

Introduction & Aim

International student mobility strengthens the UAE's national skills pipeline and builds global-mindedness, aligning with the UAE National Strategy for Higher Education 2030.

This study examines how a short Singapore immersion influences the pedagogical beliefs and professional identity of Emirati pre-service early childhood educators.

AIM

To capture the authentic voices of Emirati pre-service early childhood educators and identify actionable pathways to bridge the gap between UAE classroom practices and global standards.

Theoretical Framework (Mezirow, 1992)

International exchanges create 'disorienting dilemmas' that reshape teaching beliefs and professional identity — moving educators toward more globally integrated perspectives.

Method

Research Design

Qualitative interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) — optimised for capturing lived experience in depth.

Participants

Purposive sample: 5 Emirati ECE pre-service students (ages 21–26) from three UAE campuses, selected for diversity of campus background.

Data Collection

Semi-structured online interviews, 45–60 min, conducted immediately after a 5-day international exchange in Singapore.

Analytical Approach

Idiographic approach prioritising depth over breadth; iterative IPA coding per participant before cross-case theme synthesis.

Conclusion

Participants moved through a clear developmental continuum — from motivation and curiosity through emotional disorientation toward critical reflection and, ultimately, a broadened global-minded professional identity.

Motivation Anxiety Reflection Global-Mindedness

Key Finding

Even a short-duration international immersion can act as a powerful transformative catalyst — creating the 'disorienting dilemmas' that initiate lasting shifts in professional identity and pedagogical belief.

Future Work & Recommendations

- 01 Extend exchange programs beyond 5 days for deeper pedagogical immersion
- 02 Provide sustained post-exchange mentorship for returning educators
- 03 Develop systems to support contextual transfer into UAE classrooms

References

- Alharthi, M. (2024). Teacher education programs in the Arabian gulf through the eyes of novice teachers: A systematic review with narrative synthesis. *Gulf Education and Social Policy Review (GESPR)*, 5(2), 118–137. <https://doi.org/10.18502/gespr.v5i2.16403>
- Mezirow, J. (1992). Transformative dimensions of adult learning [Book review]. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42(3), 195–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369204200309>

