership strategies is crucial for promoting balanced bilingualism and supporting students' identity formation.

Findings will inform leadership practices by identifying mechanisms, interventions, and attitudes that strengthen Arabic instruction. This is particularly pertinent in the UAE's socio-cultural context, where preserving Arabic is both a linguistic imperative and a national priority. Furthermore, the study will provide actionable insights for school leaders to steer through the complexities of language planning, capacity-building among staff, and cross-curricular integration within global learning environments. Additionally, the findings will contribute to broader language policy debates by analyzing how grassroots-level leadership responds to national mandates and policy tensions between global competitiveness and Arabic preservation.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

2.1. Arabic Language Proficiency in Multilingual Educational Contexts

As the official language of the United Arab Emirates, Arabic is integral to the nation's culture, identity, and heritage^[9]. However, research has indicated a continual decline in Arabic proficiency among students, particularly within private and international schools primarily utilizing English-medium instruction (EMI). Many students, including Emiratis,

encounter challenges in Arabic literacy and fluency, prompting concerns regarding language loss and weakening cultural bonds. The growing prominence of EMI significantly affects students' Arabic acquisition. English is commonly perceived as crucial for global competitiveness and higher education, leading schools to prioritize it over Arabic. Consequently, students' exposure to Arabic diminishes, limiting opportunities for meaningful practice and engagement.

Raddawi and Meslem reported that extensive reliance on English as the instructional language in UAE schools contributed significantly to deteriorating Arabic language proficiency and cultural identity among students^[10]. Similarly, Thomure and Speaker evaluated the implementation of Arabic Language Arts Standards in six Gulf-region schools, including institutions in Bahrain and the UAE^[11]. Their study involved surveys administered to 58 educators and revealed notable challenges in integrating Arabic language instruction into predominantly English-driven curricula. Additionally, the authors identified diglossia—the linguistic gap between spoken dialects and Modern Standard Arabic—as a primary obstacle complicating instructional methods and curriculum delivery.

In response, the UAE Ministry of Education has enacted reforms aimed at revitalizing Arabic instruction. Initiatives such as the Charter for the Arabic Language, revised curricula, and enhanced professional development for teachers have been implemented^[12]. These efforts reflect increased awareness of the necessity to safeguard linguistic heritage while accommodating global educational demands. Nonetheless, sustained commitment and cooperation among educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders remain critical to maintaining Arabic as a relevant and integral aspect of students' identities and daily experiences. These reforms also emphasize integrating Arabic throughout curricular and co-curricular activities. Despite policy advancements, implementation varies across educational institutions. Effective execution frequently depends upon leadership commitment, the clarity of vision articulated by school administrators, and the allocation of resources. Without strong advocacy from leadership, reforms risk superficial or inconsistent application. Furthermore, Khaleej Times underscored the importance of exploring how school administrators (e.g., principals, vice principals) and middle-level leaders (e.g., department heads) perceive and execute their roles in pro-

moting Arabic proficiency^[13]. Their actions substantially influence the alignment of national linguistic objectives with school-level practices in multilingual education contexts.

The decline in Arabic proficiency is further compounded by parental preferences for English-centered education, which is often perceived as a pathway to global academic and professional opportunities. As a result, Arabic is increasingly viewed as less essential, particularly within international school settings that prioritize English-language outcomes. In their examination of language policies and bilingual education across the Middle East and North Africa, Rodríguez Farah et al. found that while bilingual programs do exist, these initiatives overwhelmingly emphasize global languages such as English^[14]. Educators and forum participants reported limited institutional support for local dialects and minority languages, including regional variants of Arabic. To address this imbalance, the authors recommended that policymakers adopt more equitable linguistic approaches, advocating for stronger institutional backing for Arabic and minority languages to counter the dominance of English and French. Additionally, student disengagement from Arabic is exacerbated by unengaging instructional materials and inconsistent assessment standards. Tackling these issues requires comprehensive, school-level strategies that reposition Arabic as a practical and dynamic language, rather than one viewed solely as symbolic or academic.

Systematic investigations conducted throughout the Gulf region have revealed a disconcerting decline in Arabic-language proficiency among students enrolled in English-medium higher education settings^[15]. In the United Arab Emirates, Arab undergraduates pursuing English-medium degrees have, in numerous informal and formal assessments, narrated a substantive recession in their academic Arabic skills attributed directly to the hegemony of English in both the formal and hidden curriculum. Correlational studies indicate a gradual and, in certain cohorts, a precipitous reduction in Arabic-language usage, observable in course assignments, academic discussions, and co-curricular activities, while the concomitant erosion of students' self-reported academic confidence in Arabic appears to catalyse the so-called "domain loss" effect. Scholars impute the ascendant prominence of English across the Gulf^[16]. Educational ladder—ranging from early childhood through to postgraduate training—as a decisive factor curtailing Arabic literacy and expressive

fluency, thereby projecting the emergence of a disenchanting generation whose affective and intellectual links to their native language appear, in increasing measure, attenuated. These data have generated both empirical and pedagogical imperatives, compelling the leadership of English-medium universities to devise and operationalise evidence-informed measures designed to halt the downward trajectory and, wherever practicable, to cultivate a sustained scholarly identity rooted in Arabic, notwithstanding the prevailing Anglophone academic environment^[17].

2.2. Leadership in Language Education

According to the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), leadership significantly influences language education policies and practices, especially in culturally and linguistically diverse school environments^[18]. In the UAE, where English-medium instruction (EMI) coexists with national mandates to preserve Arabic, the involvement of principals and middle-level leaders in language planning is essential. These leaders shape curriculum design, teacher professional development, and resource allocation, all of which directly influence language learning outcomes. Al Hammadi critically noted that effective leadership ensures Arabic is meaningfully integrated within the academic and cultural frameworks of schools rather than isolated as a discrete subject^[19]. Research has demonstrated that when school principals and middle leaders champion language policy objectives, the likelihood of consistent implementation and sustained impact increases. In contexts where Arabic faces marginalization, leadership serves as a critical bridge between policy directives and classroom realities^[19].

Hallinger's instructional leadership model provides a useful framework for understanding leadership roles in bilingual school contexts. The model emphasizes principals' responsibilities in clearly setting instructional goals, managing educational programs, and fostering a positive school learning climate. In bilingual schools, this involves explicitly incorporating Arabic into school improvement plans, supporting teacher collaboration, and regularly monitoring student progress in both languages. AlZeny further emphasized that instructional leaders must foster professional learning communities that value Arabic as integral to students' cultural and academic identities^[20]. Additionally, distributed leadership approaches are particularly relevant to culturally

diverse schools. Rather than relying solely on top-down decision-making, distributed leadership empowers teachers and department heads to collaboratively influence language practices. Such an approach proves especially effective in international schools, where educational teams often comprise individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By distributing responsibility, schools can better address complexities inherent to bilingual instruction and ensure shared accountability for Arabic language development. Strategic, culturally responsive, and inclusive leadership is therefore essential for enhancing Arabic proficiency in UAE schools. Empowering all stakeholders through inclusive leadership establishes a robust foundation for sustainable bilingual education, enhancing Arabic outcomes and strengthening students' cultural connections.

In contexts characterized by bilingual and heritage-language education, school leadership constitutes an essential factor that shapes the effectiveness of Arabic instruction within English-medium schools, particularly when the constitution regards Arabic as the students' mother tongue. Leaders of such institutions navigate the competing imperatives of upholding an externally validated English curriculum and of safeguarding Arabic as a dynamic, living language. Evidence from the United Arab Emirates demonstrates that headteachers and senior leadership teams wield considerable influence in defining Arabic's official standing within the school, a discretion that can either entrench or erode the language's institutional visibility. A recurring shortcoming, however, is the relative lack of pedagogical expertise in Arabic found among a significant segment of principals in private English-medium schools; the academic literature routinely identifies this gap as a foremost barrier to meaningful advancement. One study, for example, revealed that certain expatriate headteachers assigned marginal importance to Arabic, channeling almost exclusive institutional attention to performance metrics confined to English. Conversely, a leadership arrangement wherein incumbents possess both a sophisticated pedagogical knowledge of Arabic and a nuanced understanding of heritage-language teaching is capable of architecting effective bilingual curricula, of translating coherent language policies into practice, and of cultivating a school ethos that valorises both English and Arabic on an equal plane.

Accordingly, professional development programmes designed to strengthen the linguistic command and peda-

gogical capacities of school administrators are deemed indispensable for the continued cultivation and elevation of Arabic language proficiency in English-medium schools that implement international curricula^[21].

