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People Watching:

A case study of teacher observation culture and social learning spaces in Dubai private schools

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ABSTRACT

Student enrolment and fee revenue in international private schools are at an all-time high around the world. Private international schools in Dubai are among the highest in volume and most competitive in this global market. As a result of this, teacher accountability and observation culture has become the norm. Recent studies report teacher frustration with many of these formal observation systems and question their impact on continued teacher professional development. As many international schools operate as social learning spaces within which informal professional development often takes place between teachers, this study aims to understand the impact that formal teacher observation culture has on social learning. The study was designed with a mixed-method approach, using quantitative survey data to gain an overview of the observation culture in Dubai, combined with informal interviews to understand the lived experience of these teachers.

The results from the study substantiated the existence of this formal observation culture with many teachers reporting regular formal visits from Senior Leadership and variations in feedback from informal discussion to pay related judgments and ratings. This practice was often completed in preparation for visits by the KHDA, the regulating body responsible for the annual inspection of Dubai private schools. The study also confirmed that these schools operate as social learning spaces within which teachers contribute to mutual professional development in a variety of informal social practices. The formal observation systems adopted by the schools often had an impact on some of the key elements in social learning spaces such as staff relationships.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that schools need to rethink their approach to teacher observation to correct what has become a stressful and toxic observation culture in the Dubai private school industry. As evidence has shown that teachers often place more value on informal social learning from their peers, more opportunities should be put in place to allow these to foster with less emphasis placed on pre-planned, artificial lesson observations in preparation for the annual school inspection.

CONTENTS

GLOSSARY

UAE	United Arab Emirates
KHDA	The Knowledge and Human Development Authority
PD	Professional Development
CPD	Continued Professional Development
CPTD	Continued Professional Teacher Development
CP	Communities of Practice
PLC	Professional Learning Communities
RATE	Rapid Assessment of Teacher Effectiveness
ISERP	The Individual School Effectiveness Research Project
ISTOF	International System for Teacher Observation and Feedback
Ofsted	Office of Standards in Education
CLASS	Classroom Assessment Scoring System
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRP	Performance Related Pay

1 INTRODUCTION

Data by ISC Research (2020) indicates that there has been a 349% growth in English-medium international schools over the past 20 years, increasing from 2,584 schools in 2000 to 11,616 schools in 2020. This market consists of approximately 5.98 million students and a total fee income of $54 billion dollars. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) are a key contributor to these figures as the Emirate of Dubai tops the list of leading cities in the world for international schools with 281, followed by Abu Dhabi with 151. The majority of these international schools in Dubai are privately owned, with both student success and business profit as the combined goals. As a result, a formal observation culture has emerged, in which teachers are under intense pressure to perform throughout the school year. This research aims to understand the impact that the formal observation culture in Dubai has on teachers' continued professional development within schools functioning as social learning spaces. While research on teacher observation often places it as the core of continued professional teacher development (CPTD), this study aims to understand the impact it has on other forms of CPTD. **The research question posed asks to what extent does the formal observation culture in Dubai private schools impact them as social learning spaces for teachers?**

Presently, the UAE is in the final year of its Vision 2021 National Agenda which emphasises the development of a first-rate education system, high quality teachers, and students ranking among the highest in the world in reading, mathematics, and science exams. The progress towards these goals will be monitored by the private school inspection body in the UAE, The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). The KHDA are currently responsible for the annual inspection and rating of all private schools in Dubai. The grade received after these inspections determines how attractive a school is to parents but also the regulation of the fees a school can charge. As teacher observations form a central role in these inspections, successful teacher performance is critical in schools becoming successful and profitable. As a result of this annual process, a teacher observation culture has emerged in Dubai private schools where teachers are regularly subjected to observation, judgement, and rating. Most

schools have adopted the KHDA framework in their own inspections throughout the year which are conducted as often as termly or weekly in some cases.

While there is currently a wide body of research on individual teacher observation systems and policies (Wragg, 2002; Cohen and Goldhaber, 2016; Martinez, Taut and Schaaf, 2016; Steinberg and Garrett, 2016; Muijs *et al.*, 2018), there is little research exploring the observation cultures that can emerge within schools and groups of schools in designated cities or areas. Because of the previously mentioned high concentration of international private schools, and regular high-stakes inspections of teachers working within them, Dubai is an important case study for teacher observation culture. The purpose of this research is to gain an overview of this observation culture and provide insight to the lived experiences of the teachers conducting and receiving these observations on a regular basis. As the UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda places a first-rate education system at its core, this is a particularly demanding time for teachers who are under constant surveillance.

Rather than exploring observation culture in isolation, this research aims to understand the impact it has on schools as social learning spaces. The theory of social learning spaces can encompass related theories where learning is a social process which happens organically and collaboratively within the communities. Examples of this include Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2009), Professional Learning Communities (Eaker, 2002), and Continued Professional Development which is especially relevant for teachers (Engelbrecht, 2007). As the UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda requires a complete transformation of the current education system and teaching methods, teacher professional development and schools operating as social learning spaces is of critical importance.

A mixed-method research approach was adopted in answering this question, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was retrieved by conducting an online questionnaire of 144 teachers working in Dubai private schools in order to understand if a formal observation culture exists in these schools and if they have any characteristics of social learning spaces. Semi-structured interviews with six of the questionnaire respondents were conducted to generate qualitative data to aid in understanding the lived

experience of these teachers and assess the impact on formal observations on their practice and schools as social learning spaces. By combining these research methods, a broad overview of the observation culture was achieved with in-depth analysis of its impact on individual teachers. This mixed methods approach was essential in understanding if the formal observation culture in Dubai private schools impacts the social learning of the teachers within them.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Literature Review

Classroom or teacher observation is a widely discussed and debated topic in educational practice and literature. As a result, different styles of classroom observation have been developed over the years. According to Wragg (2002), some are drawn from traditions which involve systematic measurement and careful control of the conditions under which observations take place, while others are based on the approaches developed by anthropologists studying tribal life. Some observers are influenced by the context in which the lesson takes place and concentrate on specific aspects such as a particular subject. This in turn may influence whether they adopt a quantitative approach or qualitative approach. The process can be further complicated by the criteria they use to assess, whether their visit is planned or unannounced, and how frequently they will be observing the teacher.

In exploring the literature on this topic, there will be a focus on three practical aspects of teacher observation and three issues which arise as a result of these observations. The practical aspects looked at are observation criteria, observation frequency, and observation results. Intrinsic to these questions are the issues of accountability, credibility and politics. Because of the international school industry within which the research will take place, literature looking at a variety of national observation policies will be explored as well as international, while also focusing on studies conducted within the United Arab Emirates.

Observation criteria

As the primary goal of teacher observation is to identify and rate good or bad teaching, it is important to first define what good teaching is observed as in practice. This is strongly contested in the literature and varies greatly based on national or state requirements of school leaders and teachers, culture, and school needs. As a result, Cohen and Goldhaber (2016) state that any observational system only measures a small portion of a broader "teaching quality", a construct for which we do not yet have a consensus (p.380). It is important therefore to reach a consensus on how this is identified to avoid the school of 'we all know

what we mean by good teaching' in which appraisers rely on 'when I see it I know it' or it's 'just intuition' as rationale for assessing teacher performance (Montgomery, 2013, p.16).

Much of the literature investigating teacher observation in schools in the USA identifies good teaching as something that can be quantitatively measured using rubrics or formulae. Gargani and Strong (2014), state that teachers can be accurately and quickly observed using Rapid Assessment of Teacher Effectiveness (RATE). The latest version of RATE consists of six items relating to the lesson objective, instructional delivery mechanisms, teacher questioning strategies, clarity of presentation of concepts, time on task, and level of student understanding. Each item is rated on 3-point scale, and judges are encouraged to jot down notes to support their scores. Gargani and Strong stress that this does not define good teaching, but is sufficient to predict one important consequence of good teaching, increased student learning. Briggs and Alzen (2019) also describe how observational data can be converted into numbers. When school protocol requires the observer to go beyond qualitative observations into a set of ordered numeric scores, the observer becomes a "rater." The scores that result from this procedure are then averaged across multiple practices, lessons, and raters and then attached to teachers so that they can be compared either with one another or with some criterion-referenced standard (p.638). Similarly, Steinberg and Garrett (2016) describe a system in which teachers are scored on a scale from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 4 (distinguished). The scores for each are then averaged within subject to create section-level aggregate scores for each component and represent the average scores for a teacher's subject-specific instruction for a single class of students. While principals in the USA value these observation strategies, they are very time-consuming and often require them to spend hours in the classroom, scripting evidence and scoring rubrics (Goldring *et al.*, 2015).

As well as being time-consuming, this sort of quantitative rating is limited in many other factors when compared with qualitative teacher observation. Wragg (2002) states that judging the quality or effectiveness of what happens in a classroom is not a simple or unidimensional matter and when we talk about a 'good' teacher, an 'effective' strategy or a 'bad' lesson, we are referring to our own subjective

perception (p.60). While those who prefer quantitative approaches might look at test scores or teacher ratings, others operating to a different agenda might appraise what they see as the quality of learning taking place, without necessarily measuring it. For these reasons, qualitative teacher observation has become far more popular in many countries outside of the USA in recent years. While rating still occurs in many of these situations, schools are moving away from mathematical rubrics and numerical ratings to criteria that often contain levels of different competencies deemed important in teaching in that environment. These criteria can contain valued attributes in the teaching profession that may be incredibly difficult to quantify. For example, classroom observation in Singapore and Japan includes criteria such as 'nurturing the whole child', 'winning hearts and minds' and 'pupil trust.' These more abstract elements of teaching tend to receive less attention in the USA, where technical and procedural aspects of instruction play a larger role (e.g. questioning techniques, classroom management, identify progress for subgroups) (Martinez, Taut and Schaaf, 2016). Similarly, in China, 'teacher morality' refers to teachers' professional ethics and conduct, and includes such criteria as being committed to the teaching profession, observing school rules, caring for and respecting students, and acting as a role model to students (Zhang and Ng, 2017, p.203).

Evidently, what is considered good teaching can vary greatly in different countries and cultures. The International School Effectiveness Research Project (ISERP) illustrates this. ISERP was an international comparative study that used US-developed observation instruments to look at classroom practices in the USA, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, The Netherlands, Norway, the UK and Ireland. These instruments proved highly problematic outside of an Anglo-American context, as it became clear that countries defined key components and measures of effective teaching differently, and that many items suffered from ceiling effects, leading to a lack of differentiation between teachers (Muijs et al., 2018, p.396). As a direct result of this, the International System for Teacher Observation and Feedback (ISTOF) was developed by a team from 20 countries using an iterative Delphi process to ensure cross-cultural relevance and validity. The team identified five overarching or supercomponents that encapsulated effective teaching. These were classroom environment, quality of teaching, adaptive teaching, long-term planning, and teacher as a professional (Teddlie *et*

al., 2006). This international mindset when observing teaching was adopted by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) when establishing their new observation system for private schools in Dubai. Policy makers involved in the new monitoring system decided that it should be flexible and capable of responding to a wide-ranging set of needs and demands of families coming from many different cultures and nationalities. The final design of the new inspection system was shaped after consulting with local stakeholders, receiving advice from regional and international experts, and by visiting countries with working inspection systems such as the UK, Scotland, The Netherlands and New Zealand (Thacker and Cuadra, 2014, p.23).

'Good teaching' is evidently incredibly difficult to define in simple terms and is perceived differently in observations around the world. It may be measured quantitatively or qualitatively, however consensus in the literature seems to suggest that a qualitative measurement of teaching which allows for varied criteria containing less tangible factors such as cultural intricacies and national and local beliefs about effective teaching result in a far more informed observation of teaching ability.

Observation frequency

Just as there is debate as to what good teaching looks like in the literature, there is also a host of different perspectives on how often these teacher observations should take place. Like the previous section, these perspectives differ among studies in different countries and cultures. Briggs and Alzen (2019) advocate for observations to be conducted over a longer period of time to demonstrate teacher growth in the USA, ideally 8-10 observations over a two-year span. Steinberg and Garrett (2016) support this longer-term observation stating that unless observation scores are generated using multiple years of teacher data to adjust for nonrandom assignment of teachers to classes of differing ability, then annual performance evaluation will likely mischaracterize teacher effectiveness. The inspection agency Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) in the UK have also adapted to this movement towards less observations by reducing the number of judgements from 28 in the earlier framework to just 4 in the 2012 revision (Baxter, 2014). In Dubai, the KHDA conduct only one annual inspection of schools however this has been deemed too frequent with criticisms such as schools

spending a considerable part of the year focusing on preparing for the visit which can detract from teaching (Azzam, 2017, p.126). Schools also explain that the impact of the changes they put into place following the inspection recommendations, may take time to be seen, sometimes longer than one year. This is especially true given the high turnover of students and, for many schools, the teachers (Thacker and Cuadra, 2014).