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Results & Discussion

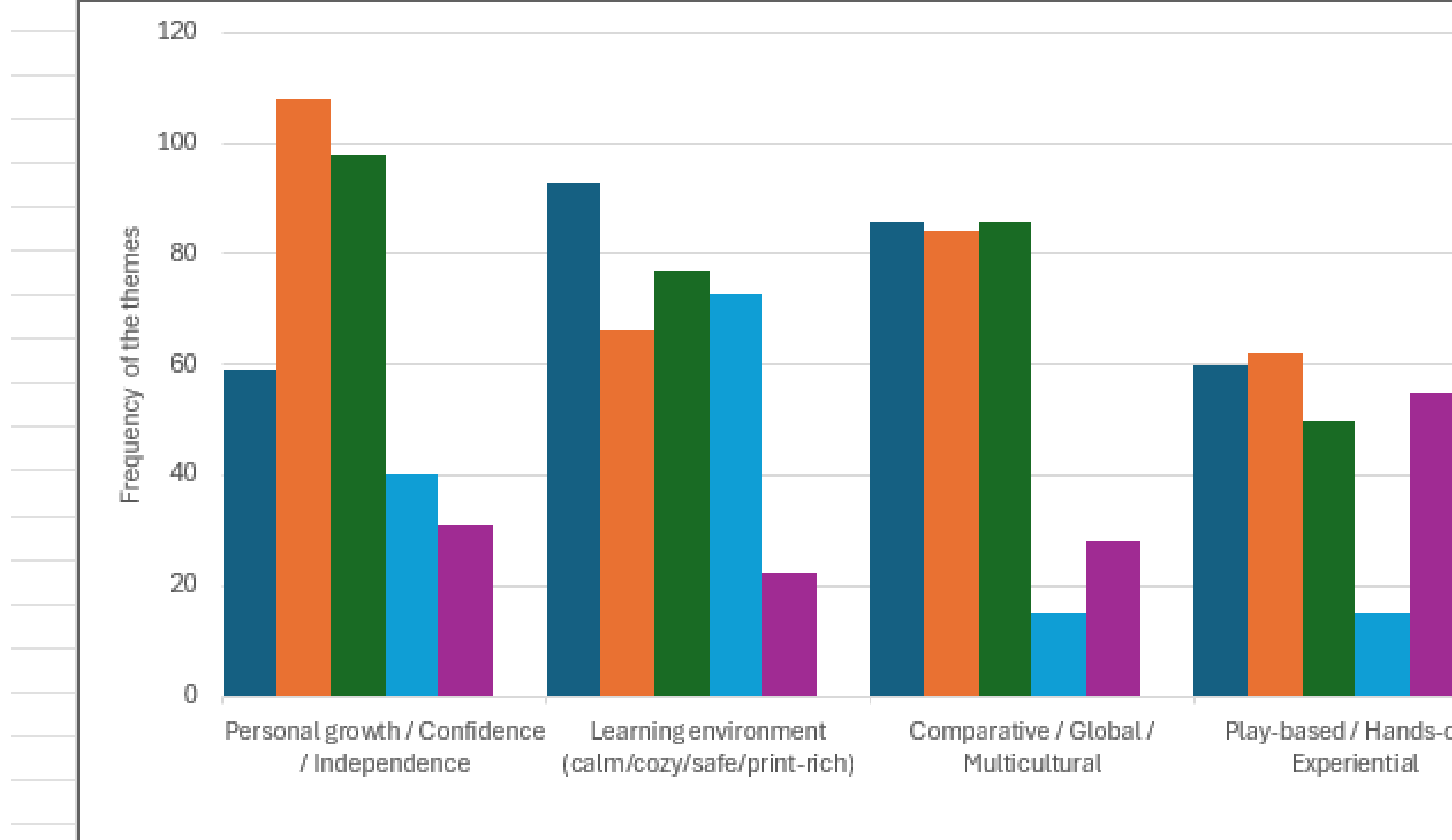
Four-Stage Transitional Journey

- 1 Motivation & Orientation**
Stage 1: Participants expressed curiosity, optimism and readiness for international learning before departure.
- 2 Emotional Anxiety**
Stage 2: Confronting unfamiliar pedagogical practices triggered professional disorientation and uncertainty.
- 3 Critical Reflective Comparison**
Stage 3: Participants began systematically analysing differences between Singaporean and UAE classroom approaches.
- 4 Global-Mindedness & Independence**
Stage 4: Integration of global perspectives into professional identity, with aspiration to transform UAE practice.

Emergent Thematic Categories

Holistic & Experiential Learning	Professional & Pedagogical Development
Intercultural & Cross-Cultural Learning	Personal Growth & Adaptation

Original Study Chart: Thematic Frequency Data



Key Pedagogical Comparison

SINGAPORE	UAE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Child-led learning ❖ Play-based pedagogy ❖ Inquiry-driven curriculum ❖ Student agency at centre ❖ Minimal direct instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-led instruction • Structured curriculum • Technology-rich classrooms • Standardised outcomes • High educator direction

Readiness Gap

Short program durations and systemic barriers limit the meaningful integration of global pedagogical practices into UAE classrooms. Structural reform is needed alongside individual transformation (Alharthi, 2024).

Discussion Summary

The exchange acted as a transformative catalyst for professional growth. Participants initially approaching Singapore with a 'tourist' mindset were drawn into genuine pedagogical reflection.

The four-stage journey mirrors Mezirow's transformation cycle — moving from 'disorienting dilemma' through reflection toward a revised professional worldview. This has direct implications for how UAE institutions design, prepare for, and follow up on international educator exchange programs.

Study Highlights & Impact

5 Participants Emirati ECE pre-service educators	45–90 min Average interview duration
4 stages In the transformational journey	4 themes Identified via IPA analysis

Significance of This Study

- First-Person Voice**
Centres authentic lived experience of Emirati pre-service educators — rarely foregrounded in existing Gulf education literature.
- Policy Relevance**
Provides actionable evidence for UAE policymakers designing mobility programs aligned with Higher Education 2030.
- Theory in Practice**
Demonstrates real-world application of Mezirow's Transformation Theory in a Gulf education context.
- Methodological Contribution**
Applies IPA to a novel educational exchange context, establishing a replicable model for similar settings.

Implications for Practice

- For Educators**
Embrace cross-cultural exposure as a catalyst for professional renewal — discomfort is where growth begins.
- For Institutions**
To include in-situ reflection, and post-exchange mentorship
- For Policymakers**
Invest in extended, structured mobility programs as a core pillar of teacher development strategy aligned with UAE 2030.

UAE National Strategy Alignment

This research directly supports the UAE National Strategy for Higher Education 2030, which positions international mobility and global-mindedness as cornerstone competencies for the next generation of Emirati educators. The findings offer a roadmap for scaling impactful exchange programs.

IPA Research Process

- 1 Purposive Sampling**
Five Emirati ECE pre-service educators across three campuses
- 2 Semi-structured Interviews**
Online, 45–90 min, post-Singapore exchange
- 3 Verbatim Transcription**
Full transcription of all sessions before analysis
- 4 Idiographic IPA Coding**
Iterative close reading and coding per participant
- 5 Cross-case Synthesis**
Theme identification and integration across participants