



Research-Engaged Schools as Catalysts for System Change: Practitioner Inquiry, Teacher Leadership, and Innovation Networks in the UAE

Abstract

Many education systems struggle to move school improvement beyond isolated professional development activities toward sustained, evidence-informed change embedded in everyday school practice. This symposium examines how research-engaged school networks can serve as catalysts for system change from within, drawing on the UAE's Learning and Innovation Networked Communities (LINC) initiative. LINC is a partnership among the Ministry of Education (MoE), Emirates College for Advanced Education (ECAE), and participating public schools. Since its establishment in 2022, LINC has expanded from 13 to over 30 schools and from 133 to more than 300 active participants, offering a UAE-based model for connecting practitioner inquiry, teacher leadership, professional learning, and school-based innovations. Grounded in a theory of action that positions practitioner inquiry, collaborative professional learning, and teacher leadership as key drivers of school improvement, LINC supports educators in identifying persistent challenges in teaching and learning and developing locally responsive innovations through structured inquiry cycles. Drawing on program evaluation data, school-based inquiry outputs, diagnostic rubric evidence, participant reflections, and examples of implemented innovations, the symposium highlights how research engagement can become embedded within school culture through professional collaboration, data-informed decision-making, and critical friendship models that support sustained innovation and cross-school dissemination.

The symposium includes the following five interrelated papers that examine the development, implementation, and emerging impact of LINC:

Paper #1: Scaling Research-Engaged School Networks for System Transformation

This paper examines LINC as a networked model for scaling research-engaged school improvement across the UAE. Drawing on program documentation, participation data, school-based inquiry outputs, and dissemination evidence, the paper analyses how the LINC partnership created conditions for the spread of locally tested pedagogic innovations within and between schools through network structures such as steering committees, school-based inquiry teams, critical friendship, and dissemination events such as the LINC Retreat and annual LINC Summit support system-wide learning. The paper argues that sustainable transformation depends not only on individual teacher inquiry but also on intentionally designed networks that connect practitioner research, leadership development, data use, and cross-school knowledge sharing (Godfrey & Brown, 2019). It concludes by considering how the LINC model may inform international efforts to build research-engaged school systems.

Paper #2: From Emerging to Transformative: Using the LINC Diagnostic Rubric to Build Research-Engaged School Cultures

This paper examines how LINC has supported schools in developing cultures of collaborative inquiry and practitioner research. Drawing on evaluation findings from 20 schools and evidence generated through the LINC Research-Engaged Schools Diagnostic Rubric, the paper analyses how schools move from “emerging” to “transformative” cultures of inquiry and evidence-informed



practices (Carpenter, 2017). It examines changes in teacher leadership, pedagogic innovation, professional collaboration, and school conditions that support sustained research engagement. The paper contributes a practical framework for understanding how research-engaged school cultures can be developed, monitored, and strengthened over time.

Paper #3: Collaborative Inquiry and Teacher Leadership as Drivers of School Improvement: The Case of Cluster 9.1

This paper focuses on collaborative inquiry and teacher leadership initiatives implemented across UAE schools, specifically MOE's Cluster 9.1 from Abu Dhabi. Drawing on teacher inquiry reports, implementation artifacts, and examples from lesson study cycles, school leadership collaborative inquiry, and the Teacher Peer Excellence Group (TPEG) writing initiative, it examines how a Cluster Manager and principal-led inquiry team, combined with teacher-led inquiry teams, used reflective practice, peer observation, and practitioner research to address school improvement priorities. It highlights how collaborative inquiry strengthened professional dialogue, collective efficacy, and teachers' capacity to lead improvement from within their own school contexts (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Paper #4: AI and Future-Ready Pedagogies within Research-Engaged UAE Schools

This Paper examines how research-engaged school cultures can support responsible experimentation with AI and digital innovation. Drawing on teacher reflections, professional learning artefacts, and classroom examples, it explores how LINC educators used tools such as ChatGPT, virtual science labs, game-based learning, and digital fabrication to support literacy, assessment, STEM learning, creativity, and problem-solving. The paper argues that AI integration should be embedded in sustained professional learning and inquiry-driven school improvement, rather than treated as isolated tool use (Tan et al., 2025). It also aligns with UNESCO's call for teachers to develop AI competencies grounded in human-centred, ethical, pedagogical, and professional learning dimensions.

Paper #5: Practitioner Inquiry for Inclusion, Equity, and Educational Change

This paper investigates inclusive education initiatives within the LINC network, particularly the large-scale research project RAMP which involves public schools and Hemam Centers supporting students with autism spectrum disorder. Drawing on practitioner inquiry evidence, intervention documentation, and school-based implementation examples, it examines how practitioner research rooted in the model of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS [Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006]), enabled special education teachers and autism specialists to codesign evidence-informed interventions. It further explores how collaborative professional learning and practitioner-led research contributes to more inclusive learning schools.

Key Words: Research-Engaged Schools; Practitioner Inquiry; Teacher Leadership; Future-Ready Pedagogies; System Transformation



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Paper	Lead Presenter	Other Presenters
Paper #1	Dr. Othman Abu Khurma (Othman.AbuKhurma@ecae.ac.ae)	Dr Aysha Saeed Alshamsi (A.Alshamsi@ecae.ac.ae) Dr Yahia Alramamneh (Yahia.Alamamneh@ecae.ac.ae)
Paper #2	Dr. Qasim AlShannag (Qasim.ALShannag@ecae.ac.ae)	Dr. Adeeb Jarrah (adeeb.jarrah@ecae.ac.ae)
Paper #3	Alsaad Saleh Omar Mubarak Aliaberi (MOE Cluster Manager)- (Alsaad.Aliaberi@moe.gov.ae)	Afra Rashed Bakheet Al Marbouei (Principal): Afra.Almarbouei@moe.sch.ae Zainab Abdulla Mohamed Alhosani (Principal): Zainab.Alhosani@moe.sch.ae ; Najwa Ahmed Abdulrahim Almarzooqi (Principal): Najwa.Almarzouqi@moe.sch.ae ; Dr Sumaya Saqr (ECAE)
Paper #4	Dr Patricia Fidalgo (pfidalgo@ecae.ac.ae)	Dr Reem Hashem (Reem.Hashem@ecae.ac.ae)
Paper #5	Dr Farah ElZein (Farah.ElZein@ecae.ac.ae)	Dr Hamdah Alhashmi (Hamdah.Alhashmi@ecae.ac.ae)