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The Relationships Between School Principals' Resilience, Perceived Organizational Support, and Thriving in United Arab Emirates Schools

Ali Ibrahim, Noura Al Azzani

Research Article

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Author for correspondence:
Ali Ibrahim
ali_saidebrahim@uaeu.ac.ae
United Arab Emirates University, United Arab Emirates

Abstract

Background/purpose. Research on how school principals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) remain resilient in the face of workplace challenges remains limited. This study seeks to address this research gap by investigating how principals cope with work adversity (which is a time of intense stress or serious anxiety that can cause physical or psychological problems) and how they thrive in their leadership roles by moving beyond their pre-adversity level of functioning.

Materials/methods. The study used a quantitative design to examine the association of five variables with thriving: internal and external resilience factors, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and Perceived Organizational Support (POS). Each variable was assessed independently and then analyzed for its relationship to thriving. Guided by the resilience framework, theories of response to adversity, and the socially-embedded model of thriving at work, the study explored whether these variables enhance the thriving of school principals. Out of a total of 104 school principals in one school district, 84 completed a six-part Likert-scale questionnaire. Data analysis employed descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses to examine relationships and predictors of thriving.

Results. The results showed that thriving was correlated with all variables except external resilience factors, with the strongest associations found for internal resilience factors and job satisfaction. Principals' demographics did not significantly affect levels of thriving. Furthermore, internal factors of resilience and self-efficacy emerged as the strongest predictors of thriving, highlighting the importance of psychological resources.

Conclusion. As UAE education undergoes significant and rapid changes, the study recommends that educational policymakers prioritize resilience and thriving among school principals and consider leadership programs that integrate organizational support systems and resilience training.

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1. Introduction

School principals have many responsibilities such as leading teachers, managing operations, coping with change, resolving conflicts, maintaining staff motivation, and hiring and retaining skilled staff (Southwick et al., 2017). These duties create pressure on principals and many of them experience work-related adversities (Riley & Masten, 2005). Adversity is defined as a time of intense difficulty or serious anxiety that can cause physical or psychological problems (Carver, 1998). Additionally, the growing emphasis on inspections and accountability systems further intensifies this pressure, as principals are held directly responsible for their schools' performance and external evaluations. Unfortunately, not all principals are resilient enough to successfully navigate school adversities. In some situations, the resulting stress can drastically harm principals' health and can even be fatal. For example, Ruth Perry and Irene Hogg, well-respected and award-winning headteachers, committed suicide shortly after Ofsted England and HMIE Scotland downgraded their school ratings (Waters & McKee, 2023; Adams, 2015).

The factors affecting school principals' resilience are classified as internal and external (Nishikawa, 2006). Internal factors refer to personal characteristics such as coping abilities, self-esteem, and cognitive resources, while external factors include personal relationships, social support, and access to resources such as mentoring or professional networks (Ledesma, 2014; O'Leary, 1998; Ungar, 2004). Research also highlights that self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and organizational support can play significant roles in facilitating or undermining how principals react to the adversities they face (Brooks & Goldstein, 2003; Pepe, 2011).

Several studies have examined school principals' resilience, concluding that resilience is determined by how principals think and respond to challenges (Maulding et al., 2012; Patterson & Kelleher, 2005; Turk, 2018). Coutu (2002) explained that resilient leaders possess three characteristics: an accurate acceptance of reality, an ability to improvise, and a positive self-concept. Similarly, Patterson and Kelleher (2005) identified six traits common among resilient leaders: they can assess reality effectively, maintain optimism, remain faithful to personal ideals, uphold a strong sense of efficacy, use their energy wisely, and act on personal convictions.

In this study, thriving is treated as a related but distinct concept from resilience. Following Spreitzer et al. (2005), thriving is defined as a psychological state characterized by vitality and learning, fostered by supportive work environments, in which individuals progress beyond their pre-adversity level of functioning. While resilience involves recovering and maintaining functioning after hardships, thriving goes a step further—it involves growth and enhanced vitality through those experiences.

Although the resilience of school principals has gained increasing international attention, empirical research on how principals in the UAE experience and sustain resilience and thriving within their unique cultural and organizational settings remains scarce. The current study investigates resilience and thriving among school principals in the UAE in two main areas. The first is the extent to which school principals in the UAE use internal and external factors of resilience. The second is whether other factors—such as job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and organizational support—associate with school principals' resilience and thriving when they face work adversities. It is hoped that by understanding the interplay among these factors, the study can provide information and guidance for school leaders and policymakers in the UAE on the topic.

1.1. Problem Statement

School principals in the UAE have experienced many changes and shifts regarding the direction of the education system (Thorne, 2011). One very significant shift was the change in the governance of the educational system from the Ministry of Education (MoE) to the Abu Dhabi Educational Council

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(ADEC) in 2006; whereby ADEC became the sole authority in charge of public and private education in the emirate of Abu Dhabi while the MoE kept its authority over education in Dubai and other emirates. Since 2006, ADEC has made substantial changes to transform education in Abu Dhabi. Some notable changes include Public-Private Partnerships in schools (Ibrahim, 2020; Thorne, 2011) and the Irtiqa'a School Self-Evaluation and Inspection Program (Hourani & Litz, 2019). In 2017, the education system was again reformed. The MoE became responsible for public schools, while ADEC became the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) and retained its authority over private schools in Abu Dhabi. In January 2021, the Emirates Schools Establishment branched out from the MoE, and responsibilities were split between the two entities. In 2024, the ESE was merged back into the MoE, consolidating the governance of public schools under the Ministry once again.