There are also differing perspectives stating that observation needs to be something constant, embedded in the working culture of the school rather than as isolated events. Zhang and Ng, (2017) accredit the successful observation system in China to the observations taking part throughout the whole year. Cohen and Goldhaber (2016) state that most research instruments mandate multiple observations separated by several weeks or months for comprehensive and stable estimates of practice. Muijs et al. (2018) reinforces this, warning that ISTOF observations will never be sufficient if just one lesson is observed. They recommend multiple lessons to establish sufficient reliability, which has been found to increase asymptotically with the number of observations (p.404).

Other systems reduce the frequency of observations as teachers gain more experience and proficiency in their roles. For example, the Teach for America system in the United States focuses resources entirely on teachers in their first two years, after which they are considered alumni of the program and no longer receive formalized support or mentoring from the organization. Similarly, the Tennessee or Chicago systems include all teachers, but prescribe different schedules of observations at different career stages (apprentice vs. professional; tenured vs. non-tenured). Germany and Singapore also focus more on novice teachers with experienced teachers' observations becoming less frequent and less focused on punitive consequences (Martinez et al., 2016, p22).

Ultimately, there is no 'ideal' number of observers or observations. Any such judgment would have to be local and take into consideration the purpose and context of the observational system. It seems that high stakes observations such as appraisals or those conducted by authorized inspection bodies occur less but can still require a large portion of the school year dedicated as preparation time. Wragg (2013) accurately surmises that "if appraisal is seen as nothing more than

a legally required ritual that has to be enacted at intervals through clenched teeth, then the classroom observation part of it will be perfunctory and apologetic" but "if it is regarded as a sustained process, an essential part of professional life, not an unwelcome addition to it, then the appraisal of what happens in the classroom, especially self-appraisal, is an important element of keeping the school under review" (p.97).

Observation results

In order to assess whether teacher observations improve schools, improvement itself must be defined. Again this is debated in the literature, as schools may define improvement as student results, teacher professional development, or student performance in international standardized testing. Murphy et al. (2013) criticizes classroom observations as the primary tool of teacher evaluation, stating that they have provided little more than a patina of symbolism rather than power school improvement as measured by student learning (p.350). Martinez et al. (2016) supports this, claiming large-scale and standardized classroom observations are far from the norm among traditionally high performing countries and there is little empirical evidence to suggest that such practice, and high-stakes teacher evaluation in general, constitutes a good vehicle for countries to exert improvements and achieve educational success (p.27). Similarly, on a local scale, classroom observation was rated as the factor that contributed the least to teacher development by teachers in Portugal and the UAE (de Lima and Silva, 2018; Goe, Alkaabi and Tannenbaum, 2020).

However, there are also empirical and larger scale arguments for teacher observations improving schools and student learning. Cantrell (2016) gives two such examples, the first being the Chicago Public Schools Excellence in Teaching Project in which principals received training on how to rate lessons using a version of Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching. The following year, the training for the second group of principals was greatly reduced, resulting in far less gains being made by students when compared to the first group. This gap in gains widened further in the next year. Another study led by the University of Virginia assigned teachers from a study group to receive a year of coaching via MyTeachingPartner, a video-based professional development programme built around the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) observation

instrument. Similarly, when compared with a control group of teachers who did not participate in the observations, the gains they attributed to CLASS were equivalent to moving students' assessment results from the 50th to 59th percentile. Similar success is being attributed to the KHDA inspection process in Dubai. As more schools move from Good to Outstanding ratings in their first inspections, a steady improvement has occurred overall, as seen in the improvement of overall scores in international standardized testing like TIMSS and PISA results (Thacker and Cuadra, 2014, p.36). Therefore, it seems that teacher observation can improve schools, depending on the definition of improvement and values each school holds.

Accountability

In the last three decades, schools and teachers have come under far more public scrutiny in what has been termed the 'era of accountability' (Wragg, 2002; Murphy, Hallinger and Heck, 2013). Thacker and Cuadra (2014) state that accountability for teachers essentially means that "the interests, priorities and preferences of stakeholders should dictate the content, production and evolution of the education system; and that those responsible for these outcomes would suffer consequences if they are not delivered or will be rewarded if successful (p.15). Martinez et al. (2016) differentiate between self-regulating, professional, and organizational models of educational accountability. Self-regulated accountability normally precludes teacher evaluation as a formal policy tool and teachers are trusted to hold themselves accountable based on feelings of moral and ethical responsibility for the common good. Professional accountability systems see teachers as trusted professionals with peers playing the key role in teacher development and evaluation. While explicit standards and regulations may provide a basis for accountability, monitoring compliance with these standards is more implicit and locally shaped. Finally, "organizational accountability models tend to rely on explicit, bureaucratic, centrally implemented mechanisms to monitor teacher practice and effectiveness, with a focus on ensuring compliance with standards and regulations, and the expectation that stronger control and more pressure will result in improving desired outcomes" (p.18).

Like many of the issues discussed so far in the literature, teacher accountability is also highly contested and perceived differently among various studies. In the US, teachers are generally unhappy with the level of organizational accountability they are held to in high stakes observations and evaluations (Goldring *et al.*, 2015; Steinberg and Garrett, 2016; Briggs and Alzen, 2019). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) noted that based on 2012–2013 survey data, the most frequently cited reasons for leaving the teaching profession were dissatisfaction with testing and accountability pressures. When organizational accountability is prioritized over self-regulated and professional accountability, teachers inevitably become frustrated by the lack of trust and autonomy provided by their institutions. The teacher becomes "accountable rather than responsible (...), implying that the teacher loses the traditionally enjoyed mandate of trust" (Frostenson, 2015, p.25). De Lima and Silva (2018) describe these examples of organizational accountability as 'acts of de-professionalization', a process wherein teachers lose the ability to influence and the power to define the contents and forms of their own work (p.12).

Dubai's KHDA inspection body is a unique example of organizational accountability. Unlike more traditional examples, such as Ofsted in the UK which holds public schools accountable to the public (Baxter, 2014), the KHDA is a public entity which holds a private educational sector accountable to the public. As a result, there are multiple forms of organizational accountability at play for teachers at the one time. Some of these result from the curriculum the school has chosen to implement while others may be promoted by the KHDA, who looks to encourage market accountability as well as professional accountability, and some result-based accountability within those two forms (Thacker and Cuadra, 2014). Because of this unique bureaucratic system of accountability, many teachers are facing a multitude of challenges and frustrations in their work. In a study aimed to identify some of these challenges faced by teachers in both public and private schools in the UAE, Goe et al. (2020) highlights many of which are directly linked to such accountability. Some challenges listed include teacher assessment being unfair, a lack of practical feedback and being unhappy with the current observation systems by school leadership. Teachers also commented that better salaries should be given to those meeting these high levels of accountability based on their competencies and performance. There also seemed to be a want

for more self-regulating and professional accountability as teachers criticized the lack of opportunity for more informal, peer observations or mentoring as professional development.

Credibility

If teachers are to be held to such high levels of accountability based on their teaching, then the observers, school leaders or principals must be viewed as credible. A common frustration among teachers and point of criticism in the literature is a lack of credibility in these individuals and the observation process.

The primary reason for this seems to be a lack of formal training for principals, department heads and other school leaders in observing and providing effective and constructive feedback to teachers (Murphy, Hallinger and Heck, 2013; Martinez, Taut and Schaaf, 2016; de Lima and Silva, 2018). According to Montgomery (2013), being a professionally qualified and experienced teacher does not automatically confer the ability to teach someone to teach as these are a much higher order set of skills and competencies (p.12). Formal training is especially important if the observation tool being used is external, such as ISTOF, which requires knowledge of the protocol by observers, training, practice and the establishment of interrater reliability. This is even more important as the stakes rise where ISTOF is incorporated into evaluation or accountability systems. Muijs et al. (2018) would not recommend using ISTOF for such purposes without establishing reliability with the observers through multiple observations. However, this lack of proper training and issues with credibility can also be present in local observation systems such as in the UAE. When Gaad et al. (2006) interviewed subject supervisors responsible for observing teachers in UAE public schools, none of them could identify the national goals and all three of them had a very different perception about the goals of education and the effectiveness of the national goals. Similarly, Goe et al. (2020) reported frustration with teachers about the lack of credibility in their observers. When asked about career progression and assessment, one teacher stated that "There must be a better way to provide feedback on my teaching. The current way is outdated. We need advisors and mentors who provide sufficient, practical feedback that would help us improve, not some vague comments that won't support our progression" (p.9).

While the credibility of the individual observer is very important to teachers, the system which they are representing must also be credible. This is especially important for regulatory organisations such as Ofsted in the UK and the KHDA in Dubai. Since its inception, Ofsted's effectiveness has been called into question by parliament, press and the public, who have questioned the extent to which its judgements can be deemed to be both valid and robust, and the extent to which it contributes positively to school improvement (Baxter, 2014, p.27). Like Ofsted, the KHDA inspection framework (which owes its origins to Ofsted) has been revised multiple times since its creation. With each new revision, the 'metaphorical goalposts for schools are moved' and the credibility is undermined (Azzam, 2017, p.127). According to Montgomery (2013), the problem with any national scheme such as Ofsted or the KHDA is that there must be some autonomy at a local level. If this is lacking, then teachers will not identify with the aims and purposes of the system and it becomes in danger of becoming a 'paper-and-pencil' exercise.

Supporting what has been discussed so far, Zhang and Ng (2017) identify two essential prerequisites for a successful appraisal system – credibility and fairness. The observers must be adequately trained in order to fairly observe and provide constructive feedback or the larger system which they represent must be seen as credible, fair and consistent. Interviews with teachers and administrators revealed that teachers care greatly about the credibility and fairness of the appraisal process. If either are absent, "teachers will reject its results, and the process will have no meaning for either teachers or the school" (p.212).

Politics

Observation systems cannot exist independently without dealing with politics on an internal or external level, or in some cases, both. Internally, most schools operate as a hierarchical structure with principals or heads of department filling the role of supervisor or observer and teachers occupying the role of subordinates. While the bureaucratic language of teacher observation has been 'softened', in practice, teacher evaluation and observation are systems of performance management that are scaffolded on hierarchical authority (Murphy, Hallinger and Heck, 2013). As a result of this, many observations are not isolated or impartial, but heavily influenced by such internal politics. De Lima and Silva

(2018) report of tacit (and sometimes explicit) agreement among department heads not to rate a colleague's performance in a negative way, regardless of the actual quality of their teaching. To avoid creating negative situations, some school leaders admitted to either assigning the maximum score or the intermediate one and only assigning the negative score in very extreme situations (p.17). This is an example of what (Donaldson, 2013) defines as a 'culture of nice' in which observers are reluctant to give critical feedback, or accurately rate poor performance. Thus, successful appraisal systems are not only characterized by their technical quality and feasibility, but also by their political viability (Zhang and Ng, 2017, p.199).

Externally, observation politics are often inextricable from the politics of the nation which they represent. The creation of Ofsted in the UK in 1992 aimed to create a more transparent inspection regime, through a schedule that provided parents with impartial information in order to aid parental choice of school, aligning with the neo-liberal education agenda which began in England in the early 1980s. Today, Ofsted is described as a primary means by which the government perpetuates its educational ideology rather than an impartial agency (Baxter, 2014, p.33). While the KHDA in Dubai was also set up as a regulatory institution and a source of impartial information for parents, it now has tremendous political power over the private educational landscape in Dubai and the teachers working within it. The majority of private schools in Dubai are either owned or operated by private, profit-seeking businesses. Schools are only permitted to raise their annual fees by a predetermined multiple of the Education Cost Index (ECI), according to their performance ratings from the KHDA. While some schools are relatively cheap given their KHDA rating, these exceptional cases should not detract from the fact that the higher ranked schools are the more expensive ones (Azzam, 2017, p.120). As school rating includes teacher observation, this has resulted in many schools tailoring their observation culture to suit the agenda of the KHDA and, at times, dedicating a large portion of their school year to preparing to meet this agenda. In comparison, the public education system in the UAE is deficient as it does not contribute to the economy in the same level. Some causes of this include inadequate planning and assessment as well as a lack of modernization (Muysken and Nour, 2006).