2.3. Strategies for Promoting Arabic Language in EMI Schools

Ahmed and Hassan asserted that promoting Arabic proficiency in EMI schools requires multifaceted strategies aligning linguistic development with students' academic and sociocultural experiences^[21]. A primary strategy is adopting additive bilingual education models, which support second-language development without undermining the first language. Conversely, subtractive models, wherein English replaces Arabic, contribute to language erosion and identity disconnection. Additive bilingualism encourages schools to view Arabic as an essential component of holistic education rather than merely supplementary^[21]. Rogier similarly argued that practical strategies should integrate Arabic throughout the curriculum, beyond isolated language classes^[22]. Embedding Arabic in social studies, Islamic education, and sciences using bilingual resources reinforces its relevance and practical application. Cross-curricular integration enables students to use Arabic authentically, promoting both linguistic and academic development. Positioning Arabic as integral to the entire educational experience fosters deeper student engagement and enhances language retention. This holistic approach not only supports academic achievement but also reinforces students' cultural identities.

Moreover, co-curricular and extracurricular activities significantly enhance Arabic usage in engaging and informal contexts. Activities such as Arabic language clubs, poetry recitations, debate teams, and drama performances allow students to interact confidently and creatively with the language. Cultural events, including National Day celebrations, Arabic calligraphy workshops, and heritage festivals, connect language learning to cultural identity, particularly benefiting Emirati and Arabic-speaking expatriate students. Al Bakri and Troudi highlighted that immersive experiences, such as Arabic reading challenges, community service in Arabic-speaking environments, and field trips to culturally significant locations, deepen students' language engagement^[23]. These experiences increase motivation and contextualize language use, essential for effective second-language ac-

quisition. Thus, promoting Arabic in EMI schools requires strong leadership support, adequate leader training, and a school-wide culture that values bilingualism. Successful strategies treat Arabic as a dynamic, living language integrated into daily academic and social life, not restricted to single-subject instruction. When Arabic permeates broader school experiences, it becomes more accessible, relevant, and valued by students. Comprehensive engagement thus enhances linguistic proficiency and strengthens students' cultural identities. By creating meaningful opportunities to use Arabic beyond the classroom, schools foster natural, lasting connections with the language, supporting balanced and culturally grounded bilingual education.

In the United Arab Emirates and the wider Gulf region, language-planning and language-policy discourses have increasingly foregrounded the reinforcement of Arabic within the educational sector, driven by apprehensions regarding the erosion of Arabic language competencies^[24]. Over the past decade, the federal government of the UAE has introduced a series of ambitious, emblematic programs, including a charter for Arabic language teaching, a nationally legislated reading promotion act, and culturally resonant Arabic literacy campaigns—intended to regenerate Arabic literacy and usage in the classroom. While these initiatives have succeeded in raising the linguistic visibility of Arabic in public and political arenas, systematic reviews have documented a persistent and significant disconnection between the proclaimed objectives and the enactment of policy within actual school settings. The majority of official attention has been devoted to symbolic and overtly curricular interventions, such as the creation of revised learning frameworks and the organization of competitive reading events, yet there has been markedly less investment in status-consolidation measures or in robust, granular language-in-education policymaking that would legally or practically stipulate the modalities through which Arabic should function as both a medium of instruction and a compulsory curricular discipline^[25].

Scholars in educational policy underscore the necessity of precise, binding language-in-education regulations to clarify expectations regarding Arabic deployment, teacher credentialing, and curricular benchmarks. A contemporary study of “Arabic language initiatives” in the UAE revealed that, notwithstanding a proliferation of programmes, institutions still confront insufficient policy direction for the concurrent

delivery of Arabic and English; the study therefore urged the enhancement of policy guidance at both administrative and curricular strata^[26]. For heads of schools, the absence of a cohesive policy framework frequently compels them to devise language strategies ad hoc, underscoring the imperative for a systematic language-planning apparatus that equips them to elevate Arabic competency in English-medium Instruction contexts^[26].

2.4. Challenges to Arabic Language Instruction

Taha argued that despite national efforts to strengthen Arabic education in the UAE, several persistent challenges hinder effective learning and teaching of the language in English-medium instruction (EMI) schools^[24]. These challenges include outdated pedagogical practices, limited instructional resources and instructional time, and significant gaps in teacher preparation and professional development. A primary barrier is the heavy reliance on traditional, rote-based teaching methods, which emphasize grammatical memorization rather than communicative competence. Al-Bataineh noted that Arabic language instruction in many schools continues to employ didactic approaches that neither engage learners nor reflect contemporary second-language acquisition theories^[23]. Such outdated methods do not align with students' learning preferences, particularly in international school contexts, where inquiry-based and interactive approaches are more prevalent. Consequently, students often perceive Arabic lessons as disconnected or tedious compared to real-life applications, resulting in low motivation and achievement.

Likewise, Hopkyns and Elyas identified limited instructional time allocated to Arabic, compared to English and other core subjects, as another critical issue^[26]. In many EMI schools, Arabic is treated as a peripheral subject, resulting in minimal weekly contact hours and limited integration with other curricular areas. This marginalization reduces students' exposure to the language and limits opportunities for reinforcement across the curriculum. Furthermore, there is often a shortage of high-quality, age-appropriate Arabic teaching materials, particularly for non-native speakers. Al Bakri and Troudi critically noted that teacher preparation and quality also remain crucial challenges^[23]. Many Arabic teachers lack access to ongoing professional development focused on modern pedagogical techniques, student-centered learning,

and bilingual strategies. Additionally, pre-service teacher education programs may inadequately equip educators with the skills necessary to teach Arabic effectively in diverse EMI school settings. The lack of collaboration between Arabic and non-Arabic teaching staff further isolates Arabic instruction, preventing holistic language planning at the school level. Addressing these challenges requires systematic reform involving curriculum modernization, equitable time allocation, and sustained investment in teacher training^[27].

The body of work emerging since 2019 uniformly points to the professional preparedness of Arabic language teachers as the crucial variable in the success of English-medium instruction (EMI) programs in Arabic-language contexts. In the United Arab Emirates, contemporary analyses highlight that although the country has issued new curricular benchmarks for Arabic, it continues to confront a deficit of teachers trained to the requisite level, as well as a relative absence of comprehensive training regimes invested in contemporary Arabic pedagogy. A considerable number of Arabic educators enter the profession having received little exposure to strategies oriented toward learner proficiency or the promotion of a student-centred classroom, and they tend to default to traditional, grammar-focused frameworks that can alienate students. In response, the literature now advocates for a “paradigm shift” in the design and delivery of Arabic teacher education, encompassing both initial and ongoing training. Gallagher^[28] urges the incorporation of distinct modules within teacher preparation curricula that cultivate a deep, discipline-specific pedagogical content knowledge, coupled with immersive training that mirrors the bilingual realities of Gulf-school contexts. Complimentary to this, sustained professional development is championed—in the form of mentorship, structured workshops, and collaborative networks—to support in-service educators in the systematic adoption of interactive and communicative pedagogies designed to foster learner autonomy and proficiency in the Arabic language^[28].

Educational leaders must assume responsibility by placing the professional growth of Arabic teachers at the forefront and by providing sustained, targeted support for the adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches^[28]. The contemporary body of research indicates that the efficacy of top-down policy initiatives or curricular revamps will falter unless accompanied by a cadre of teachers who are both thoroughly

prepared and engaged in ongoing professional development, particularly within English-medium school contexts where Arabic instruction must compete for curricular time and pedagogical primacy.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

Al Hammadi identified several interrelated theoretical perspectives relevant to leadership strategies aimed at fostering Arabic proficiency in UAE schools^[19]. These include the sociocultural theory of language acquisition, transformational leadership theory in language education, and frameworks for language planning and policy implementation. Sociocultural theory, rooted in Vygotsky’s work, posits that language development is a socially mediated process in which context, interaction, and cultural tools shape learning outcomes. From this perspective, language acquisition occurs through meaningful engagement with more capable peers and adults within culturally relevant environments. Rogier argued that, when applied to Arabic instruction in the UAE, sociocultural theory underscores the importance of embedding Arabic language instruction in authentic, real-life contexts, enabling learners to negotiate meaning, express identity, and connect with their heritage^[22]. This theory also emphasizes the necessity of dialogic classrooms and collaborative environments supported by culturally responsive teaching practices.

Additionally, transformational leadership, introduced by Burns and further developed by Bass as cited in Aljaberi, (2024)^[1], emphasizes the role of leaders in empowering, inspiring, and motivating staff toward shared goals^[1]. Within multilingual educational contexts, transformational leaders articulate a compelling vision for bilingualism, model commitment to Arabic language development, and foster a school culture wherein Arabic holds significant cultural and academic value. Such leaders engage teachers in professional learning, enhance motivation, and build collective responsibility for language outcomes. Transformational leadership is particularly critical in addressing tensions between national identity and global competitiveness in EMI schools^[29].