Going through such major changes, school principals were confronted with unending demands and requirements that consumed their time and energy, leaving them trying to cope and survive. While Denecker (2019) documented similar resilience challenges among school principals in Switzerland, the pressures described—such as implementing frequent top-down policy changes and balancing competing expectations from authorities—are also relevant to the UAE context and help illustrate the types of tensions school principals face. School principals have limited involvement when it comes to policymaking, and it is difficult for them to enforce new policies.

New reforms in the UAE education system have intensified the responsibilities of school principals, who now face greater administrative and accountability demands alongside teachers (Zahran et al., 2016; Al Maktoum & Al Kaabi, 2024). Hojeij, Ibrahim, and Baroudi (2023) report that the intensification of educational reforms in the UAE—characterized by heightened accountability demands and administrative complexity—has substantially increased the stress and workload experienced by school principals, a finding consistent with Rai and Beresford-Dey's (2023) broader review of leadership challenges in the UAE's reform-driven education context. Therefore, school principals have to not only enforce new requirements from education authorities but also cope with challenges related to teachers, staff, and overall school management. This mediator role between government policy and school-level implementation generates significant work-related stress, testing principals' resilience and their ability to thrive in leadership roles. Researchers in the UAE have not yet investigated the topic of school principals' resilience. Therefore, it is critical to understand the factors that affect school principals' resilience and thriving when they face adversity in their leadership roles.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the various factors that affect school principals' resilience and thriving in Abu Dhabi schools. Specifically, the study focused on five core variables: internal factors of resilience, external factors of resilience, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and perceived organizational support (POS)—seeking to identify the most significant factors that could help principals thrive in their roles in the UAE educational context.

1.3. Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. Is there a relationship between Al Ain School District principals' levels of thriving and each of the following variables: internal factors of resilience, external factors of resilience, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and POS?

2. Do Al Ain School District principals' levels of thriving differ significantly based on gender, educational qualification, total years of experience in education, total years of administrative experience, school cycle (KG, cycle one, cycle two, cycle three, common cycle), and school type (male, female, co-education)?

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3. To what extent do internal factors of resilience, external factors of resilience, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and POS predict Al Ain School District principals' levels of thriving?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study enriches our understanding of resilience in school leadership and the variables associated with and predictive of school principals' resilience. In addition, the study aims to confirm prior knowledge regarding the association between school principals' demographic factors and their resilience and thriving abilities. Importantly, no previous empirical study has specifically examined these relationships among school principals in the UAE context, despite the country's unique educational governance structure and its rapid, ongoing policy reforms. Thus, the study may have significant policy and practice implications, especially for UAE school principals and educational policymakers. Principals can learn what it takes to overcome the adversities of their work, and policymakers can learn how to create an environment that builds thriving skills for school principals. Moreover, teacher preparation programs can build on the results of this study to inform future development and preparation of thriving leaders.

2. Literature Review

During the 1990s, research on resilience was influenced by the deficit model, which emphasized what school leaders could not do and blamed them for lacking resilience (Seligman et al., 2009). In 1998, the president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, called for a strength-based approach. This approach assumes that individuals can surpass their ability to merely survive or recover from adversities and can thrive—a concept that in this study describes people who grow beyond their previous level of functioning after adversity and who display increased competence and capacity in their roles.

The terms survival, recovery, and thriving define the stages that a person experiences during and after encountering adversity (Ledesma, 2014). Therefore, thriving is part of the dynamic process of resilience, and whether a person can thrive depends on the person's resilience capacity. According to Mak et al. (2011), resilience can foster positive views of the self, the world, and the future. Such intrapersonal cognitive capacity supports the individual's overall well-being (Coutu, 2002; Patterson & Kelleher, 2005; Reivich & Shatté, 2002; Turk & Wolfe, 2018). Further, resilience involves a process of adaptation and growth within a volatile environment (Southwick et al., 2017) and it is a trait that can be acquired and improved with practice (Coutu, 2002; Patterson & Kelleher, 2005; Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Over the past two decades, research in school administration has increasingly emphasized resilience as a key leadership quality. Isaacs (2003), for example, explored the connection between high school principals' resilience and their capacity to enhance leadership skills, concluding that those with higher resilience ratings were notably more successful in improving teacher performance. Similarly, Brooks and Goldstein (2003) examined principals' perceptions of self-efficacy in relation to resilience and found that strong self-efficacy beliefs boosted problem-solving under stress. Geocaris (2004) applied resilience theory to principals working in challenging environments, concluding that those who thrived were more likely to introduce innovative practices.

Nishikawa (2006) investigated the internal and external essential factors employed by thriving elementary principals that help them sustain high performance. From a measurement perspective, Porath et al. (2011) developed and validated a thriving self-report scale, linking it to the vitality and learning of principals. Demographic factors have also been examined by Pepe (2011), who found no significant relationship between variables such as years of experience, school location, poverty rate, and principals' resilience. Finally, Nowicki (2008) assessed self-efficacy's predictive power and

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concluded that, without the presence of social support and a sense of belonging, self-efficacy alone was insufficient to account for resilience.

Studies have also examined the factors associated with resilience, often distinguishing between internal and external influences. Internal factors—sometimes referred to as personality traits or individual resources—encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics that shape how individuals respond to adversity. Cognitive factors include hardiness, coping ability, sense of coherence, and the use of personal and cognitive resources, all of which influence how a person interprets and appraises threats (Ledesma, 2014; O'Leary, 1998). Emotional and dispositional traits, such as optimism, empathy, insight, and feelings of self-worth, contribute to a sense of mastery over one's environment and support adaptive responses (Beardslee, 1989; Ungar, 2004). Other internal resources identified in the literature include hope, confidence, self-esteem, and spiritual or religious engagement (Beardslee, 1989; Bonanno, 2004; Carver, 1998; Ledesma, 2014; Masten, 2001; O'Leary, 1998; Ungar, 2004). Across these diverse qualities, perhaps the most consistent finding is that individuals who report higher optimism and hope are more likely to experience growth following adversity or other stressful events (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Davis et al., 1998; Ledesma, 2014; Park et al., 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

In the present study, 19 internal variables—identified in previous research (Ledesma, 2014; Nishikawa, 2006; O'Leary, 1998) as key contributors to resilience—are operationalized as individual items: positive self-esteem, cognitive appraisal, sense of optimism or hope, empathy, ability to predict, intellectual competence, problem solving, perseverance, confidence, positivity, sense of purpose, tolerance for ambiguity, risk taking, spirituality, adaptability, efficacy, personal values of trust, integrity and compassion, and personal mental and emotional energy. These items are measured collectively as the internal factors affecting resilience and thriving.