Performance related pay (PRP) is a much-debated topic in the literature and is impacted by both the internal and external politics of a school. PRP is present in the internal politics of the school when department heads or principals are responsible for yearly evaluation of their staff. Previously discussed issues such as hierarchal structures, leaders rating positively to avoid conflict and the 'culture of nice' can all directly affect a teacher's salary negatively or positively. As a result, there have always been divided opinions in the teaching profession about PRP and incentive driven systems (Montgomery, 2013, p.5). In China, the new appraisal system introduced in 2009 explicitly divided teacher salary into two parts: 70% as base pay and 30% as merit pay (PRP) (Zhang and Ng, 2017, p.197). In Singapore, rather than a salary increase, high performing teachers can be placed in a track to become school leaders, and even education researchers (Martinez et al., 2016, p.25). This shows that internal politics can not only influence teacher salaries, but career opportunities in some cases. In the private education industry of Dubai, the KHDA inspection process indirectly creates a PRP system for teachers. External politics such as KHDA's role to regulate but promote market competition among schools by their rating system results in schools' more capable teachers seeking better working and paying conditions in the higher rated and often better paying schools (Azzam, 2017). Research by Goe et al. (2020) supports this as, when asked about salary, one teacher replied that "better salaries should be given to teachers based on their competencies and performance" (p.12).

Gap for further research

It is evident that teacher observation is a well-researched and highly contested topic in the field of education. Much of the literature focuses on practical questions discussed at the beginning of the literature review such as what observations are looking for, how often they should take place and if they actually improve school performance. While the literature covers a broad range of countries and cross-national studies, observation literature in the UAE is far more limited and rarely explores outside the realms of studies examining the KHDA. Given the volume of private international schools and the UAE establishing itself as a hub for skilled international teachers in recent years, there is a need for further research on the

everyday observation culture of these private schools, especially the experiences of the school leaders and teachers who partake in them.

2.2 Theoretical Frame of Reference

Schools are social spaces where learning takes place formally and informally, inside and outside of the classroom for students and teachers alike. The theoretical frame of reference for this study will therefore focus on Social Learning Theory, encompassing the related theories of Continued Teacher Professional Development (CPTD), Communities of Practice (CP), and Professional Learning Communities (PLC) (see Figure 1).
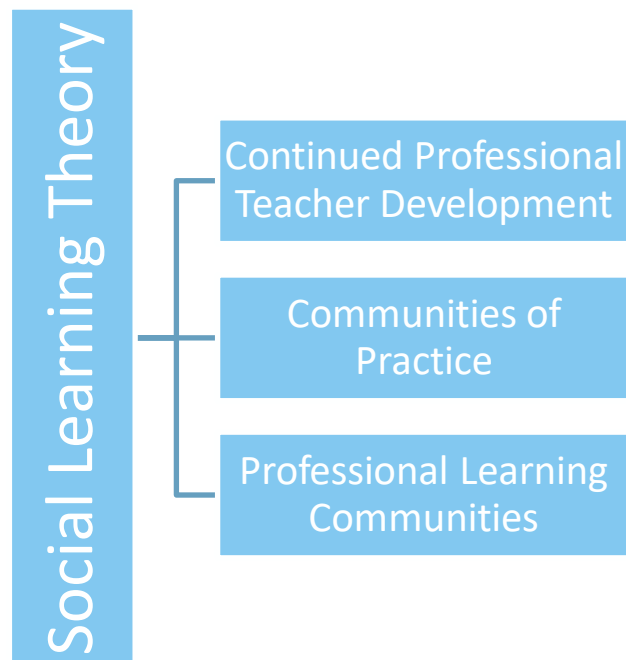
Figure 1. Social Learning Theory and related sub-theories

CPTD can be defined as ongoing education and training for teachers, addressing the numerous changes taking place in education and aiming to extend their content knowledge, instructional methodology and skills (Engelbrecht et al. 2007). This may take place in formal and informal contexts (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). CPTD in formal contexts can refer to the participation in planned and structured learning opportunities such as training and education provided by leadership, while informal settings are initiated by teachers themselves, often unplanned and embedded within the school environment. In

this research, both formal observation by leadership and informal observation by peers will be categorized as CPTD.

CPTD in these unplanned, informal settings is what Wenger (2009) defines as Communities of Practice, stating that they are "so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus" (p.242). The primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation and the process of being active participants in the "*practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 2009, p.240). The conceptual framework for Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning - Communities of Practice - encompasses four components: *meaning* — learning as experience; *practice* — learning as doing; *community* — learning as belonging; and *identity* — learning as becoming. It is not simply CPTD that teachers 'do' but how they construct meaning and identity within schools as social learning spaces. CPTD in this form of Communities of Practice can manifest itself in co-teaching, mentoring, reflecting, or even hallway discussions (Desimone, 2009, p.182).

According to Eaker (2002), this embedded collaborative approach is essential to 'reculturing' schools to become Professional Learning Communities. In schools that function as professional learning communities, teacher isolation is replaced with collaborative processes that are deeply embedded into the daily life of the school. They work together in an ongoing effort to discover best practices and to expand their professional expertise (p.5). The conceptual framework of PLCs is built on three themes: "(1) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (2) collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals, and (3) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement" (p.3). Aspects of all three of these themes have emerged in the literature reviewed as desired features of schools in the UAE by teachers and school leaders.

In this study, observation culture is understood as the frequent and often formal observations conducted to rate teachers in the UAE. The theory of Social Learning Spaces will be used to encompass Continued Professional Teacher Development including elements of Communities of Practice and Professional Learning Communities. While the current research on teacher observation in the

UAE is limited to teacher perspectives on a broad range of issues, the observation culture defined previously has emerged as a topic in need of further research. In particular, the limiting effects of this observation culture on teacher growth and professional development in private schools in Dubai. Based on this rationale, this study will aim to explore the question; to what extent does the observation culture in Dubai private schools impact them as social learning spaces for teachers?

3 METHODOLOGY

The methodology framework for this thesis took the form of a mixed-methods approach, comprised of an online questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews of six respondents. Blandford (2013) states that, in some situations, data-gathering and analysis are treated as being semi-independent from each other, with all analysis following the end of data gathering. For this research, the two were interleaved as data analysis of the initial questionnaire responses was used to establish the validity of the research question and understand the themes and issues which emerged in order to inform the questions of the semi-structured interviews.

As quantitative research seeks to confirm hypotheses about phenomena (Mack et al., 2005), an online questionnaire was used to establish if in fact a teacher observation culture did exist in Dubai private schools. By allowing participants to choose from carefully chosen and fixed responses, it created an inflexibility that allowed for meaningful comparison of responses across participants to justify the research question based on a quantitative data set. This was combined with qualitative methods as the use of open-ended questions and probing gives participants the opportunity to respond in their own words and develop on their responses, instead of forcing them to choose from fixed responses, as quantitative methods do. Semi-structured, open-ended questions have the ability to "evoke responses that are meaningful and culturally salient to the participant, unanticipated by the researcher, and rich and explanatory in nature" (Mack et al., 2005, p.4). According to Henry et al. (2015) for many years, researchers have advocated mixing quanitative and qualitative research methods, but it is often unclear what is meant by "mixed methods." Instead, the most common approach was parallel analysis, in which qualitative and quantitative analyses are conducted separately, and findings are not compared or combined until the interpretation stage. This research differs from the described parallel analysis as the findings out the quantitative questionnaire were used to inform and guide the choice of questions as well as semi-structured discussion in the interviews. The quantitative and qualitative data was explored as a holistic piece of data with one informing the other throughout the research process.

3.1 Quantitative Data Collection

The first part of the data collection process was exploratory research into the observation culture in Dubai using an anonymous online questionnaire. The goal of this questionnaire was to gain a broad, quantitative overview of the observation culture in Dubai private schools by maximizing the response rate of participants. The online distribution of the survey enabled an environment of "research detachment" (Daniel, 2016) where the participants (teachers) felt anonymity when submitting their responses to an "unknown" researcher, thus limiting inclinations or bias (Kuckartz et al., 2015) for the researcher's goals. The questionnaire was created using Microsoft Forms as this allowed for easy distribution and completion on computers or mobile devices, as well producing interpretable data in a Microsoft Excel file. As in-depth data collection would follow in the semi-structured interviews, the questionnaire was limited to sixteen questions, thirteen of which were multiple-choice answers with the aim of establishing if an observation culture was in fact present and to address other topics which are prominent in teacher observation literature (see Appendix 1).

Questions 1-3 of the questionnaire asked respondents to provide the school they currently taught in, the level they taught (primary or secondary) and to provide their current school email address. While it was stated at the beginning of the questionnaire that all responses would be kept anonymous, these details were required for analysis as well as quality control by verifying that all respondents were currently active teachers in Dubai private schools during the time of completing the questionnaire. Prior to analysis of the results, a thank you email was sent to all respondents. Any respondents who did not provide a valid school email address or those which returned an error message were removed from the data set. Questions 4-12 of the questionnaire addressed the formal observation cultures within Dubai private schools. This included the frequency and purpose of observation, if they are planned or unannounced, the qualifications of the observer and how feedback is provided. Question 13 addressed the theoretical framework of social learning spaces by asking respondents if informal professional development happened socially in their school outside of the observation culture. The questionnaire concluded by asking respondents to rate the influence that the body responsible for inspecting Dubai private schools,

known as the KHDA (Knowledge and Human Development Authority), has on their formal observation systems and suggest changes (if any) that they would make.

Social media was the primary medium for distribution of the online questionnaire. According to Blandford (2013), as social media and other technologies evolve, new approaches to recruiting study participants are emerging. What matters is that the "approach to recruitment is effective in terms of recruiting both a suitable number of participants and appropriate participants for the aims of the study" (p.13). In order to maximize the number of participants to produce reliable data, as well as ensure that appropriate participants were contacted, education specific groups and hashtags were used on the social media sites of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. This method proved to be very successful, resulting in 147 responses to the online questionnaire. Following the thank you email quality control test, 3 of these responses which did not meet the criteria were removed resulting in a final data set of 144 responses. This high number of respondents supports the need for research in this area as no incentive was offered to teachers completing the questionnaire.

3.2   Quantitative Data Analysis

The primary purposes of analysing the quantitative data were to justify the research question, guide the sampling of candidates for the semi-structured interviews, and inform the topics or themes to be addressed in the questions. The proposed research question asked; to what extent does the observation culture in Dubai private schools contribute to creating social learning spaces for teachers? Therefore, it was necessary to determine if there was in fact an observation culture in Dubai private schools and that these schools operated (to some degree) as social learning spaces.

As shown in Figure 2., the question on frequency confirms the existence of an observation culture in Dubai private schools. When asked how often teachers were observed, 61% answered that they are observed every term. Only 10% of teachers were not observed regularly with the remaining teachers being observed in varying frequencies of weekly, monthly and annually. The questionnaire also

confirmed that these private schools operated as social learning spaces. According to Wenger (2009), the primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation. Participation referring to a process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to them (p.240). In order to assess if this practice was present, the questionnaire asked if informal professional development took place in school, providing examples of social learning such as staffroom discussion, co-teaching, teacher mentoring, collaborative planning and teachers offering support in their specialist subjects. According to respondents, all of these examples of social learning are present in private schools in Dubai to some degree.

How often is your teaching observed in one academic school year? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

More Details

● Weekly	4	
● Monthly	15	
● Every term	88	
● Yearly	7	
● I am not observed regularly	15	
● Other	15	
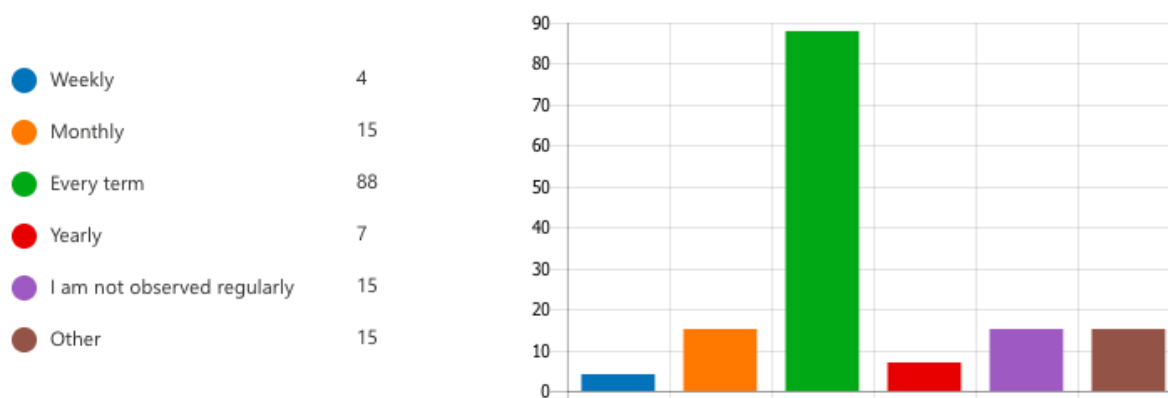
Figure 2. Frequency of observations for survey respondents

Analysis of the quantitative data was done in order to complete the sampling of teachers for the semi-structured interviews and to select the topics to be addressed. A combination of purposeful and criterion-based sampling was used to select candidates to be interviewed. Participants willing to be contacted were identified by including this as a closing question in the online questionnaire. By analysing the responses provided by this group of respondents, purposeful sampling was used to select teachers who provided detailed, varying, and

information-rich responses of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Criterion-based sampling was then used to select six teachers from both primary and secondary level who all taught in different schools. This mixed sampling method was used to ensure that those selected to be interviewed would provide an in-depth account and also represent different experiences across multiple private schools in Dubai. Teachers whose responses to observation were neutral, negative and positive were selected in order to avoid 'consent bias', whereby those with more positive outcomes are more likely to agree to participate in a study (Buckley et al., 2007).

