



QUEEN RANIA TEACHER ACADEMY
أكاديمية الملكة رانيا لتدريب المعلمين

DILEMMAS IN SCHOOLS

A CASEBOOK FOR EDUCATORS



Edited by Katherine K. Merseth

Professional
Education

HARVARD



GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION

DILEMMAS IN SCHOOLS: A CASEBOOK FOR EDUCATORS

Katherine K. Merseth, Editor

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DILEMMAS IN SCHOOLS: A CASEBOOK FOR EDUCATORS

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PRESENTATION

Our schools are important. More than providing a safe place for our students to learn and grow, our schools help mold our future as a broader community. Thus, it is our moral responsibility as educators to make sure that we consistently engage in a process of self-reflection and self-improvement. This book was created to enable us to collectively engage with and analyze the complex dilemmas we face in our schools and to present an opportunity for us to evaluate our current roles as educators and educational leaders and to envision how those roles will evolve in the future.

Driven by Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah's vision to empower teachers and equip them with the skills and knowledge to excel in the classroom, Queen Rania Teacher Academy (QRTA) has worked diligently to improve the quality of teaching in the Jordanian education system and to stimulate educational advancements across the Arab world. By expanding its reach across Jordan and the region, tackling development issues and introducing quality professional development opportunities for teachers, QRTA has gained recognition as a change agent working to enhance education in the region. Now, with the expertise of the QRTA and the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Middle East Professional Learning Initiative (MEPLI), the following case studies have been assembled by and for teachers and school leaders, and for anyone invested in promoting the region's education sector.

This book is the product of the work led by Dr. Katherine K. Merseth and a team of QRTA educators and public-school teachers and school principals from different parts of Jordan who worked together over one year to present real-life dilemmas encountered in school settings. The aim is to present educators with educational materials that can provoke rich discussions around teaching and learning, students and teachers with disabilities, behavior management, and school-community relations. We appreciate the care and dedication that they have shown and the thoughtfulness that has gone into the following pages.

These case studies provide a useful and relevant discussion-based training experience for educators. By presenting real situations, they provide a look into the complexity of the circumstances and conflicts of responsibility that educators face on a regular basis. Though grounded in the unique specifics of each situation, the cases nevertheless demonstrate a universality found throughout the world, regardless of location. Moreover, due to the multifaceted nature of these problems, the cases can be analyzed from many angles for the benefit of a diverse group of skill sets. Ultimately, these wide-ranging stories allow a space for readers to further investigate the concerns, rationales, and

ambitions of various actors and their relationships to institutions and their stakeholders.

In this way, we are excited to see how readers will use and value these materials. As this book will be published in Arabic as well as English, the diverse range of audiences and their experiences will continue to add to the material's relevance in an educational environment that also continues to change.

Now, just as much as ever, leadership is important at the school level. QRTA is actively pursuing equipping schools around Jordan with modern resources and pedagogy; however, the need for reasoned decisions from teachers and school administrators will never change. Accordingly, we know that there is no substitute for a well-informed and prepared leadership. It has been the hard work of many educators and experts to assemble this book, and we can only hope that it can help support the passion of all those willing to lead our children into a brighter future.

Thank you.

Dr. Osama Obeidat
Chief Executive Officer
Queen Rania Teacher Academy
Amman, Jordan, 2020

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The book is made possible through the contributions of many individuals at the Queen Rania Teacher Academy (QRTA) and Professional Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE).

Haif Banayan, Mary Tadros, Abdelmajeed Shamlawi, and their team at the QRTA were willing to explore the idea of expanding our respective portfolio of education resources with this type of publication. Hala Taher and her team worked tirelessly for nearly a year to assemble a team of writers, coaches, and editors to coax these cases into the excellent materials we present here. This work has been particularly complex, given the demands of translating text and ideas back and forth from English to Arabic (and across time zones) over many months.

I thank Dr. Osama Obeidat, who embraced the project upon joining the QRTA as Executive Director earlier last year.

Of course, this book would not have been possible without the support of Jordan's Ministry of Education, who facilitated educators' participation in the project. I also appreciate the sincerity, eloquence, and endurance of the writers, all of whom are teachers and school principals who shared their practice with us. Special thanks to the editors and coaches who moved early drafts to what we have here and to the writers whose cases we were not able to include in this volume.

In addition, the book would not have been possible without the diligent support and encouragement of professionals at HGSE working in Professional Education with the Middle East Professional Learning Initiative (MEPLI), including Faizah Alaoui, Betty Asamoah, Shaylyn Carey, Mitalene Fletcher, Stephen Hyde, Emily Julian, Amin Marei, and Laurel Neylon.

Notably, this collaboration and the resulting book have been the direct result of the gift from a generous benefactor that made MEPLI possible.

Katherine K. Merseth
Harvard Graduate School of Education
Cambridge, Massachusetts 2020

FOREWORD

This volume is the product of a collaboration that began in 2017 between the Queen Rania Teacher Academy (QRTA) and Professional Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE).

HGSE is pleased to serve professionals in the field of education who recognize that their ongoing learning is a critical factor in strengthening their organizations and creating the conditions for young people to realize their potential. In addition to approximately 800 resident graduate students, HGSE annually draws more than 10,000 professionals from 120 countries into our community of learners through Professional Education. These are ambitious teachers, school leaders, and system-level leaders from all types of formal and nonformal education settings, from early childhood education through higher education.

Recognizing the value of these opportunities and the enthusiasm of past participants from the Middle East, an alumnus of Harvard College and the Harvard Business School and his family made a generous gift to the School in 2016. This gift enabled Professional Education to collaborate with governmental and nongovernmental entities alike to identify and support changemakers in the field of teacher education in the region. Thus began the Middle East Professional Learning Initiative (MEPLI), with the aim to support teacher educators and system-level leaders in developing practices, programs, and structures to help improve student opportunities to learn and achieve productive, sustainable lives.

From the outset, faculty from the QRTA have participated in MEPLI and its fellowship program. These faculty members have distinguished themselves for their eagerness to explore new instructional methods, consult on the Arabization of an online course, and join with their peers in other organizations to surface critical challenges in teaching and learning. Because of all of this, we knew that the QRTA would be the ideal collaborator for Dr. Katherine Merseth, an HGSE faculty member who is a luminary in teacher development. Dr. Merseth has worked cross-nationally with school leaders to document their problems of practice and advance professional learning through dialogue.

Users of *Dilemmas in Schools: A Casebook for Educators* will extend this dialogue. They will not only learn from the unique context of Jordanian schools but also find the themes within the cases to be universally affirming of their own experiences. As such, our hope is that users will feel as enriched by our collaboration with the QRTA as we at HGSE do.

Mitalene Fletcher
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Cambridge, Massachusetts 2020

EDITOR'S NOTE

Teachers and school administrators have a decisive impact not only on the future of their learners but also on the future of the communities in which they live and work. These professionals are essential to the learning and schooling process, and they deserve exceptional training and support from both specialized institutions and their schools. The purpose of this volume, therefore, is to provide rich and engaging materials that foster the preparation, support, and development of these educational professionals.

This book comprises a series of cases and suggested discussion questions designed to stimulate an investigation of the world of educational practice. Jordanian teachers, school principals, and QRTA staff labored intensively to document the real experiences of teachers and principals in schools. These professionals serve in all regions in the country – from the rural countryside to the urban center of Amman. With names changed to protect the identities of case actors and the school sites, every case is both specific and general, often presenting a dilemma or a tense situation that requires exploration and resolution. Good cases bring a “piece of reality” into the discussion to be analyzed and explored. The cases in this book do not present criticism or analysis of the situation – this is a task to be carried out by the readers.

For context about this professional development methodology, it is useful for readers to know that in the United States, case reviews are a popular pedagogical method in the education of business, law, medicine, and educational professionals. In the view of researchers, case-based learning helps professionals develop the skills to diagnose problems, recognize multiple influences and perspectives, and engage in the practice of suggesting and analyzing potential actions.

The objective of case discussions is not to solve the dilemmas, because dilemmas are never solved, but rather to unearth deeper issues and complexities. As such, the discussion of these scenarios offers participants a safe environment in which to experiment with and propose new ideas and approaches, without concern about offending colleagues in the workplace. The discussion of cases also encourages the development of collaborative problem-solving skills and provides an opportunity to learn from one's peers. Through case discussions, the opinions and experiences of others are made explicit and may result in all parties developing a more comprehensive appreciation for diverse perspectives. In this way, multiple voices broaden the knowledge base of all participants, and participants then may apply this new knowledge to their specific school and practice.

The cases in this book may be approached by individuals, for private reflection and consideration of different leadership strategies. They are also appropriate for group discussions led by a facilitator or coach. Many times, participants find it easier to discuss someone else's challenge

than to grapple with their own, even though the scenario may echo their own experience.

The cases were developed through an intensively collaborative process. At the invitation of the Queen Rania Teacher Academy (QRTA), I traveled to Amman in 2018 to conduct a three-day workshop on case writing for educators. Following the workshop, each educator was assigned a coach and mentor at QRTA. The pair then worked together throughout the planning, outlining, and writing stages to produce the final drafts.

The initial selection process began with an assessment of the case outlines. We considered characteristics such as gender of the central figures, leadership position of the protagonist (e.g., teacher or principal), and regional contexts in order to achieve a representative balance of narratives. The authors whose outlines we selected were then invited to develop their full narratives, which were subjected to further review and revision.

The group of authors whose cases are included here are teachers and school heads, and their dilemmas in this volume are drawn from schools across Jordan. This diversity of roles, regions, and circumstances will stimulate rich discussions about the practice of teaching and leading.

Internationally, this book represents the fifth in a series of case books developed through my editorial oversight. Other casebooks reflecting educational practice are available in South Africa (*Becoming a Teacher and Leadership Matters: School Leadership and Management Cases* published by Pearson South Africa), in Chile (*Confronting Challenges: Case Studies for School Principals* published by the Chilean Ministry of Education), and in Brazil (*Classroom Challenges in Brasil* published by Instituto Singularidades).

It is fascinating to observe that many of the issues presented in this book from the Middle East resonate with cases of practice in other parts of the world. For example, cases in the Brazilian context reflect the tension of educating involuntary migrants from Venezuela, and the impact of these newcomers on local communities, which mirrors cases concerning displaced Syrian families living in Jordan. In another parallel, the dilemmas faced by new classroom teachers regarding the extent and appropriateness of their empathy for struggling students occurs in Chile, while tensions between families and schools about what is best for the child are commonplace in Brazil. Issues such as these are universal, yet contexts differ significantly. In this way, the cases in this book represent and contribute to the universality of practitioner knowledge and practice. We hope you will enjoy our work.

Katherine K. Merseth
Editor

Cambridge, Massachusetts 2020

INTRODUCTION

As embraced by users of case studies across the professional world, the following cases are intended to activate and enhance the problem-solving skills of current and aspiring leaders, particularly within the field of education. While each case is unique, the book as a whole provides an expansive assortment of opportunities to dissect the various influences, dilemmas, and responsibilities that educators face. Engaged users will be able to confidently address the tough choices the future may hold, and, ultimately, leverage their leadership skills to secure sustained actions for their community and beyond.

While we are confident in the quality of our product, the cases in this book are by no means extraordinary. In fact, the very ordinary nature of these dilemmas – that they could be found in a variety of contexts, not just in Jordan but around the world – is what makes them so important. These are real stories and real people. The cases present complex dilemmas that were chosen for their ability to accurately reflect the experiences and feelings that school leaders may have when confronted by a combination of different, potentially conflicting, lines of thought and values. However, while the organic nature of the cases conveys the humanity of the situation and its actors, the cases omit any form of analysis themselves. Rather, the responsibility for such analysis and the growth that follows rests solely upon the readers and those who will discuss these cases.