Finally, language planning and policy implementation frameworks provide macro- and micro-level perspectives on enacting language policies within institutional settings^[30]. Spolsky’s model, for instance, outlines three primary components: language practices, language ideologies or beliefs,

and language management^[31]. School leaders, positioned at the intersection of these domains, translate national Arabic language policies into classroom realities. Effective policy implementation depends not only on official directives but also on school culture, leadership capacity, and stakeholder buy-in.

Theoretical frameworks have been deliberately leveraged at several phases of the investigative process to reinforce the integrity of both the methodological design and the subsequent interpretation. In the formulation of the guided interviews, elements derived from sociocultural theory and the study of transformational leadership were integrated to formulate prompts concerning student engagement, the observable presence of leadership within the classroom, and the cultural responsiveness characterizing Arabic language pedagogy. Concurrently, concepts from language planning and policy theory directed the formulation of items pertaining to the enactment of policy, the congruence of curricular materials, and the institutional backing available to instructors. In the subsequent analytic stage, these three frameworks were retained as lenses through which to categorize emergent themes and to comprehend the confluence among leadership behaviour, language ideology, and the micro-practices of instruction. This successive operationalization of theory—first to instruct the empirical gathering, then to contextualize the analytic discourse—guaranteed a coherent correspondence between the foundational concepts and the empirical results^[32].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Interviews and Data Collection

This qualitative study aimed to generate an interpretive understanding of how participants construct meaning from their experiences, perceptions, and sociohistorical contexts^[27]. The selected research design facilitated an exploration of current educational settings, where empirical evidence regarding leadership strategies for enhancing Arabic language proficiency in UAE schools remains limited. The study utilized a qualitative, semi-structured interview design, conducted both in person and online via Zoom. Interviews were chosen for their efficacy in eliciting diverse perspectives from school leaders while allowing participants to articulate their experiences and beliefs fully. The semi-structured interviews consisted of 20 open-ended questions organized around thematic domains: the role of Arabic in school vision and policy, challenges in curriculum implementation, strategies supporting students, leadership practices, perceptions of bilingualism, and parental and community engagement.

Questions were formulated following an extensive literature review on language planning, instructional leadership, and bilingual education within the UAE and broader Gulf contexts. Purposive sampling was employed to include school personnel directly responsible for instructional leadership and Arabic language development. In total, 38 educational leaders participated, comprising 15 Heads of Department (HODs), 11 Vice Principals, and 10 Principals (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics.

Role	Gender	Age	Years of Experience	Role (Cont.)	Gender (Cont.)	Age (Cont.)	Years of Experience (Cont.)
Head of Department (P0)	Female	38	3	Principal (P19)	Female	60+	25+
Head of Department (P1)	Female	40	7	Principal (P20)	Male	44	12
Head of Department (P2)	Female	40	12	Principal (P21)	Male	49	25+
Head of Department (P3)	Female	45	12	Principal (P22)	Male	50	23
Head of Department (P4)	Female	52	19	Principal (P23)	Male	60	25
Head of Department (P5)	Female	52	20	Principal (P24)	Male	60	25+
Head of Department (P6)	Female	54	25	Principal (P25)	Male	60+	25+
Head of Department (P7)	Female	54	21	Principal (P26)	Female	35	9
Head of Department (P8)	Male	35	13	Vice Principal (P27)	Female	41	20
Head of Department (P9)	Male	39	15	Vice Principal (P28)	Female	41	20
Head of Department (P10)	Male	41	15	Vice Principal (P29)	Female	42	19
Head of Department (P11)	Male	43	17	Vice Principal (P30)	Female	56	25+
Head of Department (P12)	Male	44	21	Vice Principal (P31)	Female	56	25+
Head of Department (P13)	Male	45	23	Vice Principal (P32)	Female	58	25+
Head of Department (P14)	Male	60	11	Vice Principal (P33)	Female	60	25+
Head of Department (P15)	Male	60+	25+	Vice Principal (P34)	Female	60+	25+
Principal (P16)	Female	47	18	Vice Principal (P35)	Male	49	25
Principal (P17)	Female	48	20	Vice Principal (P36)	Male	60	25+
Principal (P18)	Female	55	7	Vice Principal (P37)	Male	60+	25+

Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity, with all ethical considerations—including informed consent—addressed before interviews commenced. Respondents could choose to answer in Arabic or English, based on their preference, promoting authentic, contextually grounded responses. Arabic responses were subsequently translated into English by the researcher, with attention to preserving cultural and linguistic nuances. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed and summarized systematically, and the data were exported to Excel for preliminary organization and cleaning. An inductive thematic analysis was subsequently conducted. This interview approach effectively captured perspectives from leaders across diverse school phases and contexts, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns in leadership approaches, barriers to Arabic language development, and institutional strategies promoting student proficiency in Arabic.

3.2. Document Review

In addition to interview data, this study incorporated a qualitative review of relevant policy and school-level documents to supplement and contextualize findings. Document analysis served as a complementary method for triangulating participant insights and verifying alignment between stated leadership practices and institutional guidelines^[26]. This method provided a comprehensive understanding of how Arabic language instruction is positioned within educational frameworks and compliance standards in UAE private schools. Moreover, reviewed documents included school vision and mission statements, internal Arabic language department plans, Arabic curriculum frameworks and pacing guides, Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) and Ministry of Education (MoE) Arabic curriculum standards, professional development agendas focused on Arabic instruction, and language policy implementation documents and bilingual education models.

Materials were collected directly from participants or through publicly accessible school websites and ADEK circulars. The goal was to examine how leadership commitments to Arabic language development were documented and operationalized at the school level. Specifically, the review focused on the integration of Arabic language objectives into strategic planning, clarity of bilingualism policies, prioritization of Arabic in curriculum schedules, mechanisms for

teacher evaluation and instructional monitoring, and school-wide initiatives that promoted the Arabic language beyond classroom contexts. Each document was analyzed using a coding sheet aligned with interview thematic areas. Documents were examined not in isolation but as contextual artifacts that corroborated or contrasted participants' responses. For example, participant claims regarding the integration of Arabic into strategic school visions were cross-referenced with published vision or mission statements. Professional development programs were evaluated for their sustained emphasis on Arabic pedagogy and teacher support.

Document review also revealed common institutional patterns, such as frequently framing Arabic as a cultural obligation rather than a subject deserving equal academic rigor compared to English or Mathematics. In certain cases, discrepancies between declared priorities and documented action plans highlighted tensions between policy compliance and authentic leadership engagement with Arabic language initiatives. Employing document review alongside interview data provided a comprehensive understanding of Arabic language leadership practices, enhancing the study's credibility and enabling more nuanced themes to emerge during analysis^[33].

3.3. Data Management

Throughout the study, data management adhered to established qualitative research standards, ensuring orderly storage, secure handling, and clear provenance of all documents from collection through analysis^[34]. Semi-structured interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online. Each session was audio- or video-recorded upon obtaining participants' consent. Recordings were transcribed using commercial transcription software, after which researchers cross-checked each transcript verbatim against the original recordings to confirm accuracy. Subsequently, the data set was refined by removing incomplete or unclear segments. Ultimately, two interviews were excluded due to insufficient detail, resulting in 38 complete transcripts available for coding. Each respondent was assigned a pseudonym (P1 to P38), and all identifying information was removed to maintain confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines^[35].

As interviews were conducted in both Arabic and English, Arabic sessions were translated into English sentence

by sentence, carefully preserving the original tone, intent, and cultural context. In cases of ambiguity, the original Arabic text was presented alongside the translation to facilitate accurate interpretation by future coders. This bilingual approach enhanced analytical fidelity and improved the overall trustworthiness of the study^[28]. Transcripts were organized according to thematic areas corresponding to the sections of the semi-structured interview guide. They were then imported into NVivo software to facilitate systematic coding, tagging of key ideas, and theme identification. An evolving codebook recorded new codes and their clear definitions, and this document was updated whenever new patterns emerged from the data. Every coding decision was documented to ensure transparency and replicability^[27].

In order to protect sensitive files and maintain version control, all materials—including audio recordings, transcripts, translations, and coding notes—were stored securely in a password-encrypted folder accessible only to the lead researcher. Regular backups were performed, and master transcripts remained unaltered. A detailed data management log documented all changes to the dataset, including interview exclusions, coding modifications, and the final merging of themes. This meticulous audit trail enhanced the methodological rigor and strengthened the credibility of the findings^[29].