3.3   Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method for the collection of qualitative data. While the online questionnaire provided quantitative data that confirmed the existence of an observation culture and social learning spaces in Dubai private schools, qualitative analysis was needed in order to understand the connection between the two and answer the research question of the extent which the observation culture in Dubai private schools contributes to creating social learning spaces for teachers. According to Blandford (2013), interviews are best suited for understanding people's perceptions and experiences (p.23). Semi-structured interviews fall between a questionnaire and conversation as the questions or themes may be planned ahead of time, but lines of enquiry will be pursued within the interview, to follow up on "interesting and unexpected avenues that emerge" (p.23).

The interview questions were prepared using the 'topic guide' advocated by Arthur and Nazroo (2003) which focuses on identifying topics to cover rather than particular questions to be asked. Questions were written down 'verbatim' not to be asked rigidly but simply to identify one way of being asked. As shown in the Interview Question Plan (Appendix 2), Arthur and Nazroo's frame of questioning was used which comprises of:

- Introduction;
- Opening questions;
- Core in-depth questions; and
- Closure.

The introduction started the interview easily by asking teachers to provide an overview of how the observation system in their school worked. This was followed by five opening questions which sought specific details on topics which were present in the literature on teacher observation. These included the frequency of observations, if prior notice was provided, if training was provided for observers and if performance related pay was based on observation. Questions were excluded if the teacher had given the answer in their overview from the introduction. The core in-depth questions were based on more personal feelings' teachers had towards the observation cultures within their schools and the value placed upon them. This section of the interview also moved towards the theoretical framework of social learning spaces. It should be noted that using terms such as 'social learning spaces' and 'communities of practice' were avoided and replaced with 'informal professional development' and examples of learning from and with colleagues in order to limit confirmation bias or guiding teachers towards the research question. The closure section of the interview asked teachers if there were any points about their schools' observation or professional development systems which were not mentioned that they would like to discuss. This ensured that teachers had some ownership of the conversation and could include points which they felt should have been addressed.

3.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

All of the interviews were recorded using the Otter mobile phone application. This application records the interviews and simultaneously transcribes the dialogue in real time. While the application was generally accurate, errors were present in some of the transcriptions. Especially for specific terms such as 'KHDA' and other abbreviations. These were corrected by reading through the transcripts while playing the audio, making editions as it progressed. Once the raw data of the six interview transcriptions was collected and corrected, an inductive thematic analysis was carried out.

The objective in qualitative content analysis is to systematically transform a large amount of text into an organised and concise summary of key results. Analysis is carried out on the raw data from verbatim transcribed interviews to form categories or themes in a process of further abstraction of data at each step of

the analysis . As the interview transcripts were incredibly rich in data, it was decided to do an inductive rather than deductive analysis, allowing for the data to determine the themes, rather than limit potentially interesting pursuits by predetermining the themes. Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87-88) six phases of thematic analysis were followed to achieve this:

1. Familiarising with the data: simply reading and re-reading the data, making notes of ideas that spring to mind.

2. Generating initial codes: coding the entire dataset systematically and collating data that is relevant to each code. They define codes as labels that "identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst". This phase was completed using colour coding. Following phase 1 when nine codes were identified, as each text was re-read, sections were highlighted based on the codes present (Appendix C-H).

3. Searching for themes: gathering codes (and related data) into candidate themes for further analysis.

4. Reviewing themes: checking whether the themes work with the data and creating a thematic "map" of the analysis.

5. Defining and naming themes: refining the themes and the overall narrative iteratively.

6. Producing the report: which will, in turn require a further level of reflection on the themes, the narrative and the examples used to illustrate themes (Appendix I).

Following this process, four key themes were decided on comprising of nine codes (see Figure 3.).

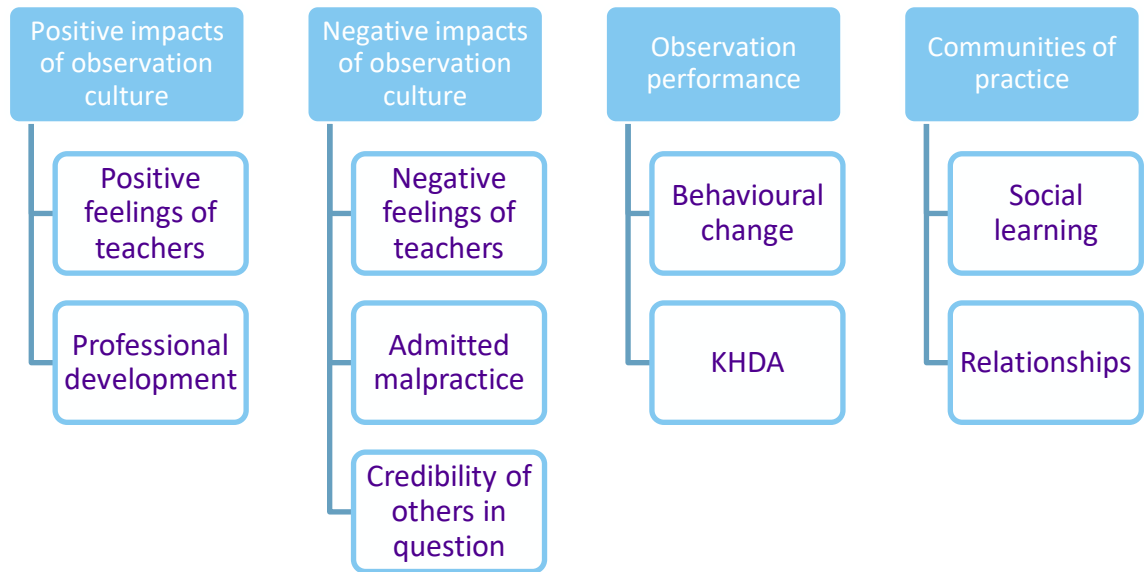| Positive impacts of observation culture	Negative impacts of observation culture	Observation performance	Communities of practice
Positive feelings of teachers	Negative feelings of teachers	Behavioural change	Social learning
Professional development	Admitted malpractice	KHDA	Relationships
	Credibility of others in question		

Figure 3. Four themes and nine codes used in thematic analysis

The sections of each interview transcript which related to a specific code were then grouped together. This allowed for a holistic analysis of each code and common or popular responses to emerge. Different codes resulted in different amounts of data in each category. Rather than aiming to achieve balance in the amount of data in each code, priority was placed on ensuring each piece of transcript selected was relevant to each code. This ensured that the data and analysis was not compromised for the sake of balanced or even results.

3.5   Transparency and Ethical Considerations

While conducting qualitative research, it is paramount that the researcher maintains a vigilance of non-bias during analysis. In other words, remaining aware of one's pre-understandings, i.e., one's own personal assumptions, professional background, and previous experiences and knowledge (Erlingsson, 2017). For eight years prior to, and a period of time during, the research process, I worked as a secondary school teacher in private schools in Dubai. During this period, I would have been observed on multiple occasions and formed opinions on the observation culture as well as gained a knowledge of observation policies in various Dubai schools. In the interest of transparency, this is being disclosed at this point. This prior knowledge was considered during the data gathering process with a vigilance of non-bias maintained throughout. All actions carried

out and choices made during the research process were done so objectively with a sole interest in conducting relevant and beneficial research, not to satisfy any pre-existing goals or agendas.

Agreed-upon standards for research ethics help ensure that researchers explicitly consider the needs and concerns of the people studied, that appropriate oversight for the conduct of research takes place, and that a basis for trust is established between researchers and study participants. Whenever research is conducted on people, the well-being of participants must be the top priority. The research question is always of secondary importance (Mack et al., 2005). Informed consent is paramount to this and is defined as "a mechanism for ensuring that people understand what it means to participate in a particular research study so they can decide in a conscious, deliberate way whether they want to participate" (p.9). Both means of data collection, quantitative and qualitative, included informed consent for participants. The online questionnaire included a statement at the top of the form, visible to participants before they began, reading: *All of this data will be handled anonymously for academic research purposes only. If at any point you decide that you would not like your answers included, you can be withdrawn from the study.*

Informed consent was provided orally to participants of the interviews prior to commencement. This took the form of an informal discussion including details of:

- What is expected of a research participant, including the amount of time likely to be required for participation

- The fact that participation is voluntary, and that one can withdraw at any time with no negative repercussions

- How confidentiality will be protected

- The name and contact information of the researcher to be contacted for questions or problems related to the research

- All this information was provided in a clear language easily understood by participants who were competent to make a decision about being in the research, and free from coercion or undue inducement to participate by researchers or others.

Participants in the online questionnaire and interviews were assured of anonymity throughout the process. This was important as participants required to be currently working in Dubai private schools. This was imperative to allow participants to speak openly and freely on what is a divisive and controversial topic in international education without fear of prosecution from their employers. Because qualitative research is conversational, it is also important for data collectors to maintain clear boundaries between what they are told by participants and what they tell participants. Conversation is a social act that requires give and take (Mack et al., 2005, p.11). All information remained confidential throughout the process and no details, no matter how trivial, were shared between participants.

4   RESULTS

4.1   Theme 1: Positive impacts of observation culture

Positive impacts of observation culture were organised into two codes for teachers participating in the study: Positive feelings towards the observation process and opportunities for professional development.

4.1.1   Positive feelings of teachers

While all six of the teachers interviewed had generally mixed feelings towards their respective observation systems, most did recognise that the process benefitted their teaching. However, these responses included some reservations such as:

> *Even though I do feel it [the observation process] was a tick the box primarily, I did definitely learn things from the observations and at times gain some good feedback.*

Teachers recognise that observations systems in all schools may include their own individual faults, but also find value in the basic process of observation followed by some form of feedback. Other positive feelings from teachers stemmed from schools taking measures to alleviate the pressure caused by such formal observations. These measures included taking away the rating systems which alleviated a lot of the pressure that teachers put themselves under leading up to observations.

Pressure is further alleviated in some schools by allowing teachers to choose the class or lesson period they are observed in. Also, observing less and balancing observations out with other measures of teacher performance like checking that marking and feedback was up to date in student copybooks and catching glimmers from different channels rather than just observations.

One teacher who spoke very positively about their school's observation system accredited much of it to the nature in which observations were carried out:

You actually feel trusted in what you're doing in the classroom as a practitioner and when you are observed it's done as a supportive and not as sort of a catch-you-out style.

This style of observations is similar to what Martinez et al (2016) refer to as professional rather than organizational accountability (p.18). Teachers are happy with the observation system when they and their peers are trusted professionals in monitoring their own development and evaluation within their own Community of Practice rather than being accountable to management to do so for them.

4.1.2   Professional development

Professional development (PD) or continued professional development (CPD) is intrinsic to the formal observation systems in Dubai private schools. Based on the questionnaire and interviews, PD is the one of the primary goals of the observation system but is also encouraged in different forms independently of it. When asked in the questionnaire if their school observation system contributed to CPD, the response from teachers was mixed. As shown in Figure 4., 54% of teachers answered 'yes' and the remaining 46% answered 'no'/'other'. Teachers who selected 'other' generally entered a critical response about PD in their school such as:

On rare occasions, feedback is valuable and benefits the teacher. Mostly, feedback has no significant benefit and the observation process is more stressful than useful.

Is meant to but hasn't been effective.

I don't believe observations in Dubai are useful for my professional development as it's all centres around KHDA. Not actually about the kids and teachers.