When carrying out a discussion session, groups should consider the events of the case, and after reflection about the dilemma presented, they should reflect how the situation and circumstances may apply to their own school(s) and context. Because these cases center around multi-tiered dilemmas, there will most likely be disagreements among group members regarding recommendations for the protagonist or even the more seemingly simple interpretations of the situation's details. It is important to embrace these differences, as they will contribute to a healthier foundation for learning for the whole group. Furthermore, case discussions usually rely on a designated facilitator to balance the voices in the room. When there is no assigned discussion leader, members must be especially mindful to actively encourage the participation of all those present. Everyone present has a valuable contribution to make; accordingly, everyone present also has something to learn.

CASES

LIST OF CASES

Teaching and Learning

Costly Change?
Can Coaching Help Everyone?
Conflict of Desires
Moment of Truth
Pass in Science . . . Fail in Arabic!
We Don't Want You
Where to Start?

People with Disabilities

Should I Continue My Studies?
Don't Leave Me Behind
What's Your Problem?
It's Not Fair

School–Community Relations

A War of Words
Excused Absence
My Family or My Principles

Behavior Management

Save Me Before You Lose Me
I Don't Care
You Can't Force It

TEACHING & LEARNING



COSTLY CHANGE?

Mirvat parked her car in her regular spot, turned off the engine, and sat looking at the school gate where the few early-bird students were hanging around, waiting for the arrival of their schoolmates.

“They’re what matter,” she murmured to herself. “What is best for them, though?”

She thought back to her first day as a principal of Al Ram Secondary School and remembered how excited she had been to put her certificate of educational leadership to good use. She had believed then that once the teachers learned of her vision for the school, they would embrace it gladly. She had been aware of how difficult enacting a shift would be; however, she had still hoped the teachers would at least attempt to make a change. She was now facing the truth that the assumptions she had once made were erroneous and that some teachers preferred the status quo.

Her frustration with trying to affect change was growing; she clenched her teeth and made her way to her office, hoping she would be able to find the right solution.

THE SCHOOL AND CONTEXT

Al Ram Secondary School is a public secondary school for girls in an urban area on the outskirts of Jordan’s capital, Amman. The school offers classes from seventh to twelfth grade and has 700 enrolled students. Each classroom has an average of thirty-five students. The school caters to families living in the neighborhood, and students come from a middle socioeconomic class. Parents value education as the main means through which their children can succeed in life, and they measure their daughters’ success by the grades they obtain. The school has become well-known for the high results its students earn in the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (Tawjihi). The school administration proudly shares the fact that 85 percent of its students are admitted to and enroll in university.

The Ministry of Education in Jordan, pushing for change in public education, has recently published teachers standards focusing on

learners and learning, assessment for learning strategies, instructional differentiation, and inclusion.

A FORWARD-THINKING PRINCIPAL

Mirvat, a tall woman with dark eyes and an aquiline nose, makes a strong impression. Her preference for conservative clothing gives her a sober air that adds to her powerful presence. She became a principal at the age of forty-one, after serving as a teacher for eighteen years, and she has been in her position for four years. She holds an MA and a PhD in education and has a certificate of instructional leadership. She completed her doctorate and certificate work while balancing her full-time teaching schedule.

A straightforward person, Mirvat speaks in an assertive tone. She has confidence in the teacher education program and wishes that all the new teachers joining the school were coming with proper teaching qualifications. With a staff of qualified teachers, she believes she can affect a shift from teacher-centered instruction to a student-centered approach that is based on developing twenty-first-century skills.

THE NOVICE TEACHER

Salwa, a new teacher, is a twenty-four-year-old woman of average height, slender build, and expressive features. She prefers to wear colorful clothes and is meticulous about her appearance. Her youthful features and smiling brown eyes give her a lighter bearing, leading some to underestimate her. Although she is quiet, she is also confident and tenacious when she believes in what she is doing. She enjoys meeting new people, but she maintains a distance from those around her and has only a few close friends.

She graduated with a bachelor's degree in English literature and then joined a teacher education professional program. She showed a passion for teaching and was inspired to choose it as a career by her mother, a teacher with more than twenty years' experience. She was hired by the Ministry of Education and appointed to Al Ram Secondary School as an English teacher for grades 7, 8, and 10. She had been glad to meet the principal and learn that they share the same vision for education. Salwa

had looked forward to applying her newly learned strategies, such as student-centered instruction and life-skills development, rather than the traditional rote learning and teacher-centered style of instruction that she had experienced as a student. She had hoped that she would build good relationships with the existing teachers. She had immediately started planning her lessons and challenging the other teachers to create efficient lesson plans.

Six months later, Salwa had conflicted feelings. She was certain that her ideas would help her students become more confident language users and learners. However, she needed for her colleagues to allow her the space to implement her methods. The principal had asked the English coordinator, Amani, to mentor Salwa and help her adjust. Salwa became upset with Amani because she described Salwa's teaching as poor while providing feedback. Salwa considered following Amani's suggestions, but during class all but two of her students had reached the desired outcomes. Salwa felt the students' work should speak for itself.



"You must make sure all the students are looking at you and listening. What I saw was not good teaching," Amani said.

"It was good learning. That is what I aim for," Salwa replied.

"Are you saying we do not pay attention to learning? That's —" Amani responded.

"No! That's not what I meant," Salwa answered. *"I was talking about —"*

"I will wait to see the lesson with tenth grade later this week before I finalize my report," Amani interrupted.



Amani concluded the conversation with a firm expression and harsh tone before walking away.

Salwa wondered if the next day would be any better, despite her interpretation of events being different from Amani's.

CHAOS: CREATIVE OR CATASTROPHIC?

Mirvat looked up when she heard the knock on her door. It was Amani, the English coordinator, waiting to get her attention.



"Good afternoon, Amani. How can I help you?" Mirvat greeted.

"You need to come and see what is going on in the tenth-grade classroom right now. I have two crying students in the teachers' room refusing to return to class. It is complete chaos. Maybe now you will see what I see."



Mirvat calmed herself, thanked Amani, and told her she would follow her. Sighing as Amani left the room, she took a deep breath and went to investigate the issue.

When they reached the second floor, Mirvat could hear excited chatter and a lot of movement coming from the tenth-grade classroom. As she walked in, she saw groups of students, some sitting on the desks, others on the floor, and one group huddled around the board, writing on it. Her first instinct was to raise her voice, but she caught herself and looked more closely at the group at the board. She could see that they were writing a dialogue together and referring to their book and notebooks for help. It was true that in some groups students were chatting about their lives, but there was still a product in front of them. She could also see Salwa going from group to group to check and guide. She pointed this out to Amani, who then pointed out a pair seated alone and visibly upset. They said that their classmates had walked out in tears earlier and that they could not work.

Mirvat braced herself and walked into the teachers' room, where she saw Rama and Arwa, two of the top students in tenth grade, with teary faces and stubborn expressions. While she was approaching them, she noted that they were being comforted by Hind, an eleventh-grade teacher who was also Rama's aunt.



"Girls, what is it? Why have you left class?" Mirvat inquired. "That's not the type of behavior I expect from you."

"Ms. Mirvat, we can't take it anymore! Tenth grade is not a time for fun. We need to be prepared for next year, and the teacher is not taking it seriously enough and is going to cost me my high grades. I am not going back into her classroom!"

Mirvat held her hand up and said, *“First, go wash your faces. Then I’ll see you in my office.”*

After the girls left, she looked at the teachers in the room and said firmly, *“Thank you for letting me know. Please get back to your work and let me deal with this in the proper manner.”*

The teachers nodded and Mirvat turned and left, thinking about what she needed to say.

After the girls came in, they explained that Salwa had asked that they work in groups on a writing assignment and had assigned the groups.

“Miss, I cannot be asked to work with Israa, Aysha, and Mona when everyone knows that Israa can barely write, Aysha is always absent, and Mona and I don’t get along. Telling us that the grade given will be the same for all and that we must show how we worked together is not fair. They didn’t want to listen to me, and time was running out! I wanted to work alone or with Sara, who doesn’t like her group either.”



Mirvat asked the girls to sit down and talked to them about the importance of getting along and respecting their teacher. She convinced them to return to class, but she felt that this was only the beginning.

Earlier in the week, Salwa had used the same approach in the seventh-grade classroom with Amani in attendance, and while the classwork had started out in a chaotic manner, the groups did cooperate and the results were accepted by all. The class did get noisy, as the principal had noticed when she passed by. However, she had also noted that the students were working toward the desired lesson outcome.

At the time, the coordinator’s evaluation had not been positive; she had focused on the noise and reported it as a “lack of classroom control.” This created tension between Salwa and Amani and left Mirvat in a quandary as to whether she should stop the coordinator from mentoring Salwa or trust that the report had merit. After all, she had seen only ten minutes of the lesson. She let the evaluation stand but was aware that it would affect Salwa’s annual review.

A SENSE OF LOSS

In her view, Amani felt that Mirvat was giving Salwa too much flexibility. She had been teaching long enough to know what works. She felt that her methods had allowed their school to become known for good marks in English, so she did not understand why a newcomer who did not consider the importance of control in the classroom was seen as someone with more credibility.

She had been there with the other teachers when the principal had introduced Salwa.



"Everyone, I am happy to introduce you to Salwa. Having recently completed a teacher qualification program, she will add a lot to our school."



Only four months later, Salwa had been asked by the principal to give a workshop on active learning to all of the teachers at the school, some of whom had more than twenty years of experience. Most of the teachers in the English department had been there for at least seven years and on average had nine years of teaching experience. Many teachers had felt resentful of the newcomer, and Mirvat could still remember some of the comments from others:



"Why was Salwa chosen to present a workshop, when she has only been teaching for four months?"

"Is it fair to ignore all of our years of experience just because she has a teaching qualification?"



The workshop had raised some good ideas, but it had been counterproductive for the youngest teacher to lecture the more experienced teachers. Only a few of Salwa's colleagues stayed for the duration of the workshop. Amani had to leave fifteen minutes into the workshop to pick her son up from the elementary school, but she trusted the other teachers' opinions.

PARENTS STEP IN

In addition, Salwa's students were not getting the same high grades as those in other classes. In fact, a father had stopped by to complain a few days prior.



"My daughter wants to study medicine. Unless she can get a high mark, there is no way she can enroll at the university. It is not the time to change things. Let my daughter graduate, then do as you like!" one parent complained.

"Sir, please," Salwa tried to contain her emotions and present a cool front.

"Language is not something that improves overnight. Give it a chance, and you will see that she will be using English more fluently. It is not about marks," Salwa added.

"How can you say that? Will you be writing the Tawjihi exam? Will you be deciding if she gets into university? We all know what the Tawjihi exam is like. Teach them to pass this exam, and don't ruin my daughter's future. I am not going to listen to you anymore. You obviously do not understand what you're doing. I will tell the principal to move my daughter out of your class, or better, move you to a different grade."



NOW WHAT?

Four parents came to school to complain to Mirvat. Salwa was in tears in her office, saying that she would resign if she were moved to the lower grades. Amani, meanwhile, was adamant that Salwa should not remain with the upper grades.