On the other hand, external factors refer to environmental conditions and social resources that help individuals withstand and recover from adversity. The literature consistently identifies supportive relationships—whether with family members, friends, colleagues, or mentors—as central to resilience, providing emotional reassurance and a sense of belonging (Beardslee, 1989; Bonanno, 2004; Carver, 1998; Ledesma, 2014; Lazaridou & Beka, 2015; Masten, 2001; Nishikawa, 2006; O'Leary, 1998). Broader community support from professional associations, engagement in local activities, and access to counseling services further enhance stability and adaptive coping. Organizational supports, including collegial collaboration and a positive school community, can buffer the effects of stress and promote sustained performance (Nishikawa, 2006; O'Leary, 1998). In the present study, eight specific external factors—support from family, colleagues at work, the school community, professional associations, involvement in community activities, a professional mentor, a personal friend, and counseling services—are measured together as the external factors affecting resilience and thriving.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three interrelated conceptual areas: resilience theory, models of response to adversity, and the socially-embedded model of thriving at work. While each provides a distinct lens, together they create a coherent foundation for examining the experiences of thriving school principals.

Resilience theory offers three models—compensatory, challenge, and protective (O'Leary, 1998; Ledesma, 2014). In the compensatory model, resilience is seen as a factor that offsets or neutralizes the influence of risk. In this case, compensatory and risk factors act independently to shape the outcomes. The challenge model approaches adversity differently: when the intensity of a risk is moderate rather than overwhelming, facing it can strengthen an individual's adaptive capacity. Such experiences can prompt self-reflection, personal growth, and preparation for future challenges

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(O'Leary, 1998). By contrast, the protective model emphasizes the interaction between risk and protective factors, where the latter diminish the likelihood of adverse outcomes by buffering the effects of risk (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). Examples of protective factors include improving self-esteem, cultivating academic or occupational skills, and developing planning and problem-solving skills (Ungar, 2004). While each model provides useful insights, this study draws primarily on the challenge model because it reflects the potential for growth through adversity—a perspective that closely aligns with the real-life experiences of many thriving principals.

A second strand of the framework draws on O'Leary's (1998) model of responses to adversity, which maps potential trajectories following a disruptive event. The model identifies four broad outcomes: succumbing, surviving with impairment, recovering, and thriving. Succumbing involves a continued decline or disengagement from functioning; survival implies maintaining some function but without full recovery; resilience describes a return to pre-adversity functioning; and thriving represents an advance beyond one's prior baseline, marked by learning and growth even in the face of repeated challenges. Porath et al. (2011) further define thriving through two central dimensions: *vitality*—the sense of being energized and alive—and *learning*—the experience of progress and skill acquisition. Together, these perspectives underscore that thriving requires both a cognitive shift and a sustained state of personal development.

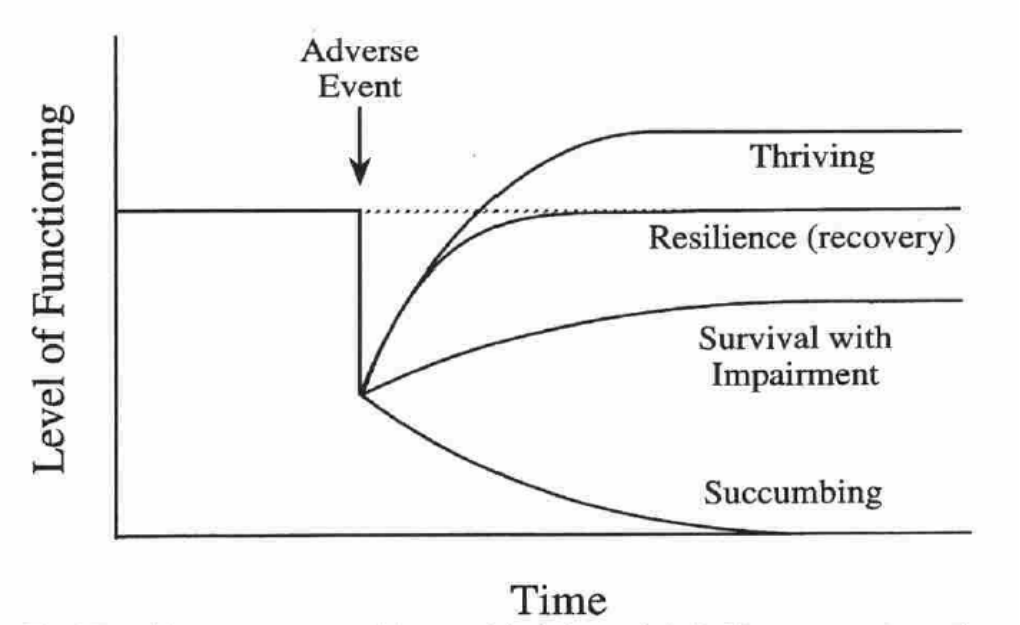

Figure 1. Models of Responses to Adversity (O'Leary, 1998)

The third conceptual pillar is Spreitzer et al.'s (2005) socially-embedded model of thriving at work, which connects individual growth to the social and structural conditions of the workplace. According to this model, when employees operate in environments that foster autonomy, open communication, mutual trust, and opportunities for knowledge creation, they are more likely to engage in what the authors term *agentic work behaviors*. These behaviors—ranging from attentiveness to relational initiative—fuel vitality and learning, which in turn promote further development and well-being. Integrating Spreitzer's model with O'Leary's framework highlights the interplay between personal resilience processes and the organizational contexts that sustain them.