Does your school observation policy contribute to teacher professional development? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

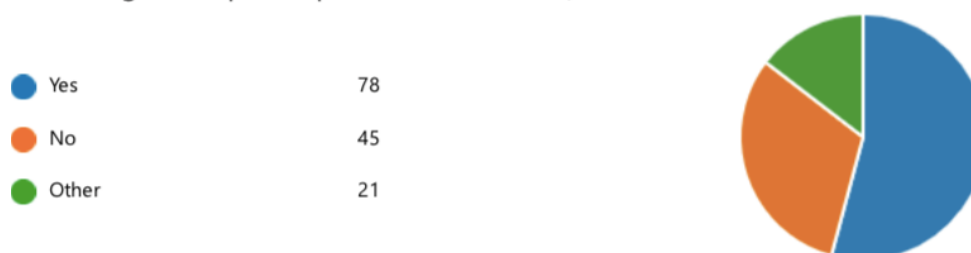- Yes   78
- No   45
- Other   21

Figure 4. Survey respondents' attitudes towards professional development in their schools

While it is positive that over half of teachers surveyed benefit from the CPD their school offers, the responses from the remaining 46% also merit investigation. The success of or dedication to PD also varied in the different schools of the teachers interviewed. A common trend in these was teachers setting three professional development goals at the start of each year. One positive example of this was a 'Personal Growth Plan' or PGP, within which the teacher set their three goals and these goals become the focus of their observations, rather than the observer looking for a multitude of things.

While CPD can be provided in schools by staff or senior leadership, outside and paid CPD was also mentioned by teachers interviewed. Two teachers spoke about a CPD budget allocated for each teacher who would have the choice to avail of it or not. Another teacher spoke very positively of multiple CPD sessions they had attended however, they were all self-funded. In terms of who is responsible for guiding and organizing CPD in Dubai private schools, Senior Leadership play a key role. As shown in Figure 5., when asked who organizes CPD, 122 out of the 144 teachers selected 'Senior Leadership.' Only 35 selected 'teachers work with peers or within departments to organise CPD'. According to van As (2018), schools should move away from once-off workshops organized by senior leadership, instead emphasizing collaboration between teachers in the form of peer support. Educational support groups can act as a structure in which development takes place over a long time where teachers can learn in collaboration in Communities of Practice and in an environment of trust, addressing actual classroom practices (p. 422).

Who is responsible for organising formal professional development opportunities in your school? (Tick all that apply)
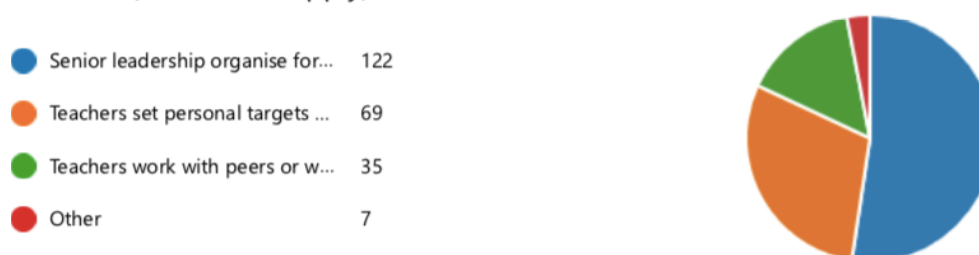
- Senior leadership organise for...   122
- Teachers set personal targets ...   69
- Teachers work with peers or w...   35
- Other   7

Figure 5. Responsibility for organising formal professional development in schools

4.2 Theme 2: Negative impacts of observation culture

Negative impacts of observation culture were organised into three codes for teachers participating in the study: Negative feelings towards the observation process, admitted malpractice, and credibility of others in question.

4.2.1 Negative feelings of teachers

Based on the questionnaire data and interview transcripts, there are substantial negative feelings from teachers about the observation culture in Dubai private schools, with some common trends emerging. One such trend, which is illustrated in Figure 6., is that teachers are stressed by the number of different elements required for them to include in a lesson observation in order to be deemed successful. When asked to select from a list of 10 things that observers are looking for, 27% of teachers selected all 10, with others adding further requirements such as lesson plans, pace, and links to success criteria. Stress from including so many elements in a single lesson observation was also discussed in the interviews by one teacher:

> *I also felt at times that the observation sheet was just overloaded with way too many things. So they were looking at your organization of the lesson, the lesson plan, use of ICT, differentiation. Now, all these things I feel are important. But if you're providing staff with this*

sheet before they're observed, then I think it can definitely be a bit overwhelming to try and hit all those boxes in the one lesson.

What are observers looking for in a successful lesson observation? (Tick all that apply)

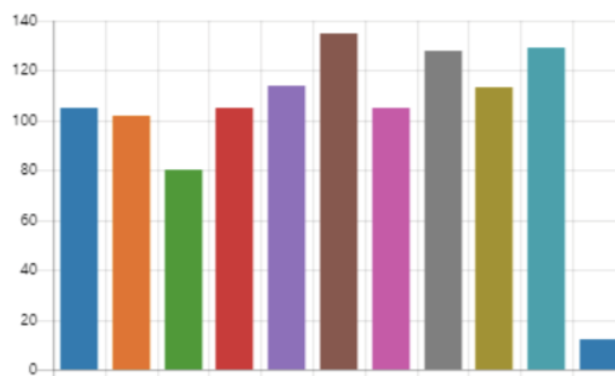| Feature	Count
🔵 Behaviour management	105
🟠 Subject knowledge	102
🟢 Marking being up to date	80
🔴 Rapport with students	105
🟣 Classroom environment	114
🟤 Differentiation	135
🌸 Use of technology	105
⚫ Effective questioning	128
🟡 Student collaboration	113
🩵 Student progress	129
🔵 Other	12

Figure 6. Features of a successful lesson observation

Teachers are expected to demonstrate all of these different elements of a successful lesson with the added pressure of an observer in the classroom. Pressure as a result of somebody observing you while teaching was another common trend in the interview transcripts. Multiple teachers described how this added pressure negatively affected their performance:

> *Subconsciously, you've got one eye on the observer, whether you're used to observations or not.*

> *I think most people struggle to perform under observation. Yeah, they might put on more of an effort but I still think they're not fully themselves because you're, you might be a bit nervous.*

> *I think when you have got someone watching you, it's that pressure of like some sort of failure. What if I do something wrong when I haven't thought about it beforehand and that sort of thing.*

The purpose of these observations provided a mixed set of answers in the questionnaire. While CPD was selected most (by 93 teachers), to share best

practice (78) and to rate teachers (74) were also popular answers (see Figure 7.). Observations to share best practice within the school is in keeping with schools as social learning spaces. However, rating teachers or judging them based on these observations seems to directly contradict the ethos of Communities of Practice.

Figure 7. The different purposes of teacher observations in schools

Concerns about the judgmental nature of the observation culture were strongly present in many of the interview responses. One teacher described how these ratings are used against teachers rather than to develop them:

> *A lot of the time it's used for a judgment and actually to rate the teachers on their performance, and a lot of the time the result will be that the teacher's contract wasn't renewed instead of 'can we develop this teacher?' it's more like, 'well let's get rid of this teacher and get someone else in use.' I don't think that's right. It's obviously not developmental.*

Teachers clearly resented the idea of such a complex experience as a lesson observation being reduced to a simple rating with another stating:

> *I don't understand that… a hotel can be rated five star and three star, teachers and individuals should not be rated.*

4.2.2 Admitted malpractice

While all teachers who were interviewed expressed negative feelings towards the respective observation cultures in their schools, many of them also admitted to incidents when they, or others, openly went against the policy or guidance that was in place. Out of six teachers interviewed, the three who held leadership positions were the three who discussed observation malpractice.

One area of malpractice relates back to teachers' negative feelings towards the number of different requirements they must demonstrate in a lesson observation. One teacher discussed frustration with this in their own school explaining that they ignored much of the overly detailed criteria. Given that many observation systems mandate improvement comments, it can sometimes be difficult for observers to provide areas to improve upon for teachers who have taught an excellent lesson. According to one interviewee, they are often looking for trivial improvements to include in the feedback as this is a requirement. The same teacher also admitted to observing less than what is mandated by leadership in their school to reduce stress on staff. In this example, the teacher recognises the negative impact of excessive observation criteria and frequent observations and is alleviating this for their team, without informing senior leadership.

A lack of transparency in the observation systems was also a common area of malpractice. This was present in the form of teachers being unaware of how their observations would affect their increments, certain teachers going unobserved, as well as teachers being observed unknowingly. One teacher explained how following an observation, observed teachers don't see all of the feedback and that it *goes straight to HR or the Director, which influences their salary for the next year*. They explained that it was only following progression to a middle leadership position that they became aware of this practice. While the observation policies of the teachers interviewed didn't explicitly state that leadership would be observed less, this was often the case:

> *I've never been observed, I haven't, I can't remember the last time I've been observed. It's been years.*

> *As a teacher, at least twice a year, as an SLT team member, not so much.*

As well as preferential treatment for leadership, the same teachers also mentioned having the option for 'do-overs' of their observations if they wished. One teacher explained how they are given the assurance that if something goes wrong during the observation, they are allowed to ask for a second observation. Similarly, following a self-admitted 'bad observation' another teacher admitted that they were given the option of choosing a different class and they could change curriculums for the observation. These incidents of preferential treatment seem to support the views of Murphy et al. (2013) in that many teacher observations are heavily influenced by internal school politics and the hierarchical nature of them means they cannot be impartial.

Another teacher discussed how cameras are present in the school classrooms and that observations are sometimes conducted without teachers' knowledge or consent:

> *I can go into any classroom, any time of day, and observe without the teacher even knowing. So, I probably have been observed in the past few years, but I've never known about it… I think it's a bit immoral.*

While there are arguments for such an unobtrusive lesson observation that would give an accurate portrayal of the teacher without an observer in the room, it is clear that this teacher recognises the issues with such an approach to observations. If schools are to operate as Professional Learning Communities, then one of the core themes they must be built on is a widely shared mission, vision, values and goals (Eaker, 2002). When teachers are unaware of how their observation policy works, why other teachers are observed less, or if they are even being observed, they cannot operate as Professional Learning Communities.

4.2.3 Credibility of others in question

Based on the questionnaire results and interviews, the value that teachers in Dubai place on their observations, especially the feedback provided, is strongly linked to the credibility of the observer. When asked if teachers were confident in their observers in the questionnaire, 63% of teachers answered 'yes', with 37% answering 'no' or 'other' (see Figure 8.). Many of the responses under 'other' clarified that this was dependent on the person as teachers are often observed by multiple different members of the leadership team. This was reflected in the interviews when teachers gave less value to feedback from observers who may not have understood their specialist subject or who may not have had a much experience as them:

> *I do feel a lot of the time when you're being observed that you're being observed by people that don't necessarily have a good base of knowledge in terms of your subject.*

> *In the past I've been observed last two years ago, for example, [Teacher name], who became the new Head of History in our school. He observed me but I was probably more experienced, and I felt I knew more history than he did.*

Are you confident in the ability of your observer/ your abilities to accurately observe teacher performance and provide constructive feedback? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

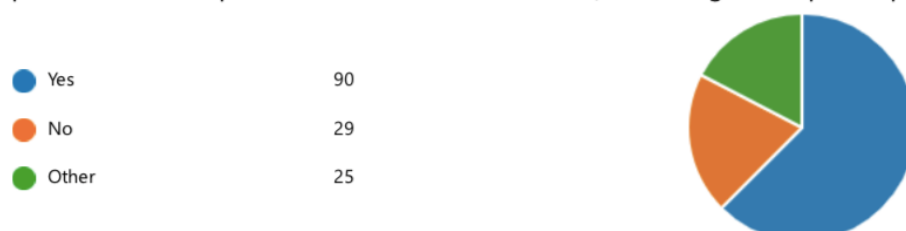|		
● Yes		90
● No		29
● Other		25

Figure 8. Confidence of teachers in those observing them

Even though 63% of teachers were confident in their observers, this seemed to be despite many of them receiving formal training in observation methods and feedback. As shown in Figure 9., only 33% of teachers answering the

questionnaire confirmed that training is provided for observers in their school. Those who selected 'other' developed with answers such as "*limited*" or "*brief*" training. This lack of training for those observing in Dubai private schools supports the global trend present in much of the literature (Murphy, Hallinger and Heck, 2013; Martinez, Taut and Schaaf, 2016; de Lima and Silva, 2018). There was also evidence of this lack of training in the interviews:

> *I think that (training) is lacking in our school, we just take off and you start going in observing lessons, and it is hoped that all of us are on the same page*.