Mirvat continued to think about the available options and how each would impact the students and the school. She thought of ways to resolve the tension between the senior staff and the novice teacher and to overcome any tensions that might arise when more novice teachers joined in the future, all while maintaining a positive school atmosphere. She wondered what to do about Salwa. How might Mirvat continue to encourage her and still reassure the parents, students, and staff? She just did not know what to do.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What decisions should the principal make? Should she move Salwa to the lower grades? How will this be interpreted by colleagues and parents?
- How might the principal encourage teachers to try out new strategies and different approaches, considering what has occurred?
- How might Salwa regain the trust of students and parents?
- How might tensions between teachers be resolved in a way that leads to better teaching practices and a positive school environment?
- How is student success defined in a school context? How would you personally define student success?



CAN COACHING HELP EVERYONE?

MEETING THE PRINCIPAL

It was an early and bright spring morning. Mona was driving downtown in the capital city of Amman. Before getting out of her car, she turned off the GPS and picked up her stack of papers.

She could hear shouts coming from the boys playing football behind the high wall, though the main gate was locked. From the cracks between the doorframe and the wall, she could see a small boy struggling to open the door until he got help from the physical education teacher.



“Good Morning, Mr. Maher,” she said to the principal, who was standing by the playground.

As she walked with the principal to his office, she noticed how the walls, doors, and windows along the hallway were marked by a culture of violence and vandalism in the school.

“Glad that it worked this time. The Arabic teachers are all here, and the coach as well!” he said with a warm smile.

“Finally!” Mona replied as she sipped her Arabian coffee.



Mona’s instructional coaching session had already been rescheduled repeatedly: the teachers would cancel at the last minute or would be absent, ignoring their appointments. Many discussions and much effort had been required to make today’s support visit happen.

The teachers had reported that the program practices in reading and writing instruction were meaningful and practical and had helped them improve their own reading and writing strategies. Yet they insisted the approach would not work in their classrooms. They complained that the students in fourth to eighth grades in their school were illiterate and apathetic and just came to school to fill up their daytime.



“They wouldn’t work at all in our context. Our students would laugh at us, and this would worsen the discipline in our classrooms! This can work for sure in girls’ schools, but not in ours,” the teachers complained.

Mona recalled how they had challenged her, saying, *“Come yourself and teach the writing workshop, and you will understand what we mean!”*



That suggestion made sense to her. Mona planned a visit to the school to launch personal narrative writing workshops in grade 7, section A, while the three teachers observed. Then, one of the teachers would present another strategy to help students collect ideas in grade 7, section B.

PLANNING THE MODEL CLASS

In a fifteen-minute meeting before the class, Mona shared copies of her lesson plan with the teachers. It focused on collecting ideas for writing personal narratives by thinking of people who matter to us and the special moments we share with them.

The lesson plan followed the program’s gradual release of responsibility model. In this approach, the teacher assumes all the responsibility while illustrating a reading or writing strategy, using modeling in combination with direct instruction. Then, the teacher scaffolds learning through controlled practice of the new strategy, transitioning into independent work time. Students then apply the new strategy, in addition to other strategies previously learned, in their reading and writing.

When the teachers finished reading the plan, Mona focused on the special moments she would pretend to be thinking of in front of the students during the modeling step. She checked with the teachers to see if the ideas were appropriate for the class she would be teaching. She indicated that she would be using writing and sketching to ensure everybody would be able to express their thoughts during the independent writing time. She also explained her strategy to engage all students in individual and later pair work by thinking about their own special moments within the mini lesson time. She finished the activity

with some thoughts on the support she might give to the class in small groups or on an individual basis. The teachers said nothing, just smiled.

THE MODEL LESSON

Two teachers, Khaled and Emad, walked with Mona to the seventh-grade classroom, and a third teacher, Sami, welcomed them at the door.

The model lesson went exactly as planned. In contrast to the teachers' claims, students seemed to be engaged and disciplined. They were able to independently collect ideas for their personal narratives, thinking of their special moments and expressing those through sketching or writing. It became evident that about 50 percent of the students met the grade-level expectations in spelling and word choice, while the other half were struggling, and a few of them resorted to sketching rather than writing during the independent work time.

In the reflective session after the class, the teachers praised Mona's teaching and were surprised by the students' high engagement and performance. However, the two younger teachers, Emad and Sami, argued that the students were unexpectedly disciplined and interacted positively only because Mona was a guest teacher and because adults were sitting and observing at the back of the classroom.

LESSON TWO

Khaled, the senior teacher, taught the second grade 7 class on the topic of collecting ideas for the personal narrative, instructing students to think of places that matter to them and special moments they'd experienced in those places. His teaching was a mixture of his traditional techniques and those that had been implemented by the coach in her model lesson. The students had time to think individually of their special places and associated moments. Then, they engaged in a pair-work activity in the mini lesson. Although his mini lesson was long, during the independent work time the students were engaged in writing and sketching until the bell rang. It was clear to the coach that Khaled was very serious and strict and that his students seemed to respect him and listen to him. The principal joined them in the second half of the class and was

impressed and touched by the students sharing their moments at the lesson's end.

THE FEEDBACK SESSION

Following the second class, Mona held a feedback session. The discussion focused on what went well in addition to areas for improvement. The teachers' feedback was mostly related to the flow of the lesson and the practices presented by the coach in the classroom.

In the second part of the session, Mona prompted the teachers to discuss whether the students' discussions and writing in both classes were effective in helping the students practice standard Arabic in a meaningful context. The three teachers responded positively, providing good examples from both classes that supported the idea.



"I was impressed by the weaker students' thoughts. Ali and Sameer rarely speak in my classes, but today they shined. Both were focused in their thinking and on task in your class," Khaled noted.

Sami, one of the teachers who had attended the class Mona taught, said, *"To me, I think it was a great opportunity to let students put the vocabulary and language they have learned into use orally and in writing. I have studied this in my master's program at the university, but today I have practiced it using hands-on activities to engage students in their own learning. It is efficient to give my students the opportunity to articulate their own thoughts. Their oral and written output can inform me about their specific needs in terms of word choice, pronunciation, spelling, and building up of sentences and paragraphs."*

Emad, the third teacher, nodded his head in agreement with his colleagues' statements.

Feeling encouraged, Mona said, *"Well, personal narrative writing is only the beginning. It is the teaser that brings students into the world of writing! In the next workshop, we will be learning how to teach nonfiction writing. In my experience, boys love this genre in particular because they become authors of nonfiction books on football, planes, pollution, and many other interesting topics of their own choice and interest. Next year, the writing workshop will*

focus on opinion writing, and hopefully you will be amazed by the strong voices of the young writers using evidence to support their opinions."

"Do you feel more confident about the implementation now?" Mona asked.

She received no answer to her question for a while. Khaled broke the silence, saying,

"In my class, I told the students we will continue, and I will, inshallah. But to be frank with you, I am still not sure about the modeling part. I understand its importance, but it wasn't easy speaking about my own life in front of my students. It's simply not something I'm comfortable doing. It's my strong personality and seriousness that have made them look up to me, made them respect me, and pushed them forward at all times."

Once Khaled finished, the two younger teachers returned to the same complaints about how weak, careless, and resistant their students were.

Sami complained, *"More than 50 percent of students in the classes I teach can't read, and their parents have never supported their learning, gotten involved, or even showed up for any parents' meetings. The problem has increased throughout the early grades. They need help with letter-sound reading. In fact, I only had time to teach the grade-level coursebook. I'm afraid I can't do more."*

Emad added, *"Your program strategies are really powerful, but I'm afraid this is the wrong place. Our students are still not ready to read beyond the textbook or do creative writing. Moreover, every one of us teachers has twenty-one periods per week – and that is quite a heavy load, especially since all of us are busy in the afternoons. Khaled edits texts, I help my family with farm work, and Sami supports his father's business. Not to mention the long, hectic commute Sami and I have back and forth to get to our hometowns on a daily basis."*

Mona didn't know what to say.



BACK TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

After finishing the feedback session with the teachers, Mona had the opportunity to meet with the principal again. She had worked with him in the instructional leadership program that aimed to build support for the newly adopted subject-specific instructional practices. Mona celebrated the potential she saw in Khaled and recommended providing further support to him. She also shared her concerns about the other two teachers' attitudes toward improving their instructional practices.



The principal confirmed her concerns, saying, *“That’s the reason I pushed them to join the training session. I was an Arabic teacher, and based on my observations and the students’ feedback, Khaled is solid in content and serious about helping his students. However, the other two teachers are not. They are limited in terms of content and pedagogy and consequently they struggle to control their students’ behavior. Every time I attend an Arabic class with one of them, I am disappointed with the lecturing and students’ boredom. The teachers are either talking or writing on the board all the time while students are literally doing nothing! Our results in the literacy national exams are getting worse year after year. I myself graduated from this school, and it was a good school back then. I want it to return to its previous glory. Our children are not bad students, and they deserve the best. I don’t have the authority to dismiss the two young teachers. I am certain that helping them and other teachers like them across the country is the only way to help our boys.”*

These big words landed like huge rocks on Mona’s shoulders. *“I will discuss this with my team leader and see if I can work more intensively with your teachers,”* Mona replied hesitantly. *“But remember, it always takes two to do the work! Your teachers need to show readiness and commitment to improve their pedagogical skills,”* she added with conviction.

With heavy steps, Mona walked back to her car, which was parked in the shade about fifty meters away from the school building. On her way, it crossed her mind that she was celebrating her third year as a coach and a trainer, and the memory from her final interview for this job flashed in her head: *“You are a strong and thoughtful teacher and this job will allow you to help all teachers and students across Jordan.”*

Those words had been imprinted on her mind when she began her job as a teacher trainer and coach.

She got into her car, switched on the engine, and reflected more deeply while driving: *“Am I really able to make a difference at such a school? Am I strong enough to do this despite the many missing pieces of the puzzle?”*

Many other questions crossed her mind repeatedly while she tried to figure out her way back to the office without using the GPS.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- If you were in Mona’s position, what would you do with the two reluctant teachers?
- How can the principal motivate teachers to provide high-quality instruction?
- How can Khaled be involved, if at all, in the teacher-development process?
- How do you think teachers’ expectations of their students influence their teaching?



CONFLICT OF DESIRES

CRITICAL YEAR

The results of the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (Tawjihi), which is supervised by the Ministry of Education, determine students' academic futures after secondary school. Some university faculties, including those for medicine, engineering, and pharmacy, require students to have a high score for admittance. Because of the critical importance of this exam, many students hire private tutors to ensure that they pass with distinction. Parents want their children to obtain high marks so that the children may benefit from university scholarships and the parents may boast to their friends and acquaintances about the superior skills of their children. This mindset is even more prevalent in the villages, where families celebrate if their children do well on the exam. The stress to succeed during the last year of high school can be immense, and students and their families often experience anxiety and struggle with the chaos of it.

The Tawjihi can be a tremendous psychological burden and responsibility for the teachers of secondary school, too, because they have to perform their duties well and on a deadline. Traditional teaching methods are considered by many teachers to be the most appropriate to allow the students to focus on preparing for the exam.

In one secondary school in a remote village in Jordan, most teachers currently adopt a traditional teaching approach, but things may be starting to change.

SHAKING THINGS UP

Zeina, an Arabic teacher, was confident as she planned for her poetry lesson for grade 12. She prepared interactive activities to engage students in a lesson on a great poem by Zuheir Bin Abi Salama. She composed a worksheet with questions on the key ideas and background of the poem. She thought her interactive plan would give her students a relief from the monotonous routine of exam preparation that would occupy the rest of their day.



Zeina thought to herself, *“My class for tomorrow will be fun and will inspire students’ thinking.”*



The more Zeina planned and revised her activities, the more she felt satisfied. She was eager to begin class.