3.4. Data Analysis

The study utilized a thematic analysis approach to examine school leaders' perspectives on strategies for enhancing Arabic language proficiency. Thematic analysis, a foundational method in qualitative research, facilitates the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning within textual data^[30]. It was selected for its adaptability and appropriateness in exploring leadership beliefs, institutional practices, and contextual challenges as reflected in semi-structured interview responses. An inductive approach guided the analysis, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Although the interview questions were organized around conceptual domains (e.g., leadership practices, curriculum challenges, bilingualism), the coding process remained open-ended to ensure that findings were grounded in the data.

The analytic process unfolded in six progressive stages.

The first stage, familiarization, involved multiple readings of all 38 complete responses to facilitate immersion in the data. During this phase, the researcher recorded initial impressions, recurring phrases, emotional tone, and linguistic features—particularly important given the bilingual nature of the dataset. Arabic responses were translated and cross-validated to ensure interpretive accuracy. This was followed by initial coding, in which the researcher examined each response line-by-line and assigned concise, descriptive codes that captured distinct ideas or beliefs. Examples include “lack of principal involvement,” “Arabic as identity,” “parental disengagement,” and “English preference.” These codes reflected both explicit and implicit meanings. More than 150 initial codes were generated across the dataset, which laid the groundwork for deeper analysis.

In the categorization phase, codes were reviewed for redundancy, similarity, and thematic relevance, then grouped into broader conceptual categories. For instance, “low status of Arabic,” “fewer Arabic PDs,” and “preference for English” were consolidated under the category Institutional Marginalization of Arabic, while codes related to leadership presence and feedback were grouped under Leadership Engagement in Instruction. These categories were further synthesized into higher-order themes that captured patterned meanings across participants. Theme development was guided not only by the frequency of ideas but also by their interpretive value and alignment with the research questions. Three core themes emerged: Leadership Commitment and Visibility, Structural and Cultural Barriers to Arabic Proficiency, and Fragmentation of Policy and Practice in Arabic Language Instruction.

Each theme was then reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate the themes and to ground the findings in participants' lived experiences. Themes were carefully named and defined to reflect the essence of the data. The final stage of analysis involved mapping these themes back to the overarching aim of the study—exploring leadership strategies that influence Arabic language outcomes. This ensured that the analytic process remained aligned with the research objectives and contributed meaningfully to addressing the central research questions. The systematic and layered nature of this approach enabled the researcher to uncover nuanced insights,

which revealed both strategic considerations and systemic barriers that shaped leadership practices in Arabic language instruction within UAE schools.

To ensure the rigor and reliability of the study's findings, multiple strategies were implemented in accordance with Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability^[32]. Credibility was established through data triangulation and member checking. By examining a variety of data sources, including interviews and documents, the study ensured consistency and convergence in its findings. Participants were invited to review and validate the interpretations, thereby enhancing accuracy and minimizing potential researcher bias^[31]. Dependability was addressed through detailed documentation of data collection and analysis procedures, consistent with Yin's recommendation to maintain an audit trail and a structured case study database^[35]. This ensured transparency and reproducibility in the research process.

Transferability was enhanced by providing a rich description of the research context and articulating the underlying assumptions, thereby enabling other researchers to assess the relevance of the findings to different settings. Confirmability was supported through systematic documentation of the research process, demonstrating that findings were grounded in the data rather than influenced by researcher preconceptions^[24]. The inclusion of peer debriefing sessions with scholars in related fields further strengthened the objectivity and methodological soundness of the study^[29]. Together, these strategies bolstered the overall trustworthiness and academic rigor of the research.

4. Results

4.1. Theme One: Leadership Commitment and Visibility

The theme articulates a dual yet interdependent facet of school leadership engagement with Arabic language instruction present within the surveyed institutions. The initial facet catalogues the intentional procedures and habitual practices that school leaders employed to strengthen the Arabic language curriculum. The subsequent facet interrogates the participants' assessments regarding the degree to which these strategic interventions translated into tangible improvements in pedagogical practice and, in parallel, into measurable gains

in student proficiency in the language. To present these results with analytical clarity, the forthcoming discussion is organised into two distinct, albeit reciprocally informing, segments: the first delineates the specific initiatives leaders instituted to reinforce Arabic language teaching, while the second weighs the perceived effects of these initiatives on both the quality of instruction and student achievement in the language. Strategies Implemented by Leaders.

One of the most salient themes to emerge from the data was the degree of leadership commitment and visibility in supporting Arabic language instruction. Participants' responses indicated a wide spectrum of involvement among school leaders—from consistent classroom engagement to distant, symbolic oversight. This variation in visibility influenced not only how Arabic was perceived within the school culture but also the instructional quality and student outcomes associated with the subject.

Participants consistently described the Arabic language as central to their school's vision, emphasizing its cultural and national significance. As one principal (P1) stated, "It is essential to our vision and reflects the identity and values of the UAE." Similarly, another leader (P5) remarked, "The Arabic language plays a vital role in shaping student identity, and our leadership reflects that by integrating Arabic into wider school events." However, while the rhetorical value of Arabic was broadly acknowledged, the actual leadership practices varied considerably in how this vision was operationalized.

When asked about personal involvement in Arabic language outcomes, several leaders affirmed strong and regular engagement. One vice principal (P2) described her approach as "fully involved and monitoring the process," while another principal (P0) detailed a structured involvement process that included "regular classroom observations, supporting the Arabic team, and providing feedback." These leaders emphasized direct instructional monitoring, which included attending lessons, reviewing teacher planning, and evaluating student performance as part of their leadership duties. By contrast, a subset of respondents appeared to hold more symbolic or indirect roles, relying on middle leaders to enact instructional oversight. As an HOD (P3) noted, "I share some techniques with the Arabic team, but sometimes leadership doesn't give it the same importance as English." This kind of delegation, while operationally practical, often led to a

disconnect between leadership vision and daily classroom realities, especially when heads or principals were not visible during instruction or planning cycles.

A clear pattern emerged indicating that middle leaders—particularly heads of Arabic departments—play a crucial compensatory role in such contexts. They were described as “leading curriculum planning, monitoring teaching quality, and supporting individual teacher development” (P0), as well as “doing daily follow-ups and providing resources to help weak students” (P1). These findings reinforce the notion that when senior leadership is less actively involved, the responsibility for sustaining Arabic proficiency initiatives shifts disproportionately to departmental leaders. Those with higher visibility also tended to be more proactive in designing targeted interventions for struggling students. One vice principal (P2) explained, “We give Arabic equal importance by allocating appropriate resources and time, and we boost student interest through collaborative projects.” Similarly, a principal (P1) described the development of individualized action plans and follow-up mechanisms “to ensure support for students weak in Arabic.” These examples underscore how visible leadership can translate into concrete instructional strategies, including differentiated instruction, strategic resource allocation, and teacher professional development.

Perceived Impact on Arabic Outcomes

On the other hand, inconsistency or absence in leadership engagement was often linked with stagnation. One respondent commented, “Some students still feel Arabic is less important. If leadership doesn’t prioritize it in the same way as English or Math, that perception spreads.” This mirrors concerns raised in wider educational literature where symbolic leadership—without visible practice—risks reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that marginalize heritage languages. The theme of visibility also extended to participation in events and assemblies. While most leaders confirmed Arabic was promoted during UAE National Day celebrations or morning assemblies, there was less evidence of continuous leadership presence in everyday Arabic instruction. Leaders who were consistently present in classrooms, professional development sessions, and curriculum discussions reported greater teacher motivation and student engagement in Arabic. Overall, this theme highlights that leadership visibility is not merely physical presence, but a sustained commitment

demonstrated through instructional monitoring, meaningful support to teachers, and personal involvement in promoting Arabic as a valued subject. Those school leaders who were perceived as highly visible were often the ones cited as driving measurable improvements in both student performance and teacher confidence.

4.2. Theme Two: Structural and Cultural Barriers to Arabic Proficiency

The extended administrative deliberations produced several programmatic recommendations of considerable depth. These included: situating Arabic instruction within cohesive interdisciplinary thematic clusters; deploying Arabic as the primary medium of pedagogy across STEAM disciplines; broadening the range of Arabic-language extracurricular programs; and strengthening ongoing faculty development in culturally sustaining pedagogy. Nonetheless, conversations often present these initiatives as worthy goals rather than as components systematically woven into the daily fabric of classroom practice.

Strategies Implemented by Leaders

A second thematic category obtained from the analysis pertains to the interrelated structural and sociocultural impediments obstructing the advancement of Arabic language skills within the academies. Respondents catalogued a range of structural, instructional, and sociocultural determinants that cumulatively constrain advancement, notwithstanding the formal statutory elevation of Arabic within the national educational statutes.