> *I think I know my stuff but then again, sometimes we go into Year 6 and I'm like, I'm just winging it basically.*

These experiences of teachers support Montgomery's stance (2013), that being a professionally qualified and experienced teacher does not automatically result in the ability to teach someone to teach.

Is training provided for observers in your school? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

● Yes	47	
● No	60	
● Other	37	

Figure 9. Training provided for those observing teachers

Apart from lack of training, credibility was questioned when teachers were observed by others who had less experience, leadership who seem removed from the realities of the classroom, and those who behaved in an unprofessional manner:

> *I've never let it show that it bothered me, but it certainly bothered me, and I think it undermines you in front of the students. The students*

that are looking on. But Mr. [Teacher name] has been here for six years why is he getting observed every month? So, it undermines the teacher, especially if they're in the school a certain number of years.

How much have they been in the classroom and also how long have they been out of the classroom? Because it's very easy to just go in with a tick list of this is what I want to see, and, and not necessarily having had any classroom experience or very little.

While we place our trust in professional work, and with the people who we claim to work with as professionals, it becomes very difficult, because not everybody behaves professionally.

While CPTD is valued in many Dubai private schools, it seems that CPTD for leadership in observation needs to be given priority. Communities of Practice require the core component of *community* and learning as doing within that community (Wenger, 2009). This cannot exist while credibility is questioned within the community as a result of adequate training not being provided for something as complex and challenging and teacher observation and feedback.

4.3   Theme 3: Observation Performance

Observation performance was organised into two codes for teachers participating in the study: Behavioural change and influence of KHDA.

4.3.1   Behavioural change

When asked in the questionnaire if their observations were unannounced or planned, only 9% of teachers responded that they were unannounced (see Figure 10.). Almost two thirds (62%) were planned and teachers who selected 'other' reported some sort of combination of "*learning walks*" (unofficial drop-ins) and formal observations. However, when an observation is taking place where teachers are graded or assessed in some form, most have prior notice.

Are these observations unannounced or planned? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

● Unannounced   13
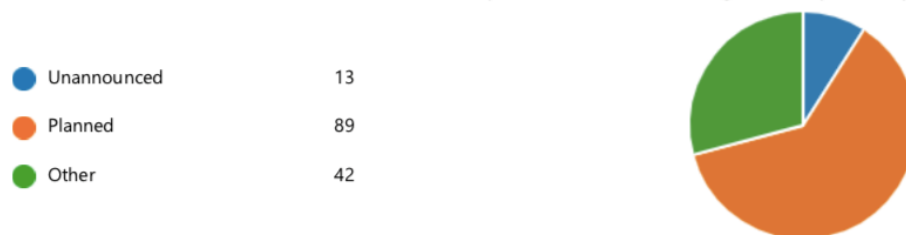● Planned   89
● Other   42

Figure 10. Prior notice provided to teachers before lesson observations

With the majority of these observations being pre-planned, it seems inevitable that teachers' behaviour would differ in day-to-day teaching and formal observations. All teachers who were interviewed except for one admitted to changing their behaviour for a planned lesson observation. The level of behavioural change varied from little changes such as being more strict with students, to other teachers admitting that they teach to what their observer is looking for:

> *I still find that when I'm being observed that I do teach that a little bit differently, whether I'm a little bit stricter with the kids, whether my personality alters a little bit.*

> *When the observation comes around, they (teachers being observed) pull everything out of the bag, but then on the on a day to day teach, and then they might necessarily, they might not necessarily do that.*

> *"What they do is, it's a one-off lesson where they're coming in and you end up providing this glitzy class. This glitzy lesson that isn't the typical lesson. So, I don't feel it's actually that helpful.*

The accepted norm from both the questionnaire and interviews is that when teachers are going to be formally observed, prior notice is given. However, the norm also seems to be that teachers are aware of what their observers are looking for, and tailor their lessons to these criteria, even if this differs from their everyday teaching style or behaviour. The general consensus is that an observed

lesson is the teacher at an unrealistic best that does not reflect the everyday teaching within the school.

4.3.2 Influence of KHDA

The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) are the external inspection body for Dubai private schools. As discussed in the Literature Review, KHDA hold significant power over teacher accountability as schools' inspection ratings determine the fees they can charge and, in turn, the salaries they can afford to pay. Higher ranked schools are often the more expensive ones (Azzam, 2017, p.120) and this has resulted in KHDA having a significant role to play in the teacher observation culture in Dubai private schools. When asked in the questionnaire if the observation policy in their school is directly influenced by the annual KHDA inspection, 50% of teachers said they strongly agreed and 36% agreed (see Figure 11.). With the majority of teachers agreeing that the KHDA inspection directly influences their school's observation policy, it is expected that teachers would feel under pressure to perform during the KHDA's inspection week.
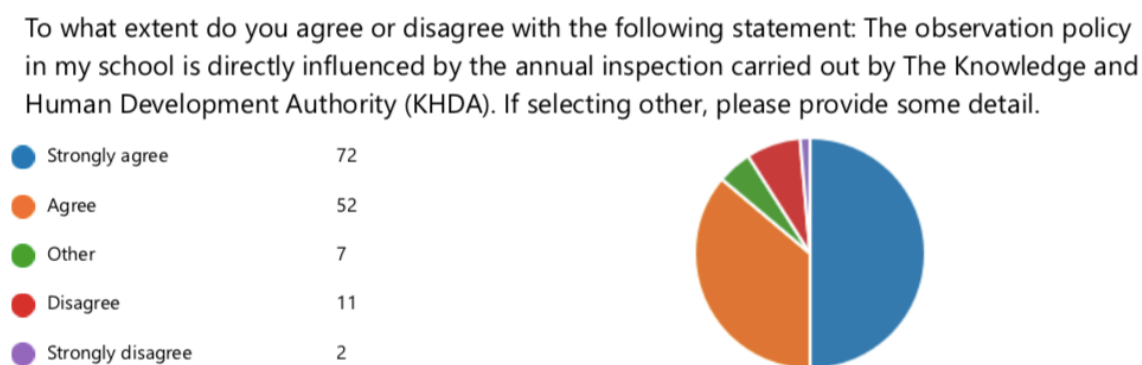

Figure 11. Influence of KHDA on school observation policies

The theme of observation performance for KHDA was present in many of the interviews. While schools' observation policies may be informed by KHDA and geared towards their success criteria, the weeks leading up to, and the week of inspections, seem to be when most performance is required:

> *I feel like it's ticking the box for them, but it's also just ticking a box for me. It's getting to KHDA and then as soon as KHDA is over, I can teach as I'd like.*

This teacher's feelings support Azzam's findings (2017) that schools are spending such a considerable part of the year preparing for the inspections, that it actually detracts from the teaching (p.126).

Another teacher stated:

> *The week is actually fine, it's the build up to it (the inspection week) is nuts. And then they always know where to send them so basically all the teachers that they rate, are the ones that they send KHDA to*.

For both teachers, the idea of performance is central to KHDA. The first can only teach as they would like once their KHDA performance is done and the second admits that schools try to direct the KHDA inspectors to their best performers. These performances are often geared towards the KHDA success criteria, rather than what schools themselves view as best practice, although these may be similar. One teacher said:

> *I've been sent the criteria for what they're looking at, for the observation, especially when it comes to KHDA. Then my teaching has been geared towards those boxes, yes, kind of tick boxes to try and achieve that Outstanding lesson rather than just kind of teach how I normally teach*.

This 'Outstanding' rating is the highest available and what teachers and schools are striving towards. So much so that one teacher spoke about how these ratings merge with the identity of the teacher and how teachers 'become' their rating which can have positive or negative repercussions. Teachers who teach to the criteria and secure their rating need to worry less, but those who do not are subject to further scrutiny or further formal observations.

The KHDA inspection seems to have the power to alter school cultures:

> *Everything is for KHDA really… when we are observing people and when we're analyzing data and yeah it's kind of at the heart of everything they do is to impress KHDA.*

> *I felt the negative kind of culture of these KHDA observations, people don't want to just pop into other people's lessons, because they probably think that's putting unfair pressure on that teacher. I feel like there's just a shift in in the school's kind of personality and the way the school runs.*

Not all teachers interviewed shared the same experience of their school cultures being drastically altered:

> *It doesn't have a big impact, certainly we'd probably have a lot less impact on other schools I know, leading up to KHDA… I think our school have gotten to the stage where they just. This is our system they either like it. You know, take it or leave it.*

> We *might listen to some of the kind of things that KHDA suggests but as I said, it's very much like we do what we do for the children so they don't necessarily make changes based on just for the inspection itself.*

These type of responses to the KHDA inspection seem to be the minority according to the questionnaire and interviews. While the KHDA inspection may be intended to regulate school fees and provide accountability of teachers, they seem to have a negative effect on schools as Communities of Practice as they create feelings of fear and judgement around the observation process and consume a lot of teacher time in preparation leading up to the inspection.

4.4   Theme 4: Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice was organised into two codes for teachers participating in the study: Social learning and teacher relationships.

4.4.1   Social learning

Despite the negative impact of the KHDA inspections on Dubai private schools as Communities of Practice, evidence of them operating as social learning spaces was evident in the questionnaire responses and interviews. When provided with a list of examples of informal professional development, many teachers selected forms of social learning which regularly took place in their schools (see Figure 12.).

The most popular among these was collaboratively planning lessons (72%), followed by visiting each other's lessons (59%), offering support in their specified field (42%), staffroom discussion (41%) and teacher mentoring (40%). All of the listed examples of informal CPTD possess elements of Communities of Practice and Professional Learning Communities. Further evidence of these examples of social learning emerged in the teacher interviews.

Do any of the following examples of informal professional development regularly take place in your school? (Please tick all that apply and add any other examples of informal professional development in 'Other')

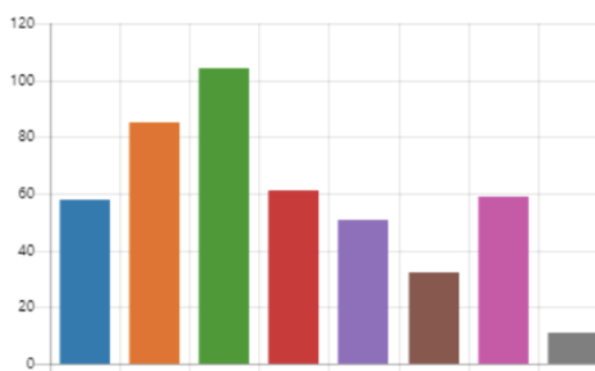|	
● Teacher mentoring	58
● Teachers visiting each other's l...	85
● Collaboratively planning lessons	104
● Teachers offering support in t...	61
● Teacher self-reflection	51
● Co-teaching	32
● Staffroom discussion of best p...	59
● Other	11

Figure 12. Examples of informal professional development taking place in schools

Rather than the whole school environment, social learning seemed to happen more in sub-groups such as within subject departments or Year Groups where teachers had stronger relationships with one another:

> *I think within my team, my specialist team, informal observations happen all the time.*

> *During team meetings every week we share practice we talked about. And the best resources to use or ideas for activities or what didn't go so well…And then I think when you do that a lot of the time it actually, teachers are more open to receive feedback in that kind of informal manner.*

When asked which they learned more from, formal professional development or informal practices, many teachers stated that they valued informal professional development more:

> *For me, it's the informal, I think I've definitely learned more. Not positive but effective feedback from these informal observations that we do within our department.*

> *Even in professional development training that I've attended. It's always the in the inter-group discussions or collaborations that we have that what causes the learning not so much the dissemination from the workshop leader.*

> *Definitely the informal. I haven't learned so much, honestly speaking, from the formal observations.*

Many of the above examples resemble Communities of Practice by how informal they are, rarely coming into explicit focus (Wenger, 2009). When these informal practices are 'formalized', teachers recognise this:

They have done in the past where teachers kind of buddy up and they might share practice, or there might be some outstanding practitioners picked out for English, Math or Science and teachers would be going to view their lessons. It's not happening at the minute, but again that's kind of stuff teachers have picked as Outstanding teachers and things that again becomes kind of formal.

In this example, the influence of the KHDA is present again, where teachers graded as Outstanding in previous inspections are nominated by leadership to share best practice. Once the process is mandated by leadership, the formal nature is felt by teachers and the organic social learning is diminished.

While most of the teachers interviewed spoke positively of the informal, social learning taking place in their schools, this is not the standard for all. One teacher described how rigid their teaching system was and that they're restricted about what they can do within their system. However, this response was the minority, and it seems that despite the pressures from the KHDA and formal observation systems, many Dubai private schools are operating as social learning spaces where informal professional development is regularly taking place in various forms.