When the class assembled on Thursday morning, Zeina took her students to the school’s new big hall and divided them into groups. She gave instructions on how the lesson would go and how the papers were to be circulated among the groups. Everything went as planned. Each group completed their work, and then answers were discussed. Zeina was happy that her students successfully achieved the lesson outcomes.

While passing out the exit cards at the end of the lesson, Zeina noticed her student Shadia standing back with a gloomy face and folded arms. That’s when she took the opportunity to ask Shadia a question.



“How was the class today?”

“You did not explain the lesson today!” Shadia responded.

All the students fell silent. Zeina, in a faint voice, struggled to ask, *“Then what did we do?!”*

“What happened was not teaching. I could not write a single note, and you did not discuss the grammar of the text.” Shadia answered.



FUTURE DOCTOR

Shadia is an advanced student who outperforms her peers in math and science. She is disciplined and serious, and she does not make jokes or smile very often; however, she is also kindhearted and humble. She used to jot notes down to record everything she heard from the teachers. She asked her teachers for extended explanations if necessary. Like most students in the high school scientific stream, she wants to

study medicine at a public university in Jordan. Thanks to her scholastic discipline, she is moving toward her goal at a steady pace. She has told some of her teachers, including Zeina, that she relies on them to help her learn all the school subjects, as she does not take any private tutoring.

On Sunday morning, the school principal called Zeina to her office, along with the school counselor. The principal had once been confident in Zeina's competency and skills, especially after she had received multiple letters of commendation from her supervisors. Zeina was worried that the principal might now have a different perspective on her.



"I received a complaint from some of the twelfth-grade students yesterday. Is it true that you didn't teach the lesson well and just let them do all the work on their own?" the principal asked.

"I helped the students analyze a poem by incorporating active learning in a rotated worksheet. The prompts and the questions in the sheets covered all aspects of the poem. While they worked in groups, I interacted with almost all of them and they performed all of the required tasks as planned," Zeina responded.

"I will be frank. Some students did not like this method and asked to have the lesson retaught in the usual way. Shadia's mother talked to the school counselor and complained about your teaching."

The principal continued, *"Listen, Zeina, I trust you, but it is less effective to use interactive teaching strategies with high school students who are preparing for their Tawjihi. The best way to prepare students for their Tawjihi is to use a direct method of teaching. You can follow whatever innovative and interactive teaching methods in the lower grades, but not with grade 12."*

The counselor added, *"I assume we all agree that high school students are usually psychologically strained under the stress of the formal exam, so we can't put more stress on them by following teaching methods that do not make them feel safe. For the sake of the students, I advise you to teach the lesson again."*

Meanwhile, Shadia's mother had entered the room. She

shook hands with Zeina.

“My daughter trusts you and does not take any private Arabic tutoring,” Shadia’s mother said. “Please teach the lesson again. Honestly, all our relatives are looking forward to Shadia’s high scores. She wants to study medicine and get a scholarship. I won’t not let anyone stand in her way.”

“But your daughter and all the other students are doing their homework. They have successfully completed their activities, which means that they have learned and understood the lesson. I was a facilitator and allowed them to construct their learning instead of spoon-feeding them the knowledge,” Zeina responded.

The counselor added, *“But the most important thing for us as a school is to accommodate students’ needs and prepare them for the end-of-school exams, regardless of the teaching approach.”*

Zeina said, “I appreciate the psychological state of the students and their families, but to what extent can students decide for their teacher? Who leads whom? Is it wise to respond to the desires that contradict the teacher’s beliefs and teaching experience? Sometimes I have some anxiety about students’ tendencies and abilities. I have forty students, each one is different from the other. I have to vary my teaching methods to match their patterns of intelligence. It is not limited to a group of students who prefer rote learning.”

The principal said, *“I remind you, Zeina, that you will be accountable for the pass rate of your students. So, avoid risks, and don’t create more stress.”*



THE SUPERVISOR

The principal called the school’s supervisor to speak with Zeina. She put the call on speakerphone.



“Since you are familiar with the school’s teaching methods and you have heard the complaint, what do you think? Has a previous complaint been filed against this teacher’s methods of teaching?” the principal asked.

The supervisor told her, *“Zeina is a highly qualified teacher*

who knows modern teaching strategies. Her success rate is high in the Tawjihi. However, the mother of one of the students filed a complaint against her last year, stating that the teacher depends on the students to explain lessons."

"What were that student's results?" Shadia's mother, fearful and angry, asked.

Zeina admitted, "She did not get high marks, and she failed in all subjects. But her academic ability was weak, and she had difficult family circumstances."

Shadia's mother said, "I am very worried. You will be the one responsible for my daughter's failure. I will contact the mothers of other students to file a parents' complaint."

The supervisor intervened, "Don't be in such a rush, please! This teacher is qualified and has had ten years' experience in the secondary stage. She has taken part in many training courses and conferences on teaching and learning."

The principal said, "But things have changed in the Tawjihi, and I want my students to take the exam without stress."

The counselor agreed, "It is not necessary to apply such strategies at the secondary level."

The supervisor added, "But these strategies have proven useful. I believe that Zeina has the right to apply what she has learned in her training. Parents are not entitled to intervene in teaching methods, as they are not specialists."

At this point, the principal postponed resolving the complaint until the educational supervisor could come in person to the school to further consider the matter.



It was not long after that heated exchange that a group of students in grade 12 complained about Zeina because she didn't teach them in the way that they preferred. However, a second group of students supported Zeina in the use of interactive activities and demanded she keep up with the student-centered teaching strategies. In their opinion, her teaching approach broke the monotony of their classes and helped their minds absorb the information.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- If you were in Zeina's shoes, what would you do next?
- To what extent should parents interfere with teaching methods?
- In your opinion, should Zeina revert to the traditional way of teaching?
- How can the supervisor support change in instructional methods?
- If you were the principal, would you have addressed the conflict in a different way?



MOMENT OF TRUTH



On a rainy and chilly Wednesday afternoon, Lama stood near her classroom's window, watching the downpour as the fog rolled over the street. She was thinking of her students. One student in particular, Dima, preoccupied her mind. Earlier in the school day Dima had asked,



"Teacher, do you think we like your class or understand what you say?"



She would never forget the looks in her other students' eyes. As she stood speechless, Lama could hear the students whispering that Dima was correct before they left the class.

The young teacher was now thinking about something the school principal had told her earlier that day. She felt totally depleted and decided to go to bed, hoping for a better tomorrow. But as soon as she closed her eyes, memories and recollections of the encounters with her students descended on her. She remembered how she had always dreamed of being an active English language teacher and helping students unleash their potential. Now she wondered how she would achieve her dream.

LAMA

Lama had been an outstanding student throughout school and at university. After she received her bachelor's degree in English language and literature, she had joined an intensive teacher training course, looking to become a highly competent teacher. Lama had always believed that people cannot learn if they are not involved in their learning process as active producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients. The training course had added greatly to Lama's knowledge, and she was excited to apply her new knowledge in the classroom and thus bring the change she had long dreamed of. Maybe her passion for education was owed to her early teacher, Sahar, who instilled in her the love for English language learning.

MY TEACHER, SAHAR

Sahar had been a kind, loving and passionate teacher who won the love and respect of her students, their parents, and her colleagues. She had linked her lessons to her students' real-life events and experiences. Her students were keen not to miss any of her exciting classes, and they remembered her long after they left her classroom.

In September, Lama had been given an opportunity to follow Sahar's lead when she was appointed to teach at a school just outside the city, relatively far from her home. She wanted to improve her lifestyle and her profession. Therefore, she started organizing her expenses. To make her daily journey to Al Hayat Secondary School easier, she decided to apply for a loan to buy a car.

AL HAYAT SECONDARY SCHOOL

Although it is an older educational facility with 1500 students, Al Hayat Secondary School has garnered a reputation of graduating top achievers in the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (Tawjihi). The school runs mixed male-female classes for grades 1 through 4. For higher grades, boys are sent to another school, which has male students only. At Al Hayat, most of the students are related in one way or another. This has implications for the learning environment, because some family disputes sometimes spill over to school.

LAMA'S FIRST DAY AT THE SCHOOL

On her first day, Lama had arrived early to school. She had headed to the faculty assembly room and waited for the principal to arrive. Lama had been a little nervous, but she comforted herself by hoping that everything would be fine down the road. Having nothing to do but wait, Lama envisioned some potential initiatives that she might carry out to improve the school environment. Soon other teachers started to arrive, welcoming their new colleague and asking about her name and specialty. Laila, the principal, walked in at 7:30 AM, and the teachers started greeting her. They spent the next few moments talking about their summer holiday.



Lama stood up, greeted the principal, and said, *“Good morning, Mrs. Laila. My name is Lama, and I will be teaching English.”*



The principal welcomed Lama and asked about her qualifications. Lama spoke about her education and the training courses she had taken to become a teacher.



The principal nodded and said, *“I hope you can make things better with the training you’ve had.”*



Lama could not quite understand what Laila meant by this comment. However, she immediately went to her desk and started tidying and organizing her supplies.

The principal assigned grades 6, 9, and 10 to Lama and told her that she would be the homeroom teacher for grade 9. Lama knew that her first year would be difficult, but she was determined to do her job perfectly. Lama was the only new teacher in the school and the only teacher who wasn't from the local community.

When Lama started talking to other teachers, she discovered that she was the only teacher who had gone through an intensive teacher preparation program before starting her career. Other teachers seemed to be trying to challenge the training Lama had undergone, saying their students had gone on to study at medical and engineering colleges without the help of such training.

Disappointed, Lama thought for a moment that no one was going to offer her any support. Nevertheless, Lama took a tour of the school and noticed that the school library didn't have leveled books in English. Also, she couldn't see any paper recycling bins in the schoolyard. By the end of the tour, she had some ideas for how she could help the school.

THE FIRST DAY FOR STUDENTS

The following day was the students' first day. Lama arrived early again,

feeling full of energy and highly motivated. Upon entering the building, she passed by a group of students who did not recognize her. She said “good morning” to them and received the same from them after a brief hesitation. The pause before returning a simple “good morning” surprised Lama and made her wonder whether the other teachers greeted their students outside of the classroom.

In her first class, Lama was keen to leave a lasting and positive first impression. She wanted to facilitate interaction and communication and set a precedent for later. She brought candy to the classroom and gave it to her students. After a brief personal introduction and orientation regarding the classroom rules, Lama told her students how passionately she loved her work, outlining the course plan and the new techniques she would employ in her teaching.

The students were excited; they felt this new teacher was different and told her that they were eager for such change.

THE FIRST MONTH

Lama believes that students learn best if they are involved in the learning process. She believes in collaborative learning and the integration of technology into the classroom. In her first month at the school, she thought she should focus on improving the learning environment by making the classroom and the school a welcoming place for all students.

She made sure to forge a close bond with her students. She tried the same with her fellow teachers, so she could enlist their support to realize the changes she envisioned. Practically, Lama applied new teaching strategies as much as she could in her lessons, which helped her students enjoy her class.

From the beginning, Lama was very motivated. She planned her lessons well and brought any materials her students would need. She was excited as she saw the students learning and working very well with each other in a joyful atmosphere. They told her that the new techniques made English language learning entertaining and were far better than listening to lectures.

Meanwhile, Lama was also addressing her transportation problem.

She started the loan application process so she could buy herself a car in order to have better control over her commute. She signed the documents and got the car three weeks later. She enjoyed getting to work without having to wait for a taxi or a bus.