The influence of prevailing cultural attitudes further compounds the difficulties confronting the learning environment. Interviewees articulated worries regarding learners’ dispositions toward Arabic, especially within institutions where English predominates both pedagogical practice and the overall ethos of the school. Evidence from the field indicates that many pupils, particularly those reared in bilingual or expatriate families, regard Arabic as excessively demanding, extraneous, or subordinate in status. A vice-principal (P19) summarised the prevailing cognitive frame: “The prevailing sentiment among both learners and occasionally parents is that Arabic ranks below English or Mathematics in career utility.” A parallel observation from another respondent (P23) underscored the same position: “Even among

Emirati pupils, the incentive to master Arabic at the academic level is muted, since spoken competence is frequently regarded as sufficient.”

The prevailing dismissal of Arabic as a secondary skill is further transmitted through an attenuated school-home nexus. Not infrequently, school leaders identified to the interviewers a conspicuous deficit in parental engagement in the reinforcement of Arabic instruction. A principal (P30) reported, “Guardians frequently lack familiarity with the curricular intents or the ways in which they might assist their offspring, particularly in the domains of reading and writing.” This concern was reiterated by a head of department (P35), who commented, “Our attempts to involve families through informational assemblies or guided reading projects register low turnout, particularly with programmes that centre on the Arabic language.”

Moreover, the existing curricular blueprint was characterised as excessively prescriptive, reliant on textbooks, and largely disassociated from students’ authentic life contexts.

Several leaders characterized the Ministry of Education’s Arabic curriculum as antiquated and insufficiently differentiated to accommodate the heterogeneity of learners. One participant (P17) remarked, “The curriculum overlooks the spectrum of proficiency levels present in a single classroom. Teachers teach to a median point, leaving both struggling and advanced learners without adequate support.” Another participant added, “The curriculum permits little flexibility for teacher or student creativity, which alienates both groups.”

These structural limitations and position-based norms are not isolated phenomena; they are interdependent and catalytical. A narrow executive emphasis on Arabic in organizational vision documents results in proportional declines in professional learning opportunities and in the provision of instructional materials. Consequently, instructional quality is constrained and the role of Arabic is further delineated to a marginal status. Even the most dedicated Arabic instructors, therefore, must expend inordinate effort to sustain learner engagement and achievement.

The evidence discussed suggests an imperative for comprehensive reform at both the institutional and the national policy levels if the sustained development of Arabic proficiency is to be realized. Absent targeted intervention on these structural and cultural impediments, initiatives designed to

improve students’ mastery of the language will incur a trajectory of fragmentation, discontinuity, and limited impact.

4.3. Theme Three: Fragmentation of Policy and Practice in Arabic Language Instruction

As with the previous theme, the findings are presented in two distinct sections that respond respectively to research questions two and three. The initial section explicates the manners in which school and organisational-level leaders exert influence over, or mediate, the Arabic-linguistic policy as formalised within each institution’s governing agenda. The subsequent section interrogates the leaders’ evaluations of the degree to which the procedural indicators of the policy are translated into measurable pedagogical outcomes, paying particular attention to the perceived discrepancies between prescriptive intent and operational enactment and to the consequent implications for students’ levels of linguistic competence in Arabic.

4.3.1. Implemented by Leaders

Multiple school leaders contended that the Kingdom’s instructional Arabic curriculum is too frequently perceived as a bureaucratic stipulation rather than a substantive discipline. One vice principal (P20) commented, “Arabic appears in the school development plan solely to satisfy inspection requirements, yet the subsequent pedagogical refinement evaporates.” A corresponding principal (P31) commented, “Policy documents articulate a vision, yet no observable accountability lever guarantees that the vision materialises in everyday instruction.”

The prevailing gap between the strategic language of the leadership and the realities of departmental execution emerged as a recurring theme. Multiple heads of department indicated that the Arabic component is nominally embedded in improvement plans, yet those plans undergo scant internal review, and focused performance audits of instruction are absent. One HOD (P26) remarked, “We confront the directive to establish Arabic targets, yet the reporting infrastructures we invoke are calibrated exclusively to English and Mathematics. Any Arabic performance is thus inadequately shadowed.” A parallel principal (P29) elaborated, “Data on Arabic student achievement is compiled, yet it garners no attention in leadership forums apart from imminent ADEK

inspections.” Moreover, instructional routines appeared to be calibrated more to longstanding teacher inclination and isolated discretion than to coherent pedagogical guidance promulgated by a strategic leadership framework.

A respondent (P18) remarked, “Arabic lessons follow the same pattern year after year, and teachers are rarely observed by leaders outside the department.” Such insularity engenders professional inertia; the privilege of isolation denies these educators the catalytic exposure redesigning practice and rare engagement with exemplar teaching outside the subject community. Consequently, Arabic classrooms are insulated from innovative methodologies, differentiated instructional frameworks, and technology-facilitated pedagogy, remaining impermeable even to the contemporary trajectories that are explicated by wider institutional strategy documents and modelled in the school’s own demonstration units.

The interviews uncovered a notable misalignment between student performance indicators and teacher-assessment frameworks in Arabic language instruction. Multiple school leaders communicated that evaluations of Arabic educators fail to adequately register student progress or deliberate instructional interventions. A vice principal (P12) articulated, “The general observation rubrics we apply lack the requisite specificity to yield meaningful insights into Arabic pedagogy.” Furthermore, instances were cited in which classroom observations were conducted by administrators lacking proficiency in Arabic, thereby constraining the quality of evaluative dialogue and relegating appraisals to superficial observations of environmental management rather than to an analysis of pedagogical effect.

4.3.2. Perceived Impact on Arabic Outcomes

A third major theme arising from the data is the discord between declared policy and the lived realities of Arabic language teaching within schools. While participants unanimously affirmed that Arabic is accorded official status and is central to national educational directives, they simultaneously signalled that the enactment of these provisions at the school level is fractured, inadequately supervised, and poorly coordinated with the overarching institutional vision.

A further source of fragmentation emerges from the gap between the prescribed Arabic curriculum and the diverse linguistic profiles of the student population. Many institutions recruit a heterogeneous mix of native, heritage,

and non-native Arabic speakers, but the prevailing framework enforces a uniform syllabus that fails to respect the unique linguistic histories of individual learners. One principal (P24) captured the dilemma sharply: “We are instructed to adhere to a uniform Arabic syllabus, yet a single classroom may comprise fluent speakers, hesitant decoders, and absolute novices.” Without the deployment of differentiated pathways or adaptive policy instruments, this disjunction produces dissatisfaction on the part of students and instructors alike.

Leaders specified enduring policy constraints that govern the procurement of instructional materials, the accreditation of supplementary texts, and the staffing of instructional personnel. Several respondents pointed out that the continued shortage of suitably qualified Arabic teachers arises from ministry regulations and fixed visa ceilings which do not align with actual regional demand. Concurrent observations revealed that directives governing the adoption of supplementary Arabic materials render their use impractical. A head of department (P33) summarized the position, stating, “We are prohibited from using alternative texts, even when the prescribed book does not match our students’ levels.”

Taken together, these statements highlight a continuing structural rupture whereby commendable leadership intentions dissipate once operationalized; the rupture is linked to intermittent oversight, weakened accountability, and the absence of curricular synergy. Administrators acknowledged that without a cohesive alignment of strategic vision, curricular design, continuous professional development, and evaluative systems, Arabic-language instruction risks becoming a nominal, ritualized practice that, despite its outward form, is unlikely to fulfill its stated educational ambitions.

5. Discussion

This discussion explores how educational leadership shapes Arabic language proficiency in private schools across the United Arab Emirates, drawing on qualitative insights from 38 school leaders. As Arabic increasingly competes with English in linguistically stratified learning environments, the study reveals that the success of Arabic language education depends less on curriculum design alone and more on how leadership, policy, and culture interact at the school level. Three core themes emerged: (1) the role of visible

and committed leadership, which highlights how senior leaders influence Arabic instruction through active engagement, symbolic endorsement, and strategic resourcing; (2) systemic and sociocultural barriers, encompassing both institutional inequities—such as imbalanced instructional time, limited teacher development, and poor material support—and broader cultural attitudes that diminish Arabic’s perceived relevance; and (3) the implementation gap between policy and practice, where national mandates often fail to translate into consistent classroom actions, leaving middle leaders to bridge the divide without sufficient authority or resources. Together, these themes suggest that improving Arabic outcomes requires more than technical reforms—it calls for a unified leadership approach that bridges vision and execution, elevates the status of Arabic within schools, and embeds the language meaningfully into daily educational life. The sections that follow examine each theme in relation to existing research and propose practical implications for strengthening bilingual education across the UAE.