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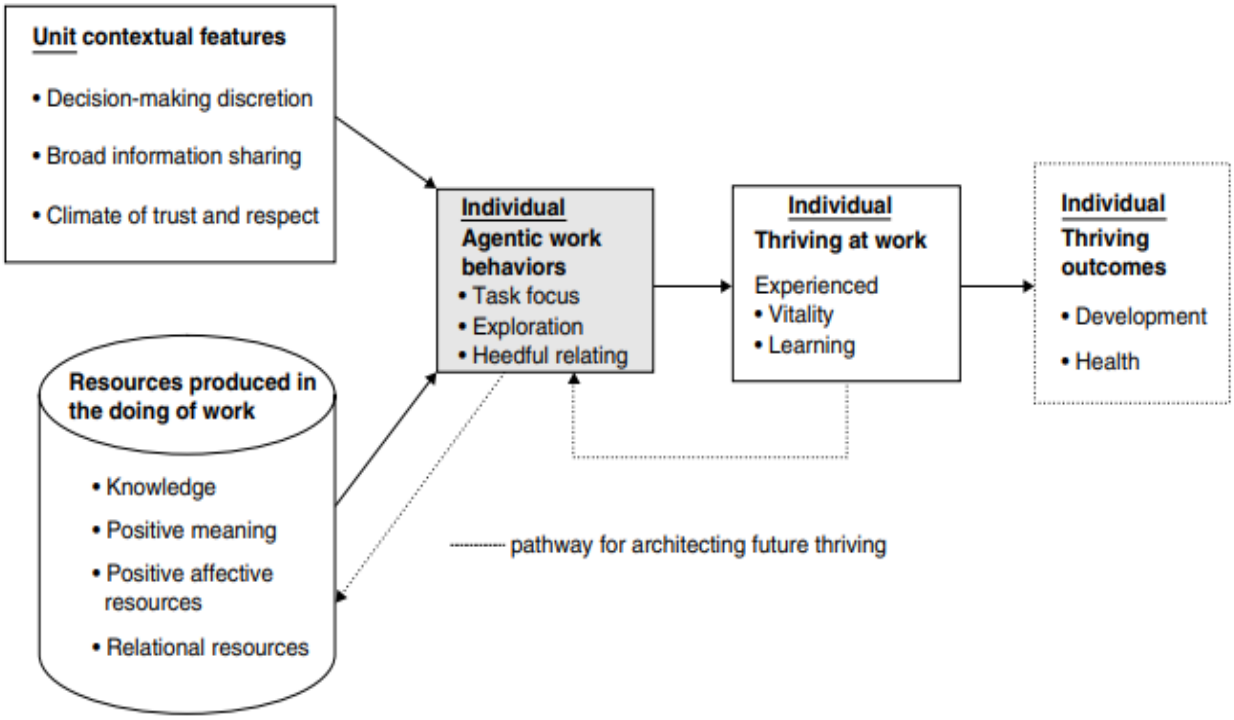

Figure 2. Socially-Embedded Model for Thriving at Work (Spreitzer et al., 2005)

Drawing these three strands together, the study defines a thriving school principal as a leader who combines a distinctive set of internal capacities—19 in total—with external resources spanning eight key support categories. Such principals respond to adversity with more than just endurance; they embrace challenges as opportunities to grow, strengthen their self-efficacy, and enhance their leadership capabilities. They approach their work with a positive attitude toward both their own abilities and the organizational support they receive. In line with the challenge model, they transform adverse experiences into sources of vitality and learning, enabling them to grow and navigate future challenges with confidence.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design, incorporating both correlational and comparative approaches. The correlational component examined the relationships between principals' thriving levels and five independent variables: internal factors of resilience, external factors of resilience, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and perceived organizational support (POS). The comparative component assessed whether thriving levels differed significantly across demographic groups based on gender, educational qualification, total years of experience in education, total years of administrative experience, school cycle, and school type.

3.2. Research Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of six sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including principals' gender, years of experience in education, years of experience in administrative positions, highest educational qualification, and the level and type of school where they worked. The second section measured principals' thriving levels using 10 items from Porath et al. (2011), scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The third section assessed internal and external factors of resilience, comprising 19 items for internal factors and 8 items for external factors, based on Nishikawa's (2006) resilience questionnaire. With permission, these items were adapted to the UAE context by rephrasing them into personal statements to improve clarity

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and cultural relevance. Responses in this section were recorded on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

The fourth section measured self-efficacy using 8 items from Chen et al. (2001), scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The fifth section measured job satisfaction with 5 items from Ho and Au (2006), also scored on a five-point Likert scale. The final section measured perceived organizational support (POS) using 16 items from Eisenberger et al. (1986), scored on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

3.3. Validity and Reliability

As part of the content validity assessment of the statements on internal factors of resilience, this questionnaire section was shared with five faculty members from the College of Education at the United Arab Emirates University, who reviewed each statement and offered suggestions to sharpen clarity and strengthen its link to the variable. Their feedback led to several small but meaningful revisions.