FACING REALITY

After a few months, Lama realized she was borrowing money to cover her expenses. She was putting almost half of her salary toward the car loan and still needed to cover other expenses, including fuel and childcare costs. Her husband was working for a company in the private sector, and his pay barely covered day-to-day expenses. Nevertheless, Lama would not allow these circumstances to discourage her, and she always maintained high spirits. But things changed when she went to the stationery store to buy herself materials for school and discovered that she did not have enough money to cover the cost.

She decided to ask the principal if the school could provide her with the items she needed for her lessons. Laila said the school did not have the resources to support all teachers with extra tools and stationery, telling Lama to look for alternatives. She advised Lama to observe how other teachers were delivering their classes.

After Lama left the principal's office, she tried to think of other solutions.



"Maybe," she thought to herself, "I can ask the students to bring some materials, since they enjoyed active learning and felt its impact."



In the classroom, she asked her students if they could help by bringing some sticky notes and tape. The students were willing to help.

The next day, the principal called for Lama to come to the administration office. One of the parents had come to the school and complained that their daughter was asked to bring stationery to class.



Addressing Lama, the principal asked, "What do you say about this?"

Lama answered, *“Yes, I asked them to bring some sticky notes and other things to use in the classroom because their learning has improved significantly with the introduction of these activities. More importantly, I did not force them to do so, I only raised the issue and they were willing to help.”*

The principal was very upset. She said, *“You can’t ask the students to bring anything.”*

Lama replied, *“But they became much better learners and their learning outcomes have improved significantly.”*

Growing even more upset, the principal said, *“Stop, please. I think I have already told you to think about your colleagues, who never ask for additional materials, yet their students score high results in the Tawjihi.”*

Lama answered, *“Yes, I understand, but lecturing makes students feel bored and unable to learn things as they should.”*

The principal continued, *“We should care only about their results; they are more important. At the end of the day, all they care about is their Tawjihi results and future careers.”*

The exchange rendered the discussion extremely tense. The principal added, *“You should go and talk to Rawiah; she will help you. She is the best teacher in the school.”*



Deeply discouraged by the principal’s rebuke, Lama left her office with an overwhelming feeling of loss and helplessness.

RAWIAH

Rawiah is another English language teacher at Al Hayat School, with seventeen years of service there. According to the school principal, Rawiah is the “best.” She has been teaching Tawjihi students for thirteen years. She is very firm with her class. Moreover, Rawiah is convinced that some students are “irresponsible.” She complains that for those students, nothing would change. Lama told Rawiah about her problem with the principal.



Rawiah told Lama, *“Listen, I have spent seventeen years*

teaching the English language. We have a major problem here. Many students don't want to learn; you can't change that with these things."

Lama responded, *"But at least I can help my students learn."*

"Forget these dreams and focus on your own life. Spend your money on yourself and your family."



Lama spent the weekend contemplating Rawiah's words. She decided to try Rawiah's techniques in the classroom to see if they would work.

TURNING POINT

As soon as she started to enter the first rote learning-based lesson into her planning notebook, Lama's hand began shaking. She was anxious about the departure from her preferred teaching method.

In the classroom, she gave an English language grammar lesson and wrote extensively on the chalkboard before asking the students to copy what was there. Needless to say, her method was a surprise to her students, who had grown accustomed to a different approach. However, no one asked about what had changed, and Lama herself could not even look her students in the eyes. When the bell rang for the end of the class, Lama heaved a deep sigh of relief. Her face looked pale, and she was extremely upset.

A moment later, Lama saw Rawiah, who asked her about how things were going in the classroom. At first, Lama said nothing and just nodded her head.



"No one complained," she admitted.

Rawiah said, *"I told you. It didn't make any difference. The students will hardly care."*



THE CLIMAX

On a cold, rainy day, Lama entered the classroom and greeted her

students. She wrote the title of the lesson on the board. She started lecturing about simple past tense of verbs, and she wrote notes and examples on the board.

Suddenly, she heard Dima calling her,

“Teacher, I have a question. Do you think students like your class? Are they enjoying their learning? Are they learning anything?”

Lama was shocked. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She didn't know what to do or what to say. At that moment, she was overwhelmed with questions on how to explain the situation to her students. She was asking herself whether she could tell them that she had a lot of financial obligations and could not afford to buy things for the class. She was also wondering whether she could tell the students about her debate with Rawiah and put the whole problem to discussion with everyone in the classroom.

Lama looked at the class and said, “If anyone thinks they are not learning anything here, they may leave.”

Dima left the classroom and soon everyone else left, except for one student, who said to Lama, *“Teacher, we are humans. We aren't copying machines or sound recorders. I don't think there is anything left to say.”*

Lama collected her books and left the classroom.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is the real cause of tension in the case?
- What are the dilemmas facing Lama? How would you help Lama to manage her difficulties with the principal, her colleagues, and her students?
- If you were in Lama's shoes, what would your next steps be?



Located in a densely populated area in central Jordan, Al Ola Primary School is home to about 650 students and thirty-one qualified teaching staff who run twenty-four classrooms for students in grades 4 through 10. The students fall within the ten- to sixteen-year-old age group, and they come from average families who all live in similar conditions.

Most people in this community work either in industrial professions or in low-income jobs, and they expect their sons, after the tenth grade, to follow in their footsteps and join the manual labor force.

More than 30 percent of students at Al Ola Primary School are unable read or write at their grade level. Jordan's educational system allows only one grade retention, except at the elementary level, where grade retention is allowed only twice.

TEACHER KHALED

Khaled, a fourth-grade science teacher, is keen to instill his love for education in his students in an enjoyable and motivating atmosphere while helping them acquire the knowledge and skills they need.

At the onset of his journey, the young teacher gave his students an evaluation test that required detailed and meaningful answers in both form and content.

But when he started to correct the papers, his shock was enormous. He found out that nineteen of his thirty-six students wrote only their names without addressing any questions. At that moment, Khaled was caught in a dilemma. Although he was a science teacher, he found himself contemplating his students' linguistic skills instead of evaluating their scientific knowledge.

It did not stop there; the surprise was even greater when he saw that the answers given by most of those who at least tried to write were poorly structured, inconsistent, and ridden with basic grammar and spelling mistakes.

The puzzled teacher grew preoccupied, trying hard to understand the underlying causes of such results and his students' poor linguistic performance. Was it the result of family living conditions? Or the teaching methods? Was it the outcome of evaluation techniques? Who is to blame here? The school system or the Ministry's grade-retention guidelines? These were some of the questions that had the teacher searching for clues.

STUDENT WASEEM

Waseem, a ten-year-old fourth grader, is one of the most active students in the science class and in the laboratory as well. His home circumstances are not ideal, but his home situation does not impede his passion for education and specifically for science.

Khaled called for Waseem to come for a quick chat. Waseem had been waiting for such an opportunity, so he spoke up courageously and without reluctance.

Waseem told his teacher that he was living with his single mother, who, after her separation from his father, had to work to meet the basic needs of her four children.



"My father rarely visits us or even checks on our conditions. He doesn't help provide for our basic needs. With my mother's preoccupation with work and my father's absence, there is no one left to help in my studies," the boy said.

He added, "I have still been unable to learn how to read or write well, and I have no idea how to overcome this. I love math and science, and I don't find them difficult to understand. This is also the case for many of my classmates."



SHOULD I EVALUATE SCIENCE CONCEPTS OR LANGUAGE SKILLS?

The brief discussion with Waseem was the first step in Khaled's journey to find a solution for his students' linguistic underperformance. He took it upon himself to help them overcome this problem.

However, he had to think carefully and thoroughly about his role as a science teacher and any effort that would fall beyond his capacity as a teacher or outside of his area of expertise. He was aware that a language teacher is the one who should evaluate students' linguistic learning and introduce corrective measures, if needed.

Given these considerations, Khaled started to search for alternatives to the written evaluation of student knowledge. He found abundant evidence that oral and practical tests can serve to assess students' learning.

Consequently, he designed an evaluation tool for practical tasks and a scale to evaluate performance on oral tests. This direct, real-time evaluation approach proved feasible and meaningful, leading to impressive results. The whole class passed the practical test, while 80 percent made it through the oral test.

FOR THE FIRST TIME

Waseem was thrilled with his marks and couldn't wait for the end of the school day so he could run home and tell his mother about the science exam. It was the first time he had earned a mark this high in any subject.

As soon as he opened the door, he ran to his mother, joyfully telling her that he scored a full mark on the science test.

At first, Waseem's mother seemed reluctant to believe what she had just heard. She even asked if he was kidding or making the story up.



"No, Mom, I am not making up anything here. I got a full mark in science. This is the truth!" Waseem replied.



Still, Waseem's mother couldn't believe the news, and she asked her son to show her the test paper. Waseem's expression changed as he told his mother that the test was oral and involved a practical task, with no written questions. He even told her to ask his teacher about it. His mother said she would call the school in the morning to confirm the news. The next day, she made the call and was referred to Khaled, who

echoed his student's story and told her that her son is smart.



"How can that be? He does not know how to read or write,"
the mother said to Khaled.



Khaled explained to the skeptical mother his approach using practical and oral evaluation. He even told her that all of Waseem's classmates passed the practical task and most of them also passed the oral test.



To Khaled's astonishment, Waseem's mother was still ambivalent about her son's achievement. She raised a fundamental question.

"What is the point of that when he cannot pass the Arabic language exam?" she asked.



Disappointed by her response, Khaled told Waseem's mother that his area of competence was science, but that he would discuss the Arabic language issue with the appropriate teacher.

AT THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

Khaled, still happy with the outcome of his evaluations, headed to the office of the school principal, Issam, to endorse the results. He thought he would be commended for his innovative approach.

On the contrary, Issam was infuriated and rained questions down on him.



"How can a student who failed in Arabic and English and got low scores in other subjects pass science? How did you allow yourself to change the evaluation mechanism determined by the Ministry of Education? How can a student who cannot read or write pass a science exam?" the principal asked.



The angry school principal told Khaled that he would open an

investigation that might escalate to a warning and that he would look into the issue with the district's science education supervisor.



"In the meantime, I am going to cancel the results of your exam, because I do not find enough justification to present them to the education district's exam approval committee," the principal concluded.

And that is what happened: the results were canceled.

Khaled, who had been standing speechless listening to Issam, was obviously not going to give up easily and told the principal directly, *"I am not changing the results. This is their real performance in the science class. I will not allow their underperformance in other classes to keep them from unlocking their potential in science."*



Since he and Khaled were unable to reach a mutual agreement, Issam decided to escalate the matter to the district's science education supervisor.

Following a brief formal correspondence, the supervisor came to the school and met with Khaled the school principal.



Addressing Khaled, the supervisor said,

"You are a new teacher and might not be well acquainted with the regulations in force. Nothing justifies your departure from the written format for evaluation, and I will not accept that."

The supervisor tried to make a point by indicating that nonwritten formats of evaluation are not in the best interest of students, because at the end of the year, they will sit for written exams.

Disappointed but determined not to give up, Khaled said, *"I believe I know my students, their needs, and the most proper way to evaluate them more than anyone else."*



Accordingly, all attempts to convince Khaled to give up his approach have failed.

A DIFFICULT DECISION

This unusual disagreement at the school divided the teachers into two factions, one citing justifications based on practical experience and the other citing theoretical criteria and knowledge.

Although the school principal decided to follow the formal path after Khaled refused to cancel the exam results, he chose not to send a detailed report about the issue to the education district. Issam now needed to deal with other fronts that had come forward in support of Khaled's approach. He had been receiving letters from parents commending Khaled, not to mention the fact that a large proportion of teachers had voiced approval of their fellow teacher's approach.

Issam found himself in a real dilemma and pondered how he could allow a teacher to be held accountable while he sought only to improve his teaching and evaluation tools in the best interest of his students.