5.1. Leadership Commitment and Visibility

The first major finding underscores that sustained, visible commitment from school leaders is essential for improving Arabic proficiency across the curriculum. When principals routinely observed lessons, coached teachers, and tracked student progress in Arabic, schools recorded faster gains in language skills. This pattern echoes a broad body of leadership research showing that active, transparent involvement by the principal correlates with overall school improvement and heightened teacher morale^[33,34]. Within the current study, Arabic specific leaders who regularly joined department meetings and publicly advocated for stronger instruction were viewed by colleagues as effective change agents, while those who delegated responsibility or remained aloof contributed to a flattening of learning in the subject. Such evidence points toward two interlocking roles of visibility: it articulates Arabic as a genuine priority and offers immediate, practical support to teachers. Furthermore, it mirrors Sergiovannis’ concept of leadership grounded in both moral purpose and instructional stewardship.

The recent observations parallel key principles found in transformational leadership theory. At its core, this approach posits that effective leaders paint a clear vision, energize followers, and exemplify dedication to common objectives.

In a multilingual school, the head, supported by the leadership team, must do more than proclaim Arabic central to the mission; they must live the message—attending Arabic lessons, honoring language milestones, and channeling time and money into Arabic initiatives. Such actions reflect Al-Jaberi’s contention that bilingual principals stimulate and empower teachers by publicly endorsing the cultural and scholarly worth of Arabic^[1]. In the same vein, classical models of instructional leadership insist that leaders engage deeply with curriculum design and classroom oversight. Hallinger’s widely cited framework, for example, tasks principals with setting academic targets, steering pedagogical activity, and nurturing a supportive climate. When this blueprint crosses into bilingual schools, it demands that Arabic feature conspicuously in school-improvement agendas and that progress in the language be tracked alongside outcomes in other core subjects. The findings illustrate this approach: one vice-principal said they are “fully involved and monitoring the process” of Arabic instruction, carrying out regular classroom observations and giving timely feedback to teachers (P2), and another principal explained that he supports the Arabic department with continual coaching and careful analysis of performance data (P0). Together, these accounts show that visible leadership goes beyond being on-site; it centers on steady, informed involvement in the practice of teaching.

Schools whose leaders visibly engage with Arabic instruction tend to report higher teacher morale and classroom innovation. When teachers observe that their administrators hold Arabic in the same esteem as subjects like English, they invest extra effort and trial new strategies. This pattern echoes Leithwood et al., who argued that effective leadership improves learning chiefly by boosting staff commitment and refining working conditions^[36]. Conversely, if support for Arabic remains mostly symbolic—showing up in aspirational vision statements or in occasional brief appearances at cultural events—staff remarked that little actually changes. One head of department complained that senior management “doesn’t give [Arabic] the same importance as English,” forcing departmental leaders to shoulder the load (P3). A leadership stance that stays hands-off risks strengthening the language hierarchy the school claims to oppose. More broadly, distributed leadership can fill the gap when principals step back; in the current study, heads of Arabic sections naturally took on the role of *de facto* advocates. Yet

such distribution should be a planned strategy, not an accident of the principal's indifference. Even in a distributed leadership model^[37], the principal must actively endorse and coordinate efforts so that everyone from department heads to instructional coaches pulls in the same direction. When a visible principal empowers others in this way, the leader blends transformational and distributed practices: they model the desired culture and invite the whole staff to take joint ownership of Arabic outcomes. The point is clear: improving Arabic proficiency begins at the top, with leaders who back the program, show up in classrooms, and understand language pedagogy. That kind of leadership sends a strong, unified message to the whole school community: Arabic study is central, not an optional add-on.

The results of this study elaborate on transformational leadership theory by demonstrating that deliberate, sustained visibility of school leaders positively mediates improvements in Arabic instruction, thereby motivating both teachers and students through an articulated, collective vision. This presence exemplifies the core tenet of transformational leadership: leaders exemplify commitment to shared objectives and systematically shape an institutional culture that prizes the Arabic language. Concurrently, the findings resonate with sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is inextricably socially constructed; when leaders visibly endorse the language, they engineer an environment in which Arabic is publicly esteemed and systematically utilized. Such an environment, in turn, fosters the collaborative, contextually rich learning experiences that the theory identifies as essential.

5.2. Structural and Cultural Barriers to Arabic Proficiency

The second theme unearths a web of structural and cultural obstacles that drag down Arabic language skills, even where policies promise otherwise. A central hurdle is the ascendancy of English in private schools, where it often drives lessons, materials, and prestige while pushing Arabic to the back seat. Interviewees observed that Arabic gets far fewer hours and resources than English or other so-called core subjects, a gap that Hopkyns and Elyas also noted in UAE international schools^[23]. In more recent work, Hopkyns and Elyas reported that many Emirati settings still cast Arabic as a fringe subject with mere minutes dedicated to

it^[26]. This was part of a larger trend in which English-led curricula replaced Arabic time. From a bilingual-education angle, this imbalance illustrates a subtractive model, in which the gaining language-English-thrives at the lost language-Arabic-expense. In such environments, English not only dominates class time but also comes to overshadow students cultural ties, eroding language proficiency and loosening bonds to heritage.

In contrast, current scholarship recommends an additive bilingual model, one that advances English alongside Arabic and regards both as valuable, interdependent resources for students^[37]. Many private schools in the United Arab Emirates, however, operate under a subtractive pattern, relegating Arabic to a narrow band in the timetable, where it has little chance of matching the time or status granted to English. Cultural mindsets and prevailing attitudes regularly entangle themselves with the more visible, structural problems within the educational system. A strongly entrenched belief among certain students and their families is that English embodies modernity and opportunity, whereas Arabic appears subsidiary to academic and professional success^[38]. Earlier research on the United Arab Emirates linguistic ecology has documented this ideology, and participants now confirm that many homes-including some Emirati households-treat Arabic as little more than a subject with limited utility.

Consequently, motivation to study the language wanes and parental encouragement at home grows scant. One vice-principal summarised the pervasive attitude when she said that Arabic is commonly judged as less critical for careers than English or mathematics, a view that also colours the outlook of students with an Arabic heritage (P19). Baker argues that when a community implicitly devalues a language learners receive weaker social signals to invest effort in it, and that dynamic unmistakably hinders engagement with Arabic^[39]. The broader sociocultural context thus matters profoundly. According to Vygotskys sociocultural theory, learning emerges through meaningful, socially mediated exchanges within the learners cultural world. Without those exchanges a language inevitably loses traction.

Research shows that learners acquire Arabic most effectively when they encounter the language in living, culturally rich situations-watching friends, community leaders, or family members use it in everyday exchanges. Sadly, Gulf classrooms rarely supply this immersive backdrop. Instead,

many Arabic periods are anchored to textbooks, scripted drills, and grammar charts that feel worlds apart from students realities, reinforcing the impression that Arabic is irrelevant. Ryding observed the same pattern, remarking that local programs emphasize memorization and syntax while ignoring learners interests and contemporary communicative methods^[40]. Participants in the present study echoed those critiques, depicting the official syllabus as inflexible and old-fashioned, leaving scant space for creativity or personalization that could spark genuine engagement. Remarkably, English-medium courses often adopt interactive, inquiry-driven models that excite students, which places Arabic at an unmistakable pedagogical disadvantage.

Compounding these problems is a chronic scarcity of high-quality, age-appropriate Arabic learning materials and scant professional development opportunities for Arabic teachers. Several school leaders have noted that their Arabic-language staff seldom receive training in student-centered or bilingual pedagogies, and they are almost never involved in whole-school initiatives such as workshops conducted in English. This situation reveals a deeper structural imbalance: capacity-building sessions routinely target English-medium educators, leaving those who teach Arabic professionally isolated. Al Bakri and Troudi argued that most English-medium instruction (EMI) schools across the Gulf continued to neglect the training of Arabic instructors and failed to encourage meaningful collaboration between Arabic and non-Arabic staff^[23].

As a result, Arabic teachers enjoy fewer opportunities to acquire fresh strategies or exchange successful practices, thus reinforcing traditional methods and, in turn, diminishing student engagement. The cumulative effect of these structural and cultural hurdles is a classroom climate in which Arabic is symbolically valued yet practically under-supported. Schools may tout the significance of the language—by embedding it in mission statements, for example, or by publicizing celebrations during National Day—but in everyday practice the subject receives minimal innovation, inadequate resources, and low institutional prestige. That disconnect between what is officially stated and what actually occurs breeds frustration among both teachers and students who genuinely care about maintaining and advancing Arabic. Even the most dedicated Arabic teachers struggle to motivate students who hear mixed signals about the languages worth-

praised as a key part of national identity yet often relegated to a secondary place in school curricula.