Second, an initial confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the 19-item model was run, and the results indicated inadequate fit, suggesting that the items did not represent a single construct. A principal factor analysis (PFA) was then conducted using Jamovi, leading to the removal of nine weak or cross-loading items. The refined 10-item model showed clear unidimensionality. A subsequent CFA confirmed good model fit: $\chi^2(35) = 48.5$, $p = .064$; SRMR = 0.056; RMSEA = 0.068 (90% CI [0.000, 0.111], $p = .253$); CFI = 0.952; TLI = 0.938; IFI = 0.953. Standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.34 to 0.84 ($p < .001$). These results indicate that the revised scale demonstrates strong construct validity and satisfactory model fit, supporting a unidimensional structure representing principals' internal resilience capacities.

Then, reliability testing showed strong internal consistency across all six subscales—thriving, internal factors of resilience, external factors of resilience, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and perceived organizational support (POS)—with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.774 to 0.902 (George & Mallery, 2016).

Table 1. Reliability Coefficients

Subscale	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Thriving	10	0.819
Internal variables	10	0.844
External variables	8	0.774
Self-efficacy	8	0.902
Job satisfaction	5	0.899
POS	16	0.868

3.4. Participants

Principals from government schools in the Al Ain School District comprised the study's population. This district has 104 schools, principals from 84 of them participated in the study, including kindergartens and different school levels. Table 2 provides the demographic information for the study participants.

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Table 2. Participants' Demographic Information

Factor		N	Factor		N
Gender	Male	22	School type	For male students	25
	Female	62		For female students	20
School level	KG	13		Co-education	39
	Cycle one	15			
	Cycle two	20	Years of experience in education	0–15	17
	Cycle three	17		16–20	15
	Common cycle	19		> 20	52
Years in administration	5–10	26			
	11–15	19		MA	28
	16–20	25	Educational level	BA	56
	> 20	14			

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection commenced after obtaining ethical approval from the Social Sciences Ethics Committee and the MoE Research Division. The data collection started on 17 May 2021 and ended on 30 June 2021. A spreadsheet with the names and phone numbers of government schools in Al Ain was downloaded from the MoE website. The MoE Research Division created an access link to the online questionnaire and distributed it to all principals in the Al Ain government schools. The researchers then personally followed up with each principal via telephone and provided a brief explanation of the study. Of the 104 school principals in the district, 100 confirmed receipt of the questionnaire. In total, 84 principals completed the questionnaire, which is considered a good sample size at the 95% confidence level (with a response rate of 81.7%). Participants provided their consent to complete the survey in writing, and all other ethical issues, including keeping participants informed about the study, their rights to voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal, were protected in this study.

3.6. Data Analysis

To address RQ1, Pearson's r correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between principals' thriving levels and the five independent variables: internal factors of resilience, external factors of resilience, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and perceived organizational support (POS).

For RQ2, differences in thriving levels across demographic groups (gender, educational qualification, total years of experience in education, total years of administrative experience, school

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cycle, and school type) were analyzed using independent-samples *t* tests for dichotomous variables and one-way ANOVAs for variables with more than two categories. Where ANOVAs were significant, Tukey's HSD post hoc tests were conducted to identify specific group differences.

To address RQ3, multiple regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which internal and external resilience factors, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and POS predicted principals' levels of thriving. This method was chosen to identify the most significant predictors among the five independent variables. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of $p < .05$.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Regarding the thriving level, the mean of the 10 statements related to resilience/thriving ranged from 4.97 (SD = 1.01) for the statement "I am sometimes learning" to 6.23 (SD = 0.58) for "I have developed a lot as a person." The mean for the 10 statements on the seven-point Likert scale was 5.82 (SD = 0.72), which—consistent with Porath et al. (2011)—can be interpreted as a high level of thriving, as it is well above the scale midpoint of 4.

For the 10 internal factors of resilience, descriptive statistics indicated that some factors were used more often than others by school principals. For example, the statement "I knew I could do what I wanted to do and nothing could be forced on me" had the lowest mean of 3.15 (SD = 1.035). Other statements, such as "I rapidly learned new skills in response to changing circumstances" and "My personal values like integrity, honesty, and compassion helped me navigate the adversity," had the highest means of 4.45 and 4.65, respectively (SD = 0.47 and 0.58) out of 6.

For the external factors of resilience, results indicated greater variability. The most frequently used factor was "I sought the support of professionals or trusted colleagues at work" (M = 4.22, SD = 0.68). In contrast, principals less often reported "I talked to a professional mentor" (M = 3.66, SD = 1.77) or "I sought support from my family" (M = 3.69, SD = 1.47).

For self-efficacy, principals rated themselves consistently high across items, with all means above 4.19 on a five-point scale. For example, "I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges" (M = 4.22, SD = 0.64) and "I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks" (M = 4.30, SD = 0.51) were among the strongest. Given that these values are close to the maximum possible score and exceed the scale midpoint by more than 0.5 points, they can be classified as high self-efficacy, in line with prior interpretations from Chen et al. (2001).

For job satisfaction, no mean exceeded 4 out of 5. The lowest was "If I could choose my career over, I would not change anything" (M = 3.26, SD = 1.07). Although this score is above the scale midpoint of 3, it is notably lower than satisfaction benchmarks reported by Ho and Au (2006) for similarly scaled measures, suggesting only moderate satisfaction overall.

For POS, the mean ranged from 3.02 to 3.50 on a six-point scale, all below the midpoint of 3.5. The lowest was "My institution tries to make my job as interesting as possible" (M = 3.02, SD = 1.21) and "My institution really cares about my well-being" (M = 3.21, SD = 1.62). These findings suggest a comparatively low perception of organizational support. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for the study variables.