But it was not only about how people felt about the issue or how much support one could receive. There was also a regulatory issue, which was emphasized by the district supervisor, who insisted that students' performance must be evaluated in writing as per the regulations.

The issue had Issam caught in a standstill. The principal was looking at things from two perspectives: as a parent and as an official responsible for a school that is subject to rules and regulations.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do you support or oppose basing final exams on oral and practical testing? Why?
- What would you do if you were in Khaled's shoes?
- What aspects of learning should Khaled prioritize so that all students in his classes are able to learn?
- How would you help the principal address the situation?



Amira, the principal, and Amal, the school counselor, were making their daily rounds when Sara, the secondary English teacher, stormed out of her classroom, bumping into them.

Amal asked, *"What's wrong, Sara? Why are you leaving your students in the middle of class?"*

Clearly exasperated, Sara replied, *"They don't want me!"* She took a deep breath and continued, *"I've tried every way I could think of to get their attention, but nothing is working. I feel like I'm losing it."*

Amira and Amal exchanged a concerned look. The principal was clearly taken aback. She said,

"What do you mean 'They don't want you'? You are one of the best English teachers I've ever met. What's the problem?"

Sara glanced at Amal and then at Amira and responded in a sharp tone, *"Private tutoring!"*



A WIND OF CHANGE AT AL AHED

Al Ahed Secondary School is an all-girls school located in a crowded, mostly middle-class area in one of the biggest Jordanian cities. Since arriving as principal two years ago, Amira has invested herself in trying to make the school as organized and harmonious as it can be.

As the school has limited resources for its 780 students and forty-five teachers, Amira certainly knows such improvements will be easier said than done. However, despite the daunting size of the challenge, the principal sees great potential in her school. More specifically, she has total confidence in the school's real treasure, her staff. Her teachers are well qualified and have received extensive training on how to improve teaching and learning with the available resources. With the support of her ever-improving staff, Amira is eager to use her skills to develop her school and motivate its students to learn and make the most of their schooling opportunities.

An area of focus for the enthusiastic principal and her team is ensuring student success in the Tawjihi, Jordan's much-anticipated national test given in the final school year, grade 12. The Tawjihi commands the attention of everyone involved in the educational system, as it influences both the students' educational and life trajectories as well as, to an extent, the school's standing and reputation within the educational system. The secondary school system is structured so that, starting with grade 11, students move into one of three educational streams: scientific studies, literary studies, or vocational studies. Al Ahed Secondary School offers the scientific and literary streams.

For the school's faculty, the literary stream remains a source of immense stress and frustration. Parents have been complaining about their children's scores. There have been arguments between the English teachers and the academic counselor. This tension seems to have consumed the whole school.

PARENTAL CONCERNS

The most recent battle regarding this issue started during the first meeting of the year between parents and counselors. The mother of a student named Noor complained that the secondary English teacher, Sara, was always nervous and shouting during class. This behavior, Noor's mother continued, was discouraging for the students and was adding to her daughter's anxiety. Noor was a good student but was easily distracted, and her mother feared that this stressful environment could only damage her daughter's chances for a good score on the Tawjihi.

It soon became clear that most of the mothers shared this concern, and they demanded a solution. Amal, the school counselor present at the meeting, tried to ease the situation by promising to report the problem to Amira. Additionally, Amal tried to convince the mothers that this was a simple issue and said,



"Mrs. Sara is a very skilled teacher, and there must be a misunderstanding."



The next day, Amal reported to Amira on what had happened during the meeting. Though she was concerned, Amal assured Amira that the parents' anger was normal given the constantly increasing pressure placed on students' Tawjihi performance.



The principal agreed, knowing all too well the pressure of those exams on all aspects of the school, and added that the issue must be investigated thoroughly.

She said, *"We all know how good a teacher Mrs. Sara is, so we need to get her perspective first to get a better understanding of things."*

She paused and reconsidered the broader stakes of the situation. *"It's always good to make sure the school's exam success rates are satisfactory as well."*



The meeting was cut short by an unexpected knock on the door. It was an official from the Ministry of Education, holding a written complaint about Sara's incompetence as a teacher.

Amira put on a smile and informed him that Sara was a flexible, patient, and well-trained professional with more than ten years of teaching experience. Furthermore, it was worth mentioning that this problem concerned only one of her classes and that, in her five years of teaching at that school, there were no other such complaints.



The official seemed only partially satisfied.

"Thank you for the information. Nevertheless, we expect this problem to be investigated thoroughly." After a few final words, he quietly left the office.



With a renewed urgency to resolve the issue, Amira immediately held a meeting to fully examine the situation.



Sara sat down opposite Amira and Amal in the principal's office and began explaining herself.

"The problem is that there are a few noisy students who keep interrupting me and distracting the other students. With more and more students receiving private tutoring, I just have lost control and respect in the classroom. How am I supposed to finish my lesson plan if I cannot even finish my sentences?"

With eyes full of tears, she denied saying any word that could have been hurtful or discouraging to her students. She said, *"I have tried so many ways to manage the room. I have given everything to these girls. . . ."*

Her voice trailed off. And then, in a tone that conveyed weeks of frustration and despair, the veteran English teacher concluded, *"I need a solution."*



Amal and Sara shared a look of concerned understanding. The private tutoring phenomenon had recently become widespread, especially among secondary school students who believed that their exam success depended on these private lessons. This trend had affected the entire educational system, with even typically high-achieving students attending private tutoring.



"So, what is the relation between private tutoring and misbehavior in your classroom?" Amira asked.

"Some students believe that the lessons explained by the private tutor are enough for them and that my classes would confuse them. As a result, they cause scenes that distract the other students," the English teacher replied.

At this point, Amal clarified that she had previously received other complaints about how noisy this class was. She also added that a strict warning should be directed to the class to improve student attitudes.

She said, *"We need to be strict here. The students need a stern warning about the consequences of their disrespectful attitudes."*

"We already gave three students warnings, right? Did that work?" Amira wondered.

"Nothing has changed. The students know that they will not be kicked out of the school for something like that in their last year," Amal acknowledged.

The moment hung there, suspended for a few seconds before Amal continued, with a tone of sadness in her voice, *“Private tutoring is changing how some of our families value this school, and it’s preventing other students from receiving the education they deserve.”*

Sara’s eyes flashed. *“Absolutely. We have some students who think they know everything, and it’s making it hard for others to even learn anything!”*



A STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

Amira and Amal went to Sara’s class to hear from the students themselves. The information all seemed to corroborate what they had previously heard.



The first student started complaining about how Sara always seemed anxious.

Then, another student added, *“I don’t want my information to be mixed. I understand what my private tutor explains perfectly, and Mrs. Sara has completely different methods that confuse me.”*

More students chimed in:

“Mrs. Sara always seems angry, which makes it hard to understand the lesson.”

“I get on well with my private tutor, and I don’t need anybody else.”

After listening to each student, Amira tried to make them understand the big picture and told them, *“Not all students in the class have private tutoring. We must support one another’s learning so we can all get high scores on the exams.”*

An anonymous student in the back whispered, *“Well, we don’t want everyone to get high scores.”*

Soon, voices filled the room, echoing the same idea.

Amira asked for the students to be quiet and explained patiently, *“Every student has the right to study in a safe environment, period. Any student who doesn’t want to benefit from the lesson can just put their heads down to let other students learn.”*



The conversation ended there, and Amira left the class, thinking that this simple issue did not necessitate all the fuss that it had gotten from the parents and teachers.

“THE PARENTS HAVE A RIGHT TO COMPLAIN.”

The following day, Nadia, a science teacher, entered the principal’s office and described how parents had contacted her about Sara. Nadia lived in the neighborhood and had a strong relationship with many of the school’s families.



The teacher told her principal, *“They insist that Sara seems overly anxious in the classroom and that nothing is wrong with their children. Sara seems to be the one who needs to change her attitude toward them.”*

“I’m not sure this is all Mrs. Sara’s fault. I have attended many of her other classes, and there were no problems with any class but this one,” Amira replied.

“All of my classes have some disrespectful students; that’s part of teaching. The English classes shouldn’t be managed any less effectively,” Nadia retorted.



Having had this same conversation several times in the past few days, Amira reflexively affirmed that Sara is well qualified and devoted to excellence. Still, the persistence of the problem was unsettling.

PICK YOUR HEADS UP!

It was the third period, and all teachers were busy instructing in their classrooms. On the ground floor, Amira was touring the classes when she found Sara talking very angrily with Amal.



“Look at them!” Sara exclaimed in an exasperated tone. *“They are all sleeping as if they are telling me to leave the room.”*

Immediately, Amira asked both the teacher and the counselor to wait in her office while she arranged for

someone to briefly replace Sara.

As they sat together, Amira encouraged Sara to calm down and offered her a glass of water.

Sara said nervously, *“I feel like everyone is out to get me! I get no respect from the students or their parents, and now I heard that Mrs. Nadia is taking the girls’ side!”*

Amira and Amal were perplexed. The principal paused for a moment and then asked, *“Why don’t we have the same problem with the math teacher, Mrs. Laila?”*

“I don’t know. Laila might not pay attention to what her students do in her class. She might just stand and lecture them, for all I know,” Sara answered.



Amira simply did not know what to do. She kept thinking about the success rates of the school, the complaints from multiple sides, the upset parents, and Sara’s frustration. It seemed as if her students — her “daughters” — had decided to wage war against their teacher by all agreeing to sleep in class, which was something that Amira guiltily realized she had insinuated that they could do.

How could Amira address the students’ resistance to Sara and protect the students who wanted to learn? Furthermore, how could she reconcile her school’s mission in a changing educational environment with her staff’s opinions of their own roles in that changing environment?

Sara put down her now half-empty cup of water. With heavy hearts, the three educators let the gravity of the situation sink in even further.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Examine the potential next steps that Sara and the school counselor could take in the next few days.
- If you were the school principal, would you have addressed the issue differently? How? What steps could you take in the future?
- Consider the following quote: “We have some students who

think they know everything, and it's making it hard for others to even learn anything!" Have you experienced this type of conflict before? How did you address it?

- How can educators mitigate potential negative effects that end-of-school national exams (Tawjihi) may have on a school's culture?



WHERE TO START?



Amal is the principal of Al Jabal Primary School, a mixed-gender school that enrolls around seventy students, from kindergarten to sixth grade. The school lacks a consistent and well-qualified staff. The teachers are mostly new, and many have to commute from neighboring cities or move from distant regions. Most teachers do not stay long, resulting in a high rate of teacher turnover. However, Amal's staff is also very well intentioned, which serves her well whenever she tries to implement a new plan that she thinks will turn the school around.

Amal, a former physics teacher who is now principal, considers herself a self-starter. She takes online professional development courses and reads any education management book she can find. Her constant drive to improve manifests itself in new projects and initiatives for which she tries to garner teacher support. Last year, she had explained to her staff that one of the main problems affecting education at the school was the type of learning the students were experiencing, which was didactic and frontal. In order to counteract this, she encouraged the teachers to take the students to the neighboring farms for immersive learning experiences, and the teachers had obliged. The year prior, she had started an initiative to introduce her staff to some new online professional development resources that covered some innovative teaching strategies that she had found helpful as a teacher.

Recently, Al Jabal Primary School has seen a stagnation in student achievement. In the past three years, the group of now-sixth graders has shown little improvement in their math, science, or literacy skills. Furthermore, more than half of the fourth graders' test performances have declined in the past year. Though these results were not encouraging, Amal hoped that there was a new resource or some creative initiative that could help.