Comparative research shows that the UAE is not the only place where a global language pushes a home language to the sidelines. Across the Gulf states, rising English prestige in schools and the job market has overridden Arabic, leaving many young people worrying about their command of the mother tongue. Similar patterns appear in Wales, Poland, Canada, and parts of Asia, where speakers of minority or regional languages drift toward whatever tongue promises higher status, exposing schools to the same prestige gap. Acknowledging the problem, the UAE has launched the Arabic Language Charter and reworked lesson plans in hopes of restoring pride in Arabic. Yet evidence from classrooms suggests that without tackling deep-seated cultural and institutional habits, such nationwide reforms will change little. A truly sociocultural answer would embed Arabic in everyday school life by using it in science fairs, arts clubs, service projects, and play, so students encounter the language in rich, purposeful contexts rather than confining it to a single period.

Reframing Arabic as more than a testable skill could reshape campus attitudes, showing students that the language facilitates learning, creative expression, and social connection. Culturally responsive leaders are key to this shift: by publicizing Arabic achievements, linking the language to identity and citizenship, and making its everyday use routine, they push back against existing hierarchies. Achieving lasting change thus demands two strands: systemic reforms such as a balanced curriculum, enhanced teacher training, and richer resources, alongside an ideological turn that positions Arabic as essential for students' futures no less than English. This is a dual path that principals must navigate with care.

The obstacles articulated within the present theme substantiate classic and recent language-planning frameworks, which contend that even overtly beneficial initiatives remain vulnerable absent systematic, structural, and contextual realignment. Evidence in the present instance reveals that recurrent shortfalls in instructional hours, professional capacity-building, and the pronounced devaluation of Arabic consistently vitiate the operational integrity of the selected policy. Such affective levers confirm the broader predictions of sociocultural theory, which stipulates that language acquisition

relies, in part, on systematic participation in the social and institutional practices of the learning environment. Absent concerted, habitual incorporation of Arabic into the quotidian milieu of the school—including teacher discourse, curricular artefacts, and informal interactions—learners encounter manifestly reduced arenas for authentic and scaffolded oral and script-centred use, constraining the negotiated, activity-based learning processes that sociocultural scholarship posits as crucial. Time, scaffolding, institutional resources, and culturally salient engagement in Arabic are, therefore, interdependent elements whose conjoined absence curtails the dialogic and participatory learning that sociocultural models regard as vital for linguistic vascularization. Arabic directly constrains the socially supported learning processes that sociocultural frameworks consider essential.

5.3. Fragmentation of Policy and Practice

The third theme centers on the persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities in Arabic language education. Official documents and public speeches in the United Arab Emirates herald Arabic as a cornerstone of national identity and insist that every school day begins with its study. Underneath this unified front, however, implementation in individual schools lags well behind. Interviewees frequently noted that targets related to Arabic appear in improvement plans or inspectorate checklists, yet compliance is often shallow and procedural rather than substantive and transformative. As one vice-principal bluntly explained, “We put Arabic in the development plan simply to satisfy the auditors, but we do nothing afterward to lift teaching” (P20). A serving principal added that “good policies stay more ink on paper because no one checks whether they show up in the lesson” (P31). Together, these candid reflections indicate that several schools regard Arabic as little more than a box they must tick in order to avoid regulatory trouble, rather than as a measure of overall educational quality. Similar patterns of fragmentation surface across other policy domains.

Multiple school leaders observed that although strategic plans set Arabic-language goals, no formal systems collect and review data on those goals, in sharp contrast to the well-established routines for English and mathematics. One department head noted that the existing data framework was crafted mainly for English and math, so Arabic achievement slipped onto the agenda only when an external inspection

was imminent. Teacher-evaluation routines reflected the same imbalance; as a vice principal remarked, the general observation checklists did not capture the distinctive methods and benchmarks required to assess Arabic teaching meaningfully. In some instances, Arabic faculty received feedback from non-Arabic-speaking supervisors, who directed their attention to broad classroom-management issues rather than discipline-specific indicators, such as gains in vocabulary or syntax. Collectively, these patterns reveal a gap between the system-wide emphasis on Arabic set by policy documents and the day-to-day monitoring and support actually experienced in schools.

Educational reform frequently falters at the point where broad vision meets the messy reality of classroom work. Fulan captured that divide by describing it as “implementation without follow-through”: new policy frameworks are rolled out, yet the ongoing guidance and review needed to embed them simply do not arrive^[41]. Our research supports this observation: unless Arabic instruction is routinely audited, teachers receive tailored professional development, and student- language outcomes shape performance reviews, even the most sincere policy intentions produce only modest gains. In short, coherence across strategy, support, and accountability is still absent. Wright argued that every bilingual and heritage- language program wrestled with a similar mismatch between aspirational goals and day-to-day practice^[42]. In the United Arab Emirates, although a vigorous national agenda now champions Arabic, its on-the-ground execution still hinges on the motivation and resourcefulness of each school-and, ultimately, each principal. Some institutions in our sample, however, achieved noticeable internal coherence: leaders set unambiguous expectations that Arabic improvement is non-negotiable, instituted regular internal assessments, paired teachers with instructional coaches, and examined progress data at frequent intervals. There, a far tighter fit emerged between the policy call to “raise Arabic proficiency” and the concrete actions that school leaders and teachers routinely undertook. Across the broader system, however, several institutions still operate without this alignment, leading one participant to describe an ongoing discrepancy as a mismatch between what schools say they value in Arabic instruction and what they actually deliver.

A key finding from the study is that middle leaders play a critical role in narrowing the gap between language policy

and classroom practice. When senior leaders demonstrated limited engagement with Arabic instruction, heads of Arabic departments and other middle leaders often assumed advocacy roles to sustain language initiatives in the absence of top-level support. These leaders coordinated lesson planning, mentored classroom teachers, and organized extracurricular activities such as Arabic clubs. Their actions served as compensation for the lack of sustained executive leadership. This pattern reflects the concept of distributed leadership, in which responsibility is shared across staff rather than centralized in the role of the principal^[37]. In these instances, the distribution of leadership proved advantageous. Dedicated department heads maintained continuity and momentum when senior leadership failed to do so. However, the findings also show that middle leaders alone cannot overcome systemic fragmentation. Without active support from principals and institutional structures, even the most committed Arabic department heads encountered resistance. One such leader explained that although she set ambitious goals and initiated new projects, her efforts lacked institutional reinforcement because they were “rarely discussed in leadership meetings” unless external inspection pressures were present (P29). What appeared to be distributed leadership often functioned as a short-term response designed to prevent program deterioration rather than as a sustainable leadership model.

A purposeful collaboration between senior and middle leaders is necessary to embed Arabic-language improvement into everyday governance and school development processes. When this partnership is well established, it fosters accountability structures such as regular progress reviews, earmarked budgets for materials and training, and a shared expectation that responsibility for Arabic instruction is held collectively rather than solely by the Arabic department. Fullan and others have argued that lasting educational change depends on system-wide coherence supported by aligned leadership at every level^[41]. To further interpret the fragmentation described by participants, Spolsky’s tripartite model of language policy provides a useful lens^[31]. The model consists of three components: language practices (actual language use), language ideologies (the beliefs and attitudes surrounding language), and language management (formal rules and policy decisions).

In the context of the United Arab Emirates, national and

emirate-level directives designed to support Arabic represent the management layer, while the framing of Arabic as central to national identity reflects prevailing language ideologies. Yet many teachers continue to follow routines that marginalize Arabic, which exposes a disconnection between policy ideals and everyday instructional realities. School leaders stand at the intersection of these three components. They are expected to interpret external mandates, shape school culture, and organize schedules and resources so that policy becomes visible in practice. However, the findings suggest that many principals struggle to fulfill this integrative role. Some are influenced by international standards, while others lack the step-by-step guidance needed to improve Arabic instruction effectively. Several participants also identified weak accountability as a contributing factor. Whereas performance in English and mathematics is closely monitored and publicly discussed, Arabic outcomes receive far less attention and scrutiny.

Addressing the gap between policy and practice will likely require two mutually supportive strategies. First, external oversight mechanisms could be strengthened so that inspection teams evaluate Arabic instruction and student achievement with the same level of detail used in other subjects. Second, capacity-building efforts should provide principals with clear implementation frameworks and accessible tools tailored to Arabic language improvement. Some progress is already evident. For instance, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), in partnership with the Ministry of Education, has introduced early childhood Arabic guidelines and mandated daily Arabic instruction in lower-primary grades. The long-term effectiveness of these reforms will depend on whether school leaders consistently apply them in daily school operations.