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Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Average mean	Scale range	SD
Thriving level of school principals	5.82	1 - 7	0.72
Internal factors of resilience	4.22	1 - 6	0.66
External factors of resilience	3.58	1 - 6	0.57
Self-efficacy	4.25	1 - 5	0.43
Job satisfaction	3.65	1 - 5	0.81
POS	3.40	1 - 6	0.56

4.2. Question One Results

To examine the relationship between the Al Ain School District principals' levels of thriving and each of the variables used in this study, Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated.

Table 4. Pearson's Correlations: Relationships Between Thriving Level Variables

		Thriving	Internal Factors	External Factors	Self-Efficacy	POS	Job Satisfaction
Thriving	R	1					
	Sig.						
Internal Factors	R	0.448**	1				
	Sig.	0.000					
External Factors	R	0.028	0.175	1			
	Sig.	0.799	0.112				
Self-Efficacy	R	0.283**	0.556**	0.016	1		
	Sig.	0.009	0.000	0.887			
POS	R	0.336**	0.115	0.322**	0.007	1	
	Sig.	0.002	0.299	0.003	0.951		
Job Satisfaction	R	0.359**	0.260*	-0.019	0.211	0.368**	1
	Sig.	0.001	0.017	0.864	0.054	0.001	

Note: **p≤0.01 level; *p≤0.05 level (2-tailed)

The correlations were positive and statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level between principals' levels of thriving and internal factors of resilience ($r = 0.449$) and between levels of thriving and job satisfaction ($r = 0.359$). Both of these effect sizes are moderate according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, suggesting meaningful practical relationships.

Although smaller in magnitude, the level of thriving was also significantly related to POS ($r = 0.336$) and self-efficacy ($r = 0.283$) at the $p < 0.01$ level. These results indicate that principals who report greater job satisfaction and stronger personal resources (internal resilience factors, self-efficacy, and organizational support) also tend to report higher levels of thriving.

There was no significant relationship between levels of thriving and external resilience factors ($r = 0.028$, $p = 0.799$). However, external factors were moderately related to POS ($r = 0.322$, $p = 0.003$),

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suggesting that principals who feel supported by their organizations are somewhat more likely to draw on external social supports as well.

4.3. Question Two Results

For RQ2, independent-samples *t* tests were carried out to identify differences in thriving levels by gender. Despite the gender imbalance in the sample (62 women, 22 men), Levene's test confirmed the homogeneity of variance assumption, $F(1, 82) = 0.182$, $p = .671$. Therefore, the standard independent-samples t-test was used, which revealed no significant gender difference, $t(82) = 1.68$, $p = .096$. One-way ANOVAs were used for differences by educational qualification, years of experience in education, years of administrative experience, school cycle, and school type. No statistically significant differences in principals' thriving levels were found across any of these demographic characteristics. In other words, the variability in thriving levels among the principals could not be explained by these personal or professional demographic variables.

4.4. Question Three Results

Prior to conducting the analysis, the data were screened for outliers and violations of assumptions. Three cases (IDs 15, 26, and 49) were identified as outliers based on standardized residuals exceeding ±3 SDs and were excluded. The final analysis was performed on 81 valid cases.

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which internal resilience, external resilience factors, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and perceived organizational support predicted principals' thriving at work. The results of the multiple linear regression are presented in Table 5. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(5, 75) = 13.81$, $p < .001$, and explained approximately 48% of the variance in thriving ($R^2 = .48$, adjusted $R^2 = .45$).

Among the predictors, internal resilience emerged as the strongest and most significant predictor ($\beta = 0.52$, $t = 4.84$, $p < .001$), followed by self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 2.05$, $p = .044$). External support ($\beta = –0.04$, $p = .656$), job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = .228$), and perceived organizational support ($\beta = –0.02$, $p = .836$) were not significant predictors.

Assumption testing indicated that the model met the requirements for normality and homoscedasticity. Residuals were normally distributed (Shapiro–Wilk = .977, $p = .159$), and standardized residuals ranged from –2.05 to 2.29, within acceptable limits. These results indicate that principals who report higher internal resilience and stronger self-efficacy tend to experience greater work-related thriving, highlighting the central role of internal psychological resources.

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Principals' Thriving at Work (N = 81)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	*t*	*p*
Constant	1.652	0.549	—	3.01	.004
Internal resilience	0.689	0.143	0.517	4.84	<.001
External support	–0.012	0.027	–0.038	–0.45	.656
Self-efficacy	0.287	0.140	0.206	2.05	.044
Job satisfaction	0.051	0.042	0.108	1.22	.228
Perceived organizational support	–0.010	0.050	–0.018	–0.21	.836

Model summary: $R = .692$, $R^2 = .479$, Adjusted $R^2 = .445$, $F(5, 75) = 13.81$, $p < .001$

Note. Dependent variable = thriving at work. *B* = unstandardized coefficient; *β* = standardized coefficient; SE = standard error.

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5. Discussion

5.1. Discussion of Question One Results

Question One investigated the correlations between Al Ain School District principals' level of thriving and the five study variables. There was a statistically significant positive correlation between the internal factors of resilience and job satisfaction and school principals' levels of thriving. Hence, a school principal with personal qualities such as positive self-esteem, a sense of optimism and hope, problem-solving, perseverance, confidence, and adaptability is resilient and able to thrive in schools when faced with work-related adversities. This result is in line with that of Nishikawa (2006), who argued that the majority of internal variables related to resilience and thriving in school leadership roles are highly important. The mean score for internal factors of resilience in this study was 4.22 (SD = 0.66) on a six-point scale, indicating that principals frequently used these factors.

This study also found that job satisfaction is required for school principals to thrive and flourish. This result confirms a study by Pepe (2011), who found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and principals' levels of resilience. Pepe (2011) stated that principals who remain satisfied with their jobs are more resilient than their counterparts who are less satisfied. In the present study, the mean score for job satisfaction was 3.65 (SD = 0.81) on a five-point scale, indicating a moderately high level. However, notably, one item ("If I could choose my career over, I would not change anything") scored much lower at M = 3.26 (SD = 1.07), suggesting that some principals may be questioning their long-term commitment to the role. These data provide a more nuanced understanding of how job satisfaction levels might impact thriving.