4.4.2 Teacher relationships

The primary focus of Communities of Practice is on learning as social participation and the process of being active participants and belonging in the community (Wenger, 2009). Therefore, the relationships between staff members are key to a thriving Community of Practice. Evidence from the interviews shows that teachers care about these relationships and are afraid to damage them in the process of providing feedback and that competition as a result of observations is also detrimental to these relationships.

Teachers in leadership positions interviewed provided examples of Donaldson's 'culture of nice' (2013) in which observers are reluctant to give critical feedback or accurately rate poor performance:

I find it difficult if I've observed a bad lesson. I kind of sugarcoat, I avoid almost telling them face to face if you know if it was really bad lesson.

I don't like the, the concept of judging. So when it comes to observing lessons I'm very comfortable when it comes to giving feedback I'm very comfortable, but when it comes to rating someone, it's highly subjective.

Another teacher stated that relationships between observers and teachers can come into play when determining what is rated as a good or bad lesson:

A lot of observations are like opinionated isn't it's what somebody likes, what they want to say or you would argue at times it's dependent on their relationship with kind of you or maybe they've got different feelings about different year groups themselves.

Apart from the culture of nice and observers being reluctant to provide critical feedback, examples of staff relationships suffering because of the observation process were also discussed. Feelings of competition between staff around observation ratings was one reported reason for creating a negative atmosphere:

It almost created this negative atmosphere within the department… On my first observation from the school, I was lucky enough to receive an Outstanding and someone else in the department received an Acceptable rating. And I generally felt that for the remainder of the year, there was almost this, this slight bit of slight animosity from that other member of the department."

There was a lot of competition between staff… and it would just be like the staffroom kind of whispering like what did you get? So they had a bad observation and that's just it just is a negative place to be when that's the focus.

Relationships were also reported to suffer when less experienced staff had to observe teachers who had been in the school for some time:

> *Staff who've been there three four or five years, it can cause friction. Yeah, if somebody who's recently been promoted, who's just as experienced as you is now turning up to your classroom, telling you, this is what you should do.*

From the interviews, it is clear that maintaining relationships with their colleagues is very important to teachers in Dubai private schools. However, it seems that these relationships come under strain once a formal observation system is put in place and levels of status or power change. This is especially important when observers must provide feedback and rate or judge those they have observed. These ratings also damage teacher relationships when competition emerges between staff who may naturally compete against those in their departments or year groups.

4.5   Summary of Results

While recognising the flaws of their respective observation systems, teachers described how they have learned and developed as a result of some of the feedback received. Now, schools are beginning to recognise some of the flaws in the current observation culture and have taken corrective measures such as removing teacher ratings, providing teachers with a choice of lesson observations, and looking at other aspects of teaching to assess their staff. As a result, some teachers reported high levels of trust and professional accountability in their schools, resulting in a far less stressful approach to the observation system. Continued professional development is highly valued by schools and is the main goal of the observation culture but also happens in varying forms outside of lesson observations. However, teachers have mixed feelings about the implementation of it as the choice and delivery is dominated by Senior Leadership.

Because of their high frequency, judgmental nature, and expectation of multiple key features to be clearly visible, lesson observations are incredibly stressful for

teachers. Many teachers also reported the simple act of having someone watch them teaching to unsettle them. While the goal of the observations is professional development, many teachers believe the judgments and ratings are tools which can be used against them for decisions in their pay increments or contract renewals. There were many examples of admitted malpractice, particularly by teachers who carried out observations. These included ignoring certain aspects of the observation criteria, observing less frequently or interpreting the criteria in their own way. Teachers often question the credibility of those observing them. This comes into question for a variety of reasons including a lack of training provided, their opinion of the observer, and the experience of the observer in relation to them.

As prior notice is provided for almost all lesson observations that are assessed or graded, teachers admit to behaving differently in these observed lessons. They generally tailor their lesson to their perceived idea of the observer's expectations. The majority of school observation policies are directly influenced by the KHDA's annual inspection and school cultures generally change leading up to the annual inspection week with observations geared towards satisfying the KHDA criteria. As schools have prior notice of their KHDA inspection, the weeks leading up to it are spent preparing lessons which satisfy the criteria but doesn't necessarily reflect the school culture or teaching on a day-to-day basis.

Private schools in Dubai share many characteristics of Communities of Practice. Social learning regularly takes place in many schools in the forms of collaborative planning, informal peer observations and staffroom discussion. Social learning is more likely to take place on smaller scales such as within year group teams or subject departments. Many teachers expressed that they valued these informal learning opportunities more than the formal professional development provided by their Senior Leadership teams. Teachers value their relationships with their peers and these informal social learning experiences are less likely to damage these relationships than formal observations. Examples of damaged relationships were reported as a result of formal observations such as teachers being afraid to provide negative feedback and also staff competing for higher observation ratings.

5   CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The research question posed in this paper asks to what extent does the observation culture in Dubai private schools impact them as social learning spaces for teachers? Within this research question exists two assumptions, firstly that an observation culture is present in Dubai private schools, and secondly, that these schools also operate as social learning spaces. As shown in the previous chapters, both of these assumptions have been proven to be correct.

While Schein & Schein (2016, p.13) debate whether we can state that occupations themselves have cultures, based on the qualitative and quantitative data of this research, an observation culture is unquestionably present in the sub-culture of Dubai private school teachers. The 147 responses to the online questionnaire show that this is a topic of importance for these teachers who were willing to contribute to the research without any form of incentive. As only 10% of respondents stated they were not observed regularly, it is clear that an observation culture exists for the majority of private school teachers in Dubai. Only 8 of these 144 respondents stated that no form of informal learning or professional development takes place in their schools with the rest selecting at least one example. With informal learning regularly taking place among peer groups in these schools, it is fair to state that they are operating as social learning spaces to varying degrees. These statistics confirm the validity of the research question as the private schools employing the majority of respondents operate as social learning spaces within an observation culture.

The research question posed aimed to explore the relationship between these formal observations and informal experiences of social learning and assess if one promotes or hinders the other. The results summarised in the previous chapter would suggest that the observation culture in Dubai private schools does hinder their operation as social learning spaces to an extent. The theoretical frame of reference applied encompassed the related theories of Continued Teacher Professional Development (CPTD), Communities of Practice (CP), and Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Following analysis of the results provided, evidence of negative impacts on all three of these related theories from the formal observation culture were present.

Firstly, the formal CPTD, which often materialised as observations from Senior Leadership, was perceived to be inferior to informal CPTD which staff did within their own year or subject groups. The main issue seems to be the lack of ownership provided to teachers in guiding their own CPTD. According to the online questionnaire, Senior Leadership are exclusively in charge of organising CPTD for 43% of teachers and 85% of respondents selected Senior Leadership combined with teachers setting their own goals and working with peers. If social learning in a more valuable form is going to take place for teachers, the ratio of time provided should be in favour of this teacher-led, informal CPTD rather than Senior Leadership-led, formal observations.

Secondly, CPTD in these informal settings embodies the theory of Communities of Practice, with the primary focus on learning as social participation and the process of being active participants in the "*practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 2009, p.240). However, the negative impacts on staff relationships as a direct result of formal observations restricts Dubai private schools in fostering these social communities. As the formal observation culture requires teachers to rate or judge rather than informally observe and provide constructive feedback, both observers and teachers are less comfortable with the process. Teachers who were observed also described becoming defined by the KHDA rating attached to them and the pressures that come with these ratings. Here the identities constructed are those of judgement and value rather than being part of a learning community.

Finally, the formal, planned and performed nature of the observations described in the teacher interviews conflicts with Eaker's definition of Professional Learning Communities in which teacher isolation is replaced with embedded collaborative processes (2002). It is clear that as formal observations are planned for the majority of teachers, they are not an organic representation of their teaching, but a premeditated performance of what they perceive the expectations of their observer to be. Individual feedback is then provided to the teacher and the cycle of learning is closed until the next performance. For the majority of teachers, formal observations seem to enforce pre-existing power structures in schools where Senior Leadership pass down their knowledge and assessment of the

teaching observed in a unilateral fashion. As the data has shown that many of the observers have not received training, this can be an especially frustrating process for teachers. If schools are going to operate as Professional Learning Communities, learning must be bilateral and collaborative.

At this point, it must be stressed that the formal observation culture is not detrimental to Dubai private schools operating as social learning spaces and it does not prohibit teachers informally sharing best practice and learning from one another. The research results have shown that for the majority of teachers in Dubai private schools, some form of social learning is taking place regularly and is valued ahead of formal CPTD. However, the current dominant trend in school observations for teachers in Dubai does seem to conflict with some of the core principals of social learning spaces. Issues such as lack of teacher ownership over CPTD and professional accountability, the judgmental nature of observations damaging important staff relationships, and the formal, pre-planned nature of the observations placing undue stress and unrealistic expectations upon teachers must all be addressed if Dubai private schools are to operate optimally as social learning spaces. The following recommendations are suggested in order to achieve this.

5.1 Recommendations

While each school should consider its own unique situation and teaching staff before exploring changes in their observation culture, there are some general suggestions which are relevant to teachers in Dubai private schools as a whole. All of the suggestions may not need to be implemented in each school, however the below list include possible solutions to some of the key issues which were voiced by teachers throughout the research process.

5.1.1 Reduce or remove notice period for observations

The results have shown that most assessed or graded lesson observations for teachers are done only when notice is provided, with teachers often having a choice in which lesson they are observed. This appears to be the primary reason for teachers altering their everyday teaching style to suit the specific observer or

observation criteria. These observed lessons tend to result in teachers 'putting on a show' and including resources, methods or approaches not usually included in their lessons. All but one of the teachers interviewed admitted to teaching differently in their pre-planned observations. Feedback is then provided on this artificial lesson and the teacher is graded on their 'ideal lesson' rather than their teaching that takes place for every other lesson period. It should be noted that while five out of the six teachers sampled to interview admitted to this, it may be a smaller percentage of all teachers in Dubai private schools who alter their teaching when observed. However, by removing the notice period, or reducing it, lesson observations will capture a more accurate snapshot of a teacher's lesson. If these observations take up as much time and investment as reported in the literature, it is far more beneficial if they are accurate of the everyday teaching culture in the school and not once-off, unsustainable perfect lessons.

5.1.2   Reduce expectations of lesson content

If notice is going to be removed for teachers, then the unrealistic expectations of teachers reported in the online questionnaire must also be revised. From the list of 10 varying elements that observers are looking for in a lesson observation, 27% of teachers selected all 10. These elements vary from explicit and observable content such as 'marking being up to date' to less tangible factors like 'rapport with students.' To expect that all 10 elements are present in every lesson places incredible stress on teachers and is impossible to achieve without considerable notice and time to plan how all of these elements will be visible to the observer. A possible solution to this could be looking for all of these elements over an extended period of time rather than a single lesson observation. Provide teachers with the criteria and inform them that evidence of all elements should be seen over the course of the academic year, within an agreed number of observations. Schools also have the option of conducting more focused or themed observations. One term could focus on a set of related lesson elements such as student collaboration or teamwork, or on observing a teacher's predetermined focused goals. Currently, the accepted expectations of visible elements in a single lesson observation seems impossible to achieve for teachers, even with notice provided. By reducing notice, and giving teachers

more focused, achievable elements to include in their lessons, a more realistic and organic lesson observation system could be possible.

5.1.3 Prioritise training in observation

Montgomery's claim that being a professionally qualified and experienced teacher does not automatically confer the ability to teach someone to teach is certainly present in the results presented in this report (2013, p.12). A clear lack of trust in observers seems to be directly linked with the lack of training provided for those conducting observations in Dubai private schools. This is evident in the 57% of respondents who were not confident in their observers and also the 33% of respondents who reported that observation training was provided in their school. If formal observations continue to carry such weight in school ratings, teacher increments and staff retention, then adequate training must be prioritised. Teachers should not become qualified observers simply by default of being promoted to a Head of Department or Year Head as the skills required must be developed specifically. It is suggested that this training becomes part of the CPTD for all staff as this would add to the transparency of the system if those observed are also aware of the intricacies. As teachers are promoted or progress, they will already be equipped with the necessary skills their new roles require. This will also help to address the issues of questioning credibility of those observing if all staff carry similar qualifications in the task. Where possible, those observing would ideally have more experience than those they are observing, although this may not always be possible for varying reasons.