Despite the strong national rhetoric supporting Arabic language education, a clear implementation gap persists. This disconnection has hindered progress in many schools across the UAE. Bridging it requires cohesive leadership at every level. Senior leaders must demonstrate sustained engagement, middle leaders must coordinate daily implementation, and the overall school culture must treat Arabic instruction as integral to student achievement rather than as a regulatory formality. This study shows that when leadership teams collectively pursue clearly defined Arabic objectives and reinforce them through systematic monitoring, sufficient

resourcing, and strategic instructional practices, policy commitments become visible in classroom realities. In contrast, when such alignment is missing, policy intentions remain aspirational and unfulfilled. The three interdependent domains discussed—leadership visibility, structural and cultural support, and policy-practice alignment—form a mutually reinforcing system. Advancing Arabic language proficiency in the UAE depends on a comprehensive approach that integrates all three. Only through sustained institutional commitment and unified action can the national vision for Arabic as a vibrant language of daily use be fully realized.

The discrepancy between articulated objectives and the realities of classroom interaction revealed in our analysis resonates with Spolsky's conception of effective language management and policy^[31]. Spolsky posits that statutory language principles will remain ineffectual in practice so long as they diverge from the habitual and ideological language behaviour of the community. In his view, policy pronouncements devolve into ungrounded aspirations—"a dream"—if they are not subsequently enacted in environments shaped by daily linguistic encounters and by prevailing community beliefs. Within the curriculum context illuminated by our data, the persistence of such divergence indicates that the mediation of transformer leadership is not only advantageous but obligatory^[43]. Leaders of this ilk could consolidate diverse stakeholders under a coherent, evidence-driven vision of Arabic language instruction while instituting rigorous and transparent accountability mechanisms that will subsequently align daily pedagogical behaviour with national or institutional aspirations. Correspondence between intervention and assurance is a prominent principle in the theoretical literature on transformational leadership, which illustrates the decisive role of the school principal or system director in directing motivational and coordinative forces toward such common ends; this becomes especially salient in bilingual systems, where representatives of competing ideological or commercial objectives collectively negotiate the salience of Arabic and of other vernaculars or international languages^[44].

6. Conclusions

Through in-depth interviews and observational data collected across five representative English-medium private schools in the United Arab Emirates, this study has empiri-

cally established the central role that effective school leadership plays in the retention and elevation of Arabic language competence. By eschewing an exhaustive presentation of results, the report nevertheless confirms that school leaders who demonstrate strategic vision and sustained personal advocacy can reliably reposition Arabic as an educational and cultural priority, counterbalancing entrenched infrastructural and ideological impediments. The inquiry thus contributes to an under-explored domain that conjoins language policy and educational governance, providing evidence that operational decisions and professional norms within schools can translate stated national objectives regarding heritage language vitality into daily pedagogical routines and institutional culture^[45].

The results presented here advance scholarly conversation in three primary ways. To begin with, they augment the heritage-language maintenance literature by demonstrating, through primary data, how purposive leadership action preserves a national language—namely, Arabic—within an English-dominant milieu. The data confirm that, whenever headteachers foreground Arabic as a constitutive dimension of institutional culture, the language achieves both symbolic and practical traction, thus challenging the assumption that English hegemony is irreversible. Second, the study deepens comprehension of educational leadership in English-medium instruction (EMI) settings beyond the Anglophone core. It discloses the micro-political and administrative manoeuvres through which school leaders operationalize language policy in multilingual environments, delicately reconciling transnational economic exigencies with local sociocultural imperatives. By collectively interrogating these two domains, the investigation surface the reciprocal and underappreciated relationships among leadership practice, policy enactment, and resultant bilingual educational trajectories, thereby furnishing a conceptual scaffold for future work on language policy across divergent EMI contexts^[46].

The findings articulated in this study possess tangible ramifications for principals, policy architects, and instructional staff embedded in multilingual educational contexts. To school leadership, a central directive emerges: a sustained, comprehensive embrace of heritage Arabic is indispensable. Administrators ought to weave Arabic into the overarching strategic vision and institutional growth agendas, elevating the language beyond auxiliary status to a pillar of cultural identity and educational achievement. Concrete, public

commitments—including the integration of Arabic within assemblies and extracurricular programming, systematic supervision of classroom practice, and the strategic coaching of Arabic instructors—serve to institutionalize and elevate the language throughout the school ecosystem. To policy makers and educational authorities, the evidence underscores the imperative of synchronizing systemic language policy with resilient, frontline support mechanisms. Legislative and regulatory instruments must be fortified to deliver adequate material resources, curricular adaptability, and fairness-based accountability that empower schools to realize Arabic programmes effectively. This entails the provision of tactically designed resources, judicious allocation of instructional hours, and evaluative criteria that formally valorize bilingual and bicultural competencies. Toq, systemic, sustained, and embedded professional development is a prerequisite. Arabic language instructo. must avail themselves of continuous, research-informed learning in tandem with global school pedagogical frameworks^[47].

Allocating resources to structured professional development, establishing sustained collegial networks, and offering targeted inducements for pedagogical experimentation constitute an effective, synergistic strategy for elevating both educator morale and instructional excellence in English-medium instruction (EMI) settings. By furnishing dedicated teachers with systematic growth opportunities, ongoing peer support, and recognition for responsive teaching, systems empower motivated professionals to harness disciplinary and linguistic strengths. Collectively, these calibrated interventions cultivate an institutional atmosphere in which heritage language proficiency can be integrated with confidence and creativity, reinforcing the dual objectives of bilingual education by normalizing additive language growth rather than positioning it as an accidental or peripheral task^[47].

Future research should extend the findings of this study by systematically examining the relationship between school leadership and heritage language proficiency across extended timelines and varied educational environments. Methodologically, longitudinal designs that monitor cohorts of Arabic learners and their instructors over multiple academic cycles would help elucidate the durability of leadership-driven reforms and their residual effects on linguistic competence and pedagogical routines. Data analysis focused on the align-

ment between continued leadership presence and incremental enhancements in proficiency and language attitudes would yield evidence of causative processes that existing cross-sectional studies may overlook. Concurrent comparative investigations that juxtapose varied institutional configurations or regulatory frameworks—either within the UAE or in comparable educational systems across the Gulf and the wider Arab diasporas—could delineate which leadership practices yield uniform advantages and which adapt only within contextual contingencies. Complementary interpretive studies that solicit the views of educators and learners would triangulate leadership-oriented findings with lived classroom realities. Such perspectives would enrich existing quantitative maps, particularly in respect of actor-centered incentives, pedagogical routines, and emotional investments that together constitute the micro-circuitry of language maintenance. Collectively, these research trajectories would test the external validity of the current evidence, thereby equipping policymakers with nuanced, context-ready leverage points for promoting Arabic within increasingly multilingual student populations^[46].

Overall, these findings underscore the critical role of intentional educational leadership in safeguarding linguistic heritage at a time when the public sphere is increasingly dominated by global English. Arabic, when taught in English-medium contexts, is threatened by reduction to an isolated subject; the study demonstrates that the more insidious challenge lies with a vacuum of leadership^[48]. Only principals and heads of department who self-identify as stewards of Arabic can bridge the distance between written policy and the quotidian experiences of teachers and learners. Their stewardship turns curricular intentions into habits of value, so that Arabic is longitudinally acquired, emotionally resonant, and practically employed^[49]. If pursued with conviction, such leadership creates a model that transcends the UAE, furnishing actionable precedents for any multilingual polity striving to harmonize an international lingua franca with a plurality of vernaculars^[50]. Consequently, the study concludes that without strategically attuned, heritage-oriented school leaders, the preservation of Arabic—and by extension, of equitable multilingual environment—is appreciably untenable in a globalized configuration of educational governance^[15].

Author Contributions

A.A.: conceptualization; study design; ethics coordination; participant recruitment; data collection (interviews/artifacts); primary coding and inductive thematic analysis; figure/table frameworks; original draft writing. A.M.A.: methodology refinement; triangulation and validity checks; supervision of analysis; interpretation; writing—review & editing; submission management and correspondence. A.Q.: methodological guidance; literature synthesis; analytic mem-
oing; critical revision of results/discussion; writing—review & editing. R.K.A.: data curation (transcription/translation management); assistance with coding and document review; reference management; formatting; writing—minor edits. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of United Arab Emirates University No: ERSC_2023_2448, date of approval 31/10/2024.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participation was voluntary, and ethical principles of confidentiality, secure data handling, and respect for participants were observed throughout. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, de-identified during transcription, and Arabic responses were translated with attention to preserving meaning.

Data Availability Statement

The study is based on semi-structured interview transcripts and school/policy documents. De-identified data contain confidential and potentially identifiable information about participants and institutions; therefore, they are not

publicly available to protect privacy and comply with consent agreements. Access: De-identified excerpts and the coding scheme may be shared upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to institutional ethics approval and a data-use agreement.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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