Second, the study found a moderate positive correlation between principals' levels of thriving and their perceptions of self-efficacy. School principals in this study rated themselves as committed leaders and believed they had the ability to confront work-related hardships and obstacles. This result aligns with a study by Ozer and Bandura (1990), who found an association among self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience. It also supports findings reported by Pepe (2011), who showed that school principals who believe in themselves, especially during the most challenging times, use self-efficacy to mitigate the negative effects of difficult periods. In this study, the mean self-efficacy score was 4.25 (SD = 0.43) on a five-point scale, which can be considered high, supporting the conclusion that participants generally had strong confidence in their ability to manage job demands.

The study also found a positive correlation between principals' level of thriving and POS. This result confirms the report by Imran et al. (2020), who stated that POS is positively correlated with employee thriving, flourishing, and work engagement. When school principals perceive that their institutions care for their well-being, value their contributions, and fulfill their socio-emotional needs, they feel positive about themselves and their futures. Moreover, according to Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002), employees with a positive view of organizational support report greater work commitment, find their occupations more enjoyable, and experience fewer indicators of tension. The mean POS score in this study was relatively low at 3.40 (SD = 0.56) on a six-point scale, indicating that although POS correlates with thriving, how principals perceive support from their organizations warrants greater attention in the UAE context.

Finally, the study found no correlation between school principals' levels of thriving and external resilience factors. This is contrary to findings reported in the literature. For example, Lazaridou and Beka (2015) and Pepe (2011) found that school principals seek external support from colleagues, friends, and family in times of challenges, which helps to alleviate the stress they experience. In contrast, principals in the present study appeared to rely primarily on their own abilities. They did not seek support from external sources, a pattern that may reflect both organizational structures and cultural norms in the UAE. In particular, the cultural tendency to avoid asking for help or voicing work-related challenges—due to concerns about appearing ineffective or risking embarrassment—may

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discourage such interactions. As Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) suggest, when employees perceive low organizational support, they are less likely to feel comfortable seeking assistance, which could further explain the limited reliance on external factors in this study.

From a comparative perspective, the absence of a direct correlation between external resilience factors and thriving contrasts with findings from Greece (Lazaridou & Beka, 2015) and the United States (Pepe, 2011), where peer and family support emerged as significant predictors. This divergence reinforces the idea that socio-cultural and governance contexts shape resilience pathways. One plausible explanation lies in the UAE's unique structures: centralized educational authority, standardized principal accountability, and norms that can frame help-seeking as a sign of inefficacy. This suggests that the way resilience develops can vary depending on cultural norms and the governance of education systems. Similar patterns may be seen in other reform-intensive systems such as Singapore or Hong Kong, where leaders operate under tightly regulated mandates, highlighting the importance of considering governance intensity and cultural attitudes toward support-seeking when interpreting resilience findings.

5.2. Discussion of Question Two Results

The second question investigated the association between principals' levels of thriving and their demographic information. The study found no statistically significant differences in thriving levels among school principals by gender, educational qualifications, years of experience in education, years of administrative experience, school cycles, and school types. While it seems logical that these variables would affect principals' ability to cope with adversity and remain resilient in the face of the system's demands and pressures, the results do not support this assumption.

Previous research confirms that these variables do not impact such characteristics. For example, Pepe (2011) found that years of experience, school location, school poverty rate, school level, principal salary, and student enrolment were not related to principals' resilience. It is possible that the relatively standardized conditions of principalship in the UAE—such as working within the same Ministry of Education framework, having similar accountability structures, and facing comparable school improvement targets—reduce or even eliminate demographic disparities in thriving. This, in turn, suggests that thriving is more strongly linked to psychological and organizational factors than to demographic ones. Therefore, further research would be most valuable if it examined the ways in which these demographic characteristics might interact with workplace conditions to influence thriving, rather than assuming direct effects.

5.3. Discussion of Question Three Results

The third question focused on whether the five variables in the study could predict principals' levels of thriving. The best-fitting model was created using multiple regression. It included two independent variables: internal factors of resilience and self-efficacy—meaning that principals who have higher levels of internal resilience and stronger self-efficacy tend to experience greater thriving at work. Job satisfaction, external factors of resilience, and POS did not predict thriving. This aligns with Nowicki (2008), who stated that these two factors significantly correlate with thriving.

The theoretical framework proposed in this study—the challenge model of resilience—posits that individuals grow and flourish despite frequent exposure to adversities. A pertinent question is whether thriving principals have already adopted or are currently applying the challenge model, consciously or unconsciously. Based on the findings, it is reasonable to conclude that many are indeed using aspects of the model, while for others it remains a valuable pathway toward development. This study further extends the challenge model by demonstrating how it operates in leadership settings, where internal resilience qualities and self-efficacy play a role.

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In practical terms, these results indicate that thriving is influenced by personal resources (internal factors and self-efficacy factors), and these play a predictive role separately or in combination. While the challenge model emphasizes growth through adversity, further research is needed to support the idea that this growth is more likely when leaders work in environments that value their well-being and give them professional autonomy.

To conclude, viewing the results of this study through the lens of the theoretical framework, a school principal cannot reach the thriving stage unless they are already a resilient person. Thriving is a developmental stage that requires resilience. However, there may be multiple pathways to reaching it: some principals may arrive through a strong internal resource base, others through high self-efficacy, and others through a blend of both. Further, in line with Ledesma (2014) and Ungar (2004), internal resilience and self-efficacy skills are developed and practiced when principals work in an environment where they feel satisfied and can count on external social and organizational support. When personal capacity, workplace satisfaction, and perceived organizational backing operate together, the conditions for sustained thriving in leadership roles—particularly in the UAE context—are maximized.