5.1.4 Foster school-wide social learning spaces

While most teachers interviewed described their schools operating as social learning spaces, this was often limited to within their subject departments or year groups. This is very positive and beneficial for staff as it promotes close-knit teams and the sharing of specialist knowledge, however it does have its limitations. If schools become institutes of individual social learning spaces, then opportunities of cross-subject and even cross-curricular learning and development are lost. It is recommended that teachers, and particularly leadership teams, view all departments and subject areas as potential

opportunities for social learning and foster this accordingly. It should be stressed that this does not mean leaders or teachers from other departments formally observing each other as these were described as areas of frustration by teachers interviewed and added to the issue of observer credibility being questioned. School-wide social learning can instead be promoted by encouraging informal observation of lessons, shared social spaces for staff rather than department offices, and a cross-department and curricular mindset adopted in all CPTD opportunities.

5.1.5 Reevaluate influence of KHDA in observation policy

An easy and obvious recommendation to suggest is for schools to move away from basing their observation policies on the KHDA framework completely. There is clear presence as 50% and 36% of teachers strongly agree and agree respectively that the KHDA directly influence their school observation policy. However, given the profit-driven requirements for the majority of Dubai private schools who rely on KHDA ratings to regulate their fee structures, this is simply not a viable option. Instead, it is suggested that schools reevaluate the weight given to the KHDA framework in their observation policies and every day running of the schools. The rating levels of 'Outstanding', 'Very Good' and 'Good' etc. that are applied to schools do not need to be applied to teachers following every observation. Teachers in schools that have moved away from this practice spoke positively of the change and it would also stop teachers being defined by their ratings as described by another respondent. It is recommended that KHDA-specific preparation is done leading up to the annual inspection, but school policies which impact teachers year-round are not based on the KHDA framework. The challenges in this are understood as schools must put in the necessary preparations to achieve the highest possible rating. However, it is reported in both the literature and interviews conducted in this research that dedicating large portions of the academic year to the week-long inspection has more detrimental effects on schools. While the KHDA reducing the frequency of the annual inspection may be the best solution, schools should focus on ensuring that their policies foster daily social learning among staff and not only cater to the KHDA who, by nature, must rate and judge private schools for means of fee regulation.

5.2   Limitations to the study

Certain limitations are inevitable for research which is studying a working culture within a sample size as large as private schools operating in Dubai. While the sample of 144 teachers who answered the online questionnaire is large enough to provide a rich amount of data and highlight many of the trends present, this is still only a minority of the full data set of teachers working in international private schools in Dubai. The ratio of teachers who responded is not evenly distributed between all of the private schools in Dubai, so the data is naturally biased towards schools with large numbers of respondents. Similarly, the six teachers interviewed also provide only a snapshot of the opinions and feelings of the 144 participants in the questionnaire, and other teachers working in Dubai. Six teachers were interviewed out of 90 who consented to being contacted. Primarily because of time constraints with teacher timetables and scaling the amount of data to be analysed and interpreted, six was the maximum that could be interviewed in-depth and effectively. As the interviews were organized during the Covid-19 pandemic when admission to schools for individuals was minimal, meeting teachers was especially challenging. Finally, because of the sensitivity of the topic, teachers were perhaps limited in the level of honesty in their responses. All of the teachers partaking were expatriate workers at the time of interview and, even with anonymity guaranteed, are opening themselves up to some level of risk in speaking in any way negatively about their employer or regulating body over the private school system.

5.3   Opportunities for further research

Up until this point, research into classroom observation has been dominated by specifics of the observation process such as observation methods, impact within certain schools or impact of observation bodies such as Ofsted in the UK. This research has focused on capturing details of an observation culture within a concentrated area of private schools, from the perspectives of teachers experiencing it. As discussed, it was limited to an extent by sample size and resources available to the researcher. Areas of further study could include exploring the Dubai public school system and the experience of international teachers within that industry. Or remaining in the private school industry, more

specific subgroups within Dubai such as the top rated 'Outstanding' schools. Teacher experience within these 'Outstanding' schools could be compared with that of teachers in each of the different ratings. There is also merit for a comparative study looking at other international school hubs with large expatriate populations similar to Dubai such as Singapore, Vietnam or China in order to see if the observation culture discussed here is an international private school phenomenon or a culture unique to Dubai.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Teacher Observation Questionnaire

1 (5)

144	09:41	Active
Responses	Average time to complete	Status

1. What school do you currently work in? (This will not be shared).

144
Responses

Latest Responses
"Raffles World Academy"
"GEMS FirstPoint"
"Our own high school"

2. What level do you teach?
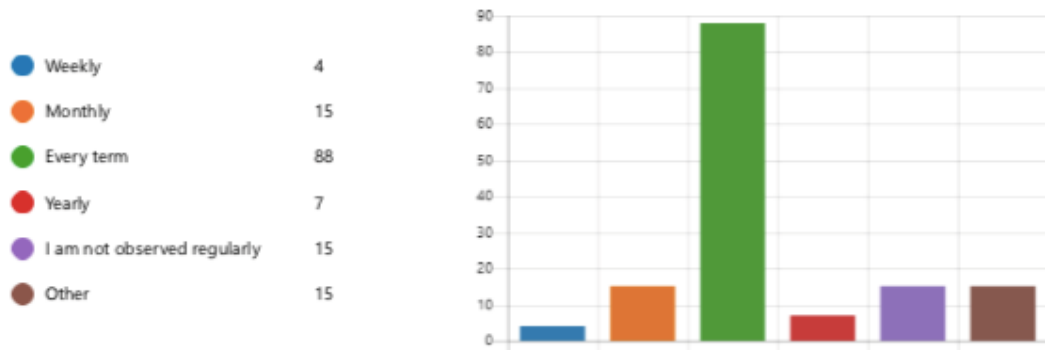
- Primary   72
- Secondary   72

3. Please provide your school email address to verify your position (your school will not be contacted).
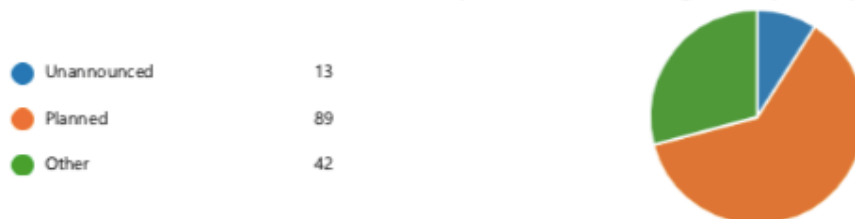
144
Responses

Latest Responses
"brendanw@rwadubai.com"
"S.alain_fps@gemsedu.com"
"Kenaz.s_oow@gemsedu.com"

4. How often is your teaching observed in one academic school year? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

🔵	Weekly	4
🟠	Monthly	15
🟢	Every term	88
🔴	Yearly	7
🟣	I am not observed regularly	15
🟤	Other	15

5. Are these observations unannounced or planned? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

🔵	Unannounced	13
🟠	Planned	89
🟢	Other	42

6. Are you confident in the ability of your observer/ your abilities to accurately observe teacher performance and provide constructive feedback? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

🔵	Yes	90
🟠	No	29
🟢	Other	25
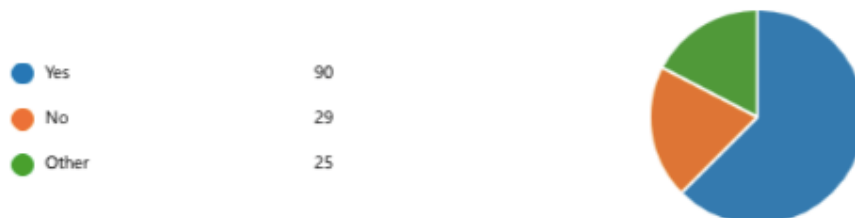
7. Is training provided for observers in your school? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)

|		
🔵	Yes	47
🟠	No	60
🟢	Other	37
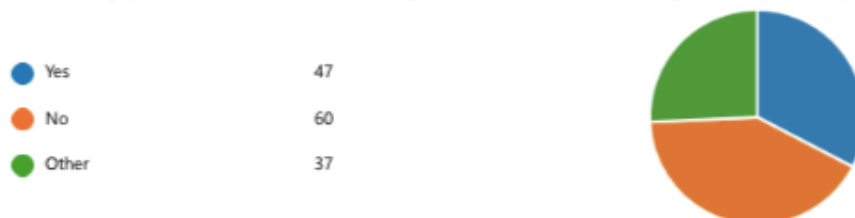
8. What is the purpose of teacher observation in your school? (Tick all that apply)

- Continued professional develo... 93
- Performance related pay incre... 52
- To rate teachers 74
- To share best practice 78
- Other 4

9. What are observers looking for in a successful lesson observation? (Tick all that apply)

- Behaviour management 105
- Subject knowledge 102
- Marking being up to date 80
- Rapport with students 105
- Classroom environment 114
- Differentiation 135
- Use of technology 105
- Effective questioning 128
- Student collaboration 113
- Student progress 129
- Other 12
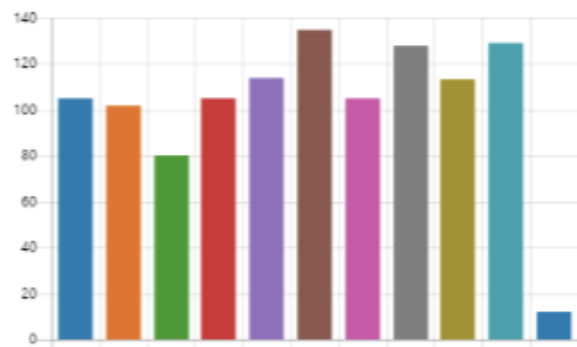
10. How is feedback provided following your observation? (Tick all that apply)

- Numerical rating/ score 25
- Pass/ Fail 3
- Verbal feedback 102
- KHDA grade e.g. "Outstanding... 103
- Other 17

11. Does your school observation policy contribute to teacher professional development? (if selecting other, please provide some detail)
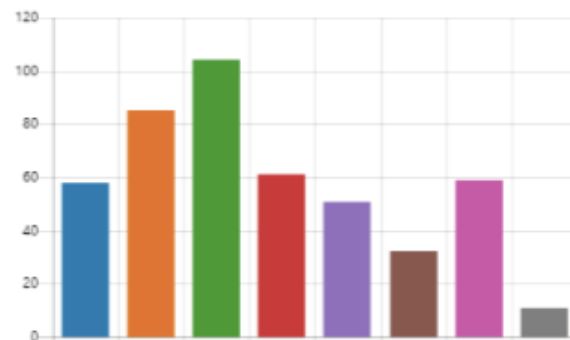
● Yes	78
● No	45
● Other	21

12. Who is responsible for organising formal professional development opportunities in your school? (Tick all that apply)

● Senior leadership organise for...	122
● Teachers set personal targets ...	69
● Teachers work with peers or w...	35
● Other	7

13. Do any of the following examples of informal professional development regularly take place in your school? (Please tick all that apply and add any other examples of informal professional development in 'Other')

● Teacher mentoring	58
● Teachers visiting each other's l...	85
● Collaboratively planning lessons	104
● Teachers offering support in t...	61
● Teacher self-reflection	51
● Co-teaching	32
● Staffroom discussion of best p...	59
● Other	11

14. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The observation policy in my school is directly influenced by the annual inspection carried out by The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). If selecting other, please provide some detail.

🔵	Strongly agree	72
🟠	Agree	52
🟢	Other	7
🔴	Disagree	11
🟣	Strongly disagree	2

15. What changes, if any, would you make to your school's current observation policy?

🔵	None	59
🟠	Other	85

16. Are you willing to be contacted for an interview on the topic of teacher observation in your school? All respondents will be kept anonymous.

🔵	Yes	90
🟠	No	54

Appendix 2. Interview Question Plan

Introduction

- Can you give me an overview of how your school observation system works?

Opening Questions

- How do you feel about the **frequency** of lesson observations in your school?

- Is your teaching different during an observation you have been given **prior notice** of?

- How **confident** are you in your ability to provide accurate observation and feedback/ ability of the observer to do so?

- What type of **training** is provided for observers?

- How to you feel about **performance related pay** based on observations?

Core/ In-depth Questions

- How do you feel about your school's **formal observation and feedback system**?

- What is the purpose of the **ratings** used to assess your teaching? (only if applicable)

- Can you describe any **informal professional development** that takes place in school outside of the formal observations?

- How much **ownership/ independence** do you have in guiding your professional development?

- Which type of professional development (formal/informal) occurs most often? Which offers the most value to you as a teacher?

- What impact does the **KHDA** have on your school and your teaching?

Closure

- Is there anything we have not discussed that you feel is important?