A PHONE CALL HOME

A loud voice from the sixth-grade classroom interrupted Amal's morning routine. It was somewhat jarring, but she knew exactly what the noise was about. Or rather, who.



Lubna, the science teacher, stood at the front of the classroom.

"Oh, good. Amal, you're here. I was trying to call you. This time, he convinced everyone not to do the assignment for homework, and now I can't teach today's lesson plan," Lubna lamented.

Amal scanned the classroom. She looked at Mahmoud, who was doing his best to avert his gaze.

"Mahmoud," she said, *"may I speak to you in the hallway?"*

Outside, Mahmoud swiftly apologized. While he had never gotten along with any of the bevy of teachers that had rotated in and out of his classroom over the last few years, he always had a sweet spot for the principal.

"It wasn't even that hard, though, convincing them. No one wants to do the work here."

Amal sighed.

"You know I'm going to have to call your father this time, right?" prodded Amal.

Later that day, she called Muhammad, Mahmoud's father. He picked up on the first ring, and she explained the situation:

"... And, as someone who appreciates the value of education and what we are doing in this school, I was hoping you could talk with Mahmoud about the importance of everyone doing their work."

"Ms. Amal, thank you for calling me today. I will talk to Mahmoud, but I simply disagree with you on this matter, and so do the other parents. I feel that it is your responsibility as a school to motivate students and make sure they learn. I'm sorry, but I have to get back to work," Mahmoud's father replied.



Amal was discouraged, but she knew she could find something to fix what seemed to be a problem of motivation.

CAN I BE HONEST?

Later that day, Amal drafted a notice for all the sixth graders to take

home, detailing an urgent meeting to take place the next morning to discuss the problem of behavior. At the meeting, there was a parent or guardian representative for each sixth grader except for Mahmoud. His mother could not come in the morning, but his dad said he would come instead during lunch that day.



Amal welcomed the parents and then began the discussion.

"I invited you here today to talk about your children's behavior and their first-term test results. If we want our students to study well and complete their assignments, I am going to need your help."

An uneasy quiet descended over the room.

Suleiman's mother broke the silence, *"Thank you for inviting us today, Ms. Amal. If I can be honest, though, I think the problem is that our children just don't get excited to come to school."*

"Maybe that is because of the workload and the difficult tests that the teachers give," Abdullah's mother interjected.

Miriam's mother chimed in, *"My child told me that he only comes to be with his friends, but he never mentions or seems excited about anything that he has learned that day."*

"My daughter is now in the fourth grade and still can't read a story," Sahar's mother said.

Other parents murmured in agreement.



Amal furrowed her brow. The school day was about to start, and this avalanche of brutal honesty had disoriented her.

Eager to find some space to process this information, Amal rushed to conclude the meeting and said that everyone should help one another by supporting the children's learning.



"Thank you for your feedback. We will take this into account and come up with a new solution. However, I would still like to emphasize that a student's learning is a mutual responsibility between the schools and home. Thank you."



CHECK-INS

That day, Amal decided to check in with each class to add details to her recent feedback.

She first went to Lubna's classroom to observe a lesson she was leading about density and its effect on floating. Lubna lobbed a question to the group.



"If someone who didn't know how to swim were dropped into the Dead Sea, they would float instead of sink. Why?"

"Because it's salty," Abdullah answered.

"Kind of. It's also because of density, Abdullah. This lesson is about density," Lubna said.

Abdullah flushed with embarrassment.

Mahmoud could see Abdullah's embarrassment.

"You sure everyone would float?" Mahmoud interrupted. Motioning to his gut, he added, *"Even you?"*

At that moment, Amal walked up and asked if she could speak to Lubna briefly. They stepped to the side.

"Did you see that? Did you see that disrespect?" cried Lubna. She added, *"I can't stand Mahmoud anymore. He has to go."*

"I understand your frustration, but you still have things under control. Don't let Mahmoud get to your head, just finish your lesson normally. We can think about how to address this after the lesson," Amal replied.

Lubna reluctantly nodded her head.



Amal gave the teacher a reassuring look and left the classroom, making a note about the discipline issue in Lubna's class. She continued her check-ins.

A MEETING WITH MAHMOUD'S FATHER

Around noon, Mahmoud's father arrived at the school. He was welcomed into the principal's office.



"Good afternoon, Ms. Amal," Muhammad greeted.

"Good afternoon. Thank you for coming today," replied the principal. "We spoke with the other sixth-grade parents this morning, and we understand that many of them feel that the assessments and methods of instruction are limiting the students' desire to come to school and their ability to learn. While this is something we will keep in mind, I also want to stress that it is not acceptable for Mahmoud to convince the other students not to do their schoolwork. We cannot let that happen."

"I understand," Muhammad replied. "I will make a point to talk to him about negatively influencing his classmates. But may I ask a question?"

Amal nodded in assent.

"While I appreciate everything you are doing for this school, why do you think these children should come to school in the first place?" Muhammad asked.

Amal blushed, a very uncharacteristic response that had now happened for the second time that day.

"I apologize for the bluntness, but I am honestly discouraged by the lack of results in the school. Mahmoud is a smart student, but his academic performance has not improved significantly in the last three years. He spends six hours a day in school learning, but learning what? I talk to him about the importance of what he is learning, and he says that nothing he is learning is important. Mahmoud and his peers are one day going to be functioning adults in this society, and at this point it doesn't look like school is helping them get there in any way," Muhammad explained.

Amal was having a hard time digesting what Muhammad was saying, and she gave a response similar to the one she had given the other parents earlier that day.

"I appreciate your honesty, Mr. Muhammad, but we are trying our best here to find a solution."

"Find a solution? Ms. Amal, I know you and your staff are working very hard. I don't doubt that. But, with all due respect, do you even know what the problem is?" Muhammad replied.

Honest feedback or not, Amal had now reached her limit for talking to parents for the day.

“Thank you very much, Muhammad, for your honesty. Now, please make sure to talk to your son about his influence on the class.”



Mahmoud’s father left the office, and Amal looked down at her notebook to see the notes she had taken during her classroom observations. She saw all the separate problems she had observed that day and all the different initiatives required to respond to them.

Amal felt as if she were running around on a sinking ship, desperately trying to plug the different holes that kept opening up. There was so much she needed to do to help her students acquire the education they deserved, but where should she even start?



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- If you were in Amal’s shoes, how would you answer Mahmoud’s father’s questions?
- What do you think is the most pressing issue facing Al Jabal Primary School? How could some of the problems the principal observed be interconnected?
- What contributes to the gap between what teachers teach and what students learn? How can educators help bridge that gap?
- As discussed, problems in schools are frequently interconnected.
 1. Should Amal change her approach to addressing problems and improving her school? Why or why not?
 2. What steps can educators take to ensure that they properly diagnose their problems and effectively implement school improvements?

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES





SHOULD I CONTINUE MY STUDIES?



A campus of scattered buildings overlooking a spacious yard in Jordan's northern countryside, Al Amal Secondary School for Girls is the learning home of a group of girls who are always striving for academic excellence and top achievement. They are a source of pride for their families, who never fall short in encouraging their daughters.

At her home, Sanaa, the school's math teacher, was quite preoccupied thinking about one of her students, Razan, who had seemed sad and desperate lately. In the span of her fifteen-year service at the school, Sanaa had become acquainted with the smallest details of the lives of each one of her students and even those of their families. She knew that Razan had poor hearing and vision, coupled with speech difficulties, and yet she tirelessly strove to shine academically among her peers.

After she had become fully aware of Razan's passion to pursue education, Sanaa had stepped in to help the young girl become integrated into the classroom. Despite her efforts to keep up with classmates, Razan was unfortunately unable to attain success. Sanaa had decided to intervene, and she had come up with a plan to motivate Razan and ensure she would remain fully integrated into the classroom environment.

Sanaa had worked with her fellow teachers and asked them to give Razan special exams without informing the girl that she was being treated differently. This stratagem continued uninterrupted for six years, with Sanaa telling every new teacher what to do with Razan.

CHANGES IN THE SCHOOL STAFF

When Razan was in eleventh grade, things began to change at Al Amal Secondary School for Girls with the arrival of a new principal and new members of the teaching staff. As the first month's exam approached, Sanaa engaged two new eleventh-grade teachers, Bayan and Majidah, and asked them to help Razan by allowing her to sit for special exams.



Bayan was obviously unhappy with Sanaa's request. She angrily said, *"I will not do what you have been doing. This is not correct. You have been deceiving this student and her parents for six years. Totally inhumane."*

Sanaa tried to explain, saying, *"I am only doing what is right for her, considering her special needs. She is making a double effort trying to learn, but she couldn't keep up with her classmates. This is why we decided to facilitate her learning by writing her tailored exams."*

With the argument heating up, Bayan said, *"The exams have nothing to do with her circumstances or health condition. If you excuse me, I need to run now to catch class."*



Obviously, the discussion had ended on bad terms, with Sanaa neither succeeding in convincing her fellow teacher to help Razan sit for special exams nor gaining the support of Majidah, the other teacher, who had not expressed an opinion on the matter.



In her eleventh-grade class, toward the end of the lesson, Bayan was discussing the forthcoming exam with her students. She approached Razan and quietly said to her, *"The exam will be standardized, and you will sit for the same exam your classmates will sit for."*



Razan, overcome with feelings of confusion and pain, tried to swallow her sadness as the classroom sank into silence. It was a moment of truth for everyone. Razan's classmates were deeply shocked by the revelation, which explained how Razan had managed to achieve good exam scores even though she was not performing well in day-to-day classes.

COMPLAINT MADE

The next day, the issue continued to snowball, with the mother of Lujain, one of Razan's classmates, lodging a complaint with the school administration on behalf of herself and other parents in protest of Razan's special treatment.



In her complaint, the mother said, *“Why does the same class sit for two versions of the exam? All students are taught by the same teacher; therefore, they should sit for the same exam if one wants to ensure justice and equality. Is it fair to advance Razan in her education when she might have deserved to fail the class? It did not even stop at this. She was given grades almost similar to those of my daughter, Lujain, who had taken an exam that was much harder than Razan’s.”*

A seasoned educator and a respected figure in the community, the school principal tried to calm the atmosphere and soothe Lujain’s mother.

“I am not sure that I know anything about this issue, but I promise you I will investigate the whole thing. And let me reassure you that justice and equality is our standard and that your daughter’s rights will be preserved. Now you and I will meet with the school coordinator to discuss this matter.”



Again, the angry mother told the coordinator the whole story and left with promises of an investigation and an explanation. But before she left, she warned that she would escalating the issue with the support of other parents if justice were not served.

As soon as Lujain’s mother left, the principal called for an urgent meeting with the school’s teachers to discover what was going on.

INVESTIGATING THE COMPLAINT

The principal convened an urgent meeting for all eleventh-grade teachers, the assistant principal, and the school coordinator. Skipping introductions, the school principal asked for an immediate explanation of the issue.



Trying to explain, Sanaa, the primary teacher involved, said, *“It was not good to reveal our efforts to all the students. We have been doing this for a long time and no one ever knew anything about it. We only did what we thought was fair for Razan. She needed special treatment, and she needed to*

be embraced and not shunned. She is full of ambition and passion."

The school principal replied, *"Why have I not been told this before?"*

"Because we did not find the right time to tell you. Since the first day you arrived in the school, you have been busy with the school-building maintenance and preparations for winter," Sanaa answered.

The school principal, clearly unhappy with Sanaa's answer, replied, *"I do not find your excuse acceptable. This is a very sensitive issue, and you are already aware of what the girls' academic performance means to the locals here. We are in real trouble. The parents are very unhappy, and this might affect our school's reputation."*

Affirming what the principal had just said, the school coordinator stressed that this issue needed to be dealt with firmly and delicately, sparing no one from being held accountable and subject to consequences.