5.4. Study Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the sampling technique and scope of the research limit its generalizability. Because the study focused only on school principals in one district (Al Ain School District), the findings may not fully represent the resilience and thriving levels of principals across other districts or emirates in the UAE. Nonetheless, Al Ain's diverse school profiles provide a useful microcosm of broader UAE dynamics, offering preliminary insights that, while not statistically generalizable, are still contextually rich and informative for similar educational settings.

Second, the data relied solely on self-reported responses, which may have been influenced by principals' feelings, biases, personal judgments, or states of mind at the time of survey completion. This is particularly relevant given that the survey period (May–June 2021) coincided with ongoing educational reforms and post-pandemic operational adjustments in UAE schools, which may have affected how principals perceived their job satisfaction, organizational support, and overall thriving. Third, while the study examined internal and external factors of resilience, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and perceived organizational support, there are likely additional unmeasured variables—such as personal mindset, physical health, economic stability, and broader socio-cultural influences—that could also shape principals' resilience and thriving. This underscores the value of integrating multidimensional data, including qualitative narratives and contextual indicators, into future research designs.

Finally, the findings reflect the UAE educational system's specific structure, policies, and demands at the time of data collection. Changes in governance, leadership expectations, or socio-economic conditions could influence the applicability of these results in future contexts. To address this, future studies should adopt multi-emirate designs, use longitudinal tracking to examine resilience trajectories across successive reform cycles, and incorporate comparative case studies of other reform-intensive systems, such as Singapore or Hong Kong. Such an approach would not only clarify the interplay among culture, governance, and thriving but also help refine the challenge model so that it can be meaningfully adapted across diverse cultural and policy landscapes.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, viewing the results of this study through the study's theoretical framework, the results suggest that a school principal is unlikely to reach a sustained state of thriving without first developing resilience**.** Thriving can be viewed as a developmental progression grounded in resilience,

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yet there may be multiple pathways toward it. Some principals may achieve thriving through a strong internal resource base; others, through high job satisfaction and perceived organizational support; and still others, through a combination of both. Consistent with Ledesma (2014) and Ungar (2004), internal resilience and self-efficacy are not fixed traits but learned capacities that are strengthened when principals work in environments characterized by satisfaction, trust, and supportive organizational structures. When personal capacity, workplace fulfillment, and institutional support converge, the conditions for sustained thriving in leadership roles—particularly within the UAE context—are strengthened. By aligning these findings with international literature, this study contributes to a more nuanced, cross-cultural understanding of how resilience pathways and thriving processes manifest across differing governance systems and cultural contexts.

7. Recommendation

Supporting principals' capacity to thrive should be a strategic goal of every educational system, as recent leadership research consistently emphasizes the centrality of well-being and resilience for sustained school improvement. Thriving leaders are more likely to sustain performance, innovate under pressure, foster positive school cultures, and enhance organizational commitment. In the UAE, where the education sector continues to experience rapid reform, resilient and thriving principals play a pivotal role in maintaining organizational stability and ensuring that reform translates into practice.

In the short term, educational authorities should prioritize the creation of visible institutional support systems. This includes implementing targeted well-being initiatives, reducing administrative workloads, and providing access to confidential peer mentoring and professional coaching. Professional development should explicitly strengthen both internal and external resilience factors, enhance self-efficacy, and promote adaptive leadership and reflective practice.

Medium-term priorities involve embedding resilience and thriving principles within principal preparation and ongoing professional development frameworks. Structured peer-learning communities, supported by school leadership units or policy departments, can foster collaboration and shared problem-solving. Policies that safeguard principals' autonomy, workload balance, and professional dignity will reinforce thriving as a collective organizational value rather than a personal endeavor.

In the longer term, multi-emirate pilot programs and longitudinal evaluations should assess the sustainability of resilience-based interventions. Mixed-method or qualitative follow-up studies would offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of thriving principals, helping to design more contextually responsive leadership programs. Comparative analyses with other reform-driven systems, such as Singapore or Hong Kong, could identify transferable practices and strengthen the application of resilience frameworks across diverse governance models. Future research should also examine how varying work contexts influence principals' resilience and thriving, thereby informing the design of evidence-based and context-sensitive leadership development strategies across diverse educational settings.

Ultimately, embedding resilience and thriving within leadership policy frameworks can serve as a cornerstone for educational innovation, ensuring that principal well-being and system effectiveness advance together coherently and sustainably.

Declarations

Author Contributions.

Ali Ibrahim: Conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, original manuscript preparation, writing, and review-editing.

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Noura Al Azzani: Conceptualization, literature review, methodology, data analysis, writing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the published article.

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About the Contributor(s)

Dr. Ali Ibrahim holds a Ph.D. in Administrative and Policy Studies in Education and a Master's in International and Development Education from the University of Pittsburgh, USA. He has served at the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Sultan Qaboos University, and is currently a Professor at the College of Education, United Arab Emirates University. Since 2008, he has taught and supervised students across all levels and published extensively on school culture, education policy, leadership, and reform. From 2023 to 2025, he led the Emirates Schools Establishment–UAEU School Leadership Upskilling Project, training over 250 school leaders. He co-founded the Gulf Comparative Education Society (2010) and has contributed to major UNDP and Arab Knowledge reports, including the Global Knowledge Index (2017–2025).
Email: ali_saidebrahim@uaeu.ac.ae
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1070-6256

Noura Al Azzani, Ministry of Education, United Arab Emirates.
Email: 201590070@uaeu.ac.ae

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