"This is what I tried to say to Sanaa when she suggested that I prepare a special exam for Razan," said Bayan, the teacher who had stood against Sanaa's proposal.

Trying to find a way out, Majidah, the new teacher, said, *"Although I have nothing to do with what happened here, I suggest that we apologize to the parents and assure them that there will be no similar incidents in the future. We should make it clear to Razan and her family that she will sit for the same exams her classmates will sit for. More importantly, we should not forget that Razan, as well as her classmates, will sit next year for the Tawjihi, which is standardized by the Ministry. As you know, the answer booklets are corrected without looking at any considerations pertaining to the students' special conditions or identities."*

Preoccupied with the escalating issue and not knowing for sure what to do, the school principal turned to Sanaa, asking, *"Can you tell me how we will address parents' concerns or help Razan's family handle this? And more importantly, how will we help Razan overcome the shock. Will an apology be enough? Who will bear the consequences? Tell me what you will do to resolve this problem that you have brought upon us."*

"I will take full responsibility. Leave it to me and I will come up with a solution that satisfies everyone," Sanaa pledged.

Believing that no one in particular should be held accountable, the coordinator joined the heated discussion again and said, *"We are here to serve the best interests of our students. Everyone is responsible, and we should find a solution that satisfies all parties. The first thing we should do is ensure that all students sit for standardized exams. Of course, Razan should be told this."*

After the meeting, Razan was brought to the principal's office to be informed of the decision that she would no longer sit for special exams.



THE MEETING



Razan, now quite worried, joined her teachers. She sat next to the teacher who had helped her the most along the way. Sanaa held the girl's hand and told her, *"Razan, I love you like my daughter, but I cannot keep this secret any longer. Over the past years, I and other teachers agreed to prepare special exams for you to help you advance in your studies and move to the next grade. Now, as a Tawjihi student, you already know that the exams are administered by the Ministry and corrected outside the school. It could be difficult for you to pass these exams."*

Helplessly trying to choke back her tears, Razan said, *"Does this mean that I might not be able to fulfill my dream and go to university? Where do I stand among my peers? Should I continue my studies or leave school now?"* Razan left the room with tears racing down her cheeks.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Do you find the special treatment that Sanaa and her fellow teachers gave to Razan over the years appropriate?
- If you were her teacher, how would you deal with Razan? Was

there an alternative to how the teachers approached the issue?

- Do you think it was the correct choice for the teachers to meet with Razan and inform her of what had been happening? What options does Razan have now?
- How should schools accommodate the various learning needs of its students? How does that role change within the context of standardized testing?



DON'T LEAVE ME BEHIND



Located at the outskirts of Jordan's capital, Amman, Al Madar School hosts a faculty of twenty members and more than 250 students. The students are a mix of children from the local population and from families that moved here seeking jobs in agriculture and other trades.

It does not take more than a minute or two to feel the tension in the atmosphere at the school. The parents are unhappy with both their children's performance and the teachers'.



The school principal, Massoud, has been navigating this tough issue since his appointment more than a year ago. He asks himself, *"How can I change the school culture and improve learning output?"*



This is a question that he has deeply contemplated and discussed with teachers, but he has never arrived at an answer. The majority of teachers believe change is unattainable, and that's why they have confined themselves to business as usual without considering additional efforts. Ahmad, Ali, and Yahya, all long-serving teachers, think change is not within the realm of possibility. Only a few of the school faculty think otherwise.

MASSOUD

Well-experienced in educational leadership, Massoud has always sought for the decision-making at the school to be a collective effort with the aim of turning the school into a welcoming, attractive, and inclusive place.



At the school's morning assembly, Massoud was preoccupied with questions.

"How can I make this school a beacon of science and turn

it into a welcoming haven for both the students and the local community? How can I unleash the potential of these students to serve as trailblazers for change in society?"

The principal shared some of these ideas aloud with some of the school's long-serving teachers.

"You can't get blood out of a stone. Do not exhaust yourself doing this," Ahmad told the principal.

Ali, another teacher, drew even a gloomier diagnosis of the situation. He said, *"You will need to work a miracle to bring about the desired change."*



Despite these opinions, their fellow teacher, Adam, had a positive response and voiced his desire to join the principal's pursuit.

UNEXPECTED GUEST

On what should have been a day just like any other at the school, the arrival of an unexpected guest brought much change to the daily routine. A tall, dark-skinned man carrying a green dossier arrived at the school with a small boy in his company. The very first moment this boy saw the other students in the school yard, he ran toward them, saying unintelligible words. The boy seemed to be dysregulated, and he tried to hit the other students before hiding behind the man. The boy's actions, way of speaking, and eye movement gave indication that he had an intellectual or developmental disability.



After this brief encounter, the man and the boy headed to the principal's office, where the visitor said, *"My son has a developmental disability, and he is being treated at a disability center. I have been asked to integrate him into a regular public school as part of his rehabilitation plan. I would much appreciate you allowing him to join your school."*

Massoud took the dossier from the father and started reading the medical report attached. It read,

"Yousef, an eight-year-old male, has intellectual and physical disabilities. Clinical examination showed poor response to treatment, coupled with upper-limb deficiency. However,

it is advised to integrate him into a regular public school. There may be a chance for improvement in his physical and mental functions if he is integrated with peers and with close follow-up."

The principal was at first undecided about the prospect of accepting such a student into his school.

He thought, *"Should I allow this student to join the school? Enrolling him in a special center could be costly for his family and would require them to relocate to the capital, something they likely cannot afford."*



With no definitive answer to give, the principal asked the man to leave the dossier for further deliberation with other school officials and faculty members, promising a reply the next day.

Shortly afterward, Massoud discussed the issue with the school's educational counselor, Allam, who gave a more technical explanation of the student's case. Allam told the principal that the report clearly indicated that Yousef's intellectual ability was below average, thus limiting his capability for adaptive behavior and social and natural interaction compared with those of his same-age peers.



Allam continued, *"Integration means students with disability are enrolled in mainstream education. They are considered integrated if they are given the opportunity to spend any time of the school day with the students who have no disability."*



After receiving Allam's professional opinion, Massoud felt caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he was thinking about this boy's aggressive encounters with other children, but on the other, he felt this student had the right to receive a regular education, to live and learn normally with his peers.



The principal called for an urgent meeting with the faculty members and brought forth the issue for debate. The

discussion drew mixed reactions and opinions.

For instance, one teacher, Ali, said, *“It will certainly be difficult to handle an intellectually disabled student without a specialist.”*

Ahmad spoke from a different perspective and directly raised the question of whether parents to the other students would accept that their children would coexist in the same classroom with an intellectually disabled student who had a tendency for aggression.

“Will the school administration take responsibility if one of the students is assaulted?” Ahmad asked.

Addressing the assembled staff, Massoud said,

“We have to remember that our school strives to be a welcoming and home-like school. This philosophy has to be translated into concrete action. We already had a similar case, another student with intellectual disability who was successfully integrated into the school environment. His learning outcome was below average, and he had no aggressive tendency toward his peers. I think his case proves that we are capable of serving students with disabilities.”

Backing the principal’s proposition, Allam cited some provisions of Jordan’s law on the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream education,

“We should not forget that Jordanian law bars the exclusion of any student from any educational institution because of disability. The law states that if it is not possible to integrate a person with disability due to the lack of reasonable facilities or access, the Ministry of Education should make available appropriate alternatives, including registration in another educational institution.”



The counselor further added that it was the school’s responsibility to allow Yousef to enroll, since there was no other educational institution in the area that could accommodate a student with disability.



After this discussion, Hammad, a first-grade teacher, looked at the principal and said,

“I will take on this challenge. I will do my best to integrate this child into my class, and I will use all that I learned at

university to support this student.”



Yahya, the English teacher, had another perspective based on his understanding of language learning. He told the attendees that students without disability already find it difficult to learn a second language and wondered how a student with intellectual disability could handle such demands. Additionally, he noted, the school did not have a disability specialist to manage such cases. At the end, the matter was put to vote, and a majority voted to integrate Yousef and make his educational journey a success story. Those who opposed the proposal remained discontented.

FIRST DAY IN SCHOOL

Early the next morning, carrying a backpack that seemed to be filled entirely with dreams, Yousef joyfully made his first steps into the school as a student. When the bell rang for the morning assembly, Yousef ran uncontrollably between the lines as the other students lined up.

Ignoring the disapproving looks thrown at him by colleagues who had been against Yousef's integration, Hammad, the first-grade teacher, held the little boy's hand and put him in the line with his peers.

As soon as the students started the morning tradition of singing the national anthem, Yousef started to make unintelligible utterances, inviting wide laughter from other students. Even after the national anthem came to an end, Yousef went on saying unintelligible things, again inviting laughter from the assembly.



Massoud felt burdened with questions. He thought, “Did I make a mistake accepting this boy into the school? What should we do to spare everyone this embarrassment every morning? Should I spare him attending the morning assembly so he will not become a laughingstock to other students? Or continue with this challenge until he is integrated with other students, even if it takes a while?”



In the classroom, Hammad, Yousef's teacher, sat him down at a single desk and handed him his textbooks. The boy started to examine the books in front of him and with every page he turned, he made unintelligible noises. Still, it seemed he was very happy with what he was looking at.

Shortly after the class, Hammad met with the school principal and counselor to draw up a plan for how to handle Yousef. The principal was discussing the starting point of the plan: should they begin it at home with the parents or in the classroom, starting with the teachers, students, or community?



In the midst of their planning, they heard someone shouting, *"Yousef ran out to the street. Hurry, he might be hit by passing traffic!"*

It was Yahya, the first-grade English teacher, who was calling for help as Yousef ran out of the building. Unhappy with how things had been unfolding since the boy's arrival, the teacher angrily said,

"Are we going to teach here or run after Yousef in the street?"



After Yousef had been soothed and returned safely to his classroom, attentions returned to making plans for his successful integration into school. Trying to calm Yahya, the school counselor reminded the irritated teacher that patience is needed. The counselor explained that handling such cases is challenging and requires proper planning if one wants to reap the fruits of one's efforts.

The school principal, counselor, and Hammad put forth a plan for Yousef and agreed it should begin at home with the help of his parents and the close coordination of the school counselor. They also agreed that Yousef's teacher, Hammad, should devise strategies to manage Yousef's case in the classroom. Yahya apologized and said he would not be part of the plan, insisting that only counselors should handle these cases and that nonspecialist teachers could not prevent any violent interaction between Yousef and the other students.

WHO TAKES ON THIS RESPONSIBILITY?

The first few days at school were difficult for Yousef, the school administration, and Yousef's teacher, Hammad. Every day, a different student would come to complain that Yousef's behavior had been aggressive and hostile. In turn, Yousef tried with great effort to communicate to those around him that he had been subject to physical abuse from his peers. The principal and the counselor closely followed up on all accusations. They explained to the other students that Yousef had disabilities and that he needed to be integrated into the school, at the same time making it clear that any abuse inflicted upon Yousef would have consequences.

PARENTS

The next day, the father of a first-grade student, Zaid, came to the school in an uproar and said that the school was not designed to host students with intellectual disabilities and that he would not allow any more assaults by Yousef against his son. He even threatened that he and other parents would launch a campaign against Yousef's presence in the school.

It did not stop there. Another parent, Sakher's father, came in asking about the reasons that pushed the school to allow the entry of a student with an intellectual disability. He also demanded that the school provide explanations of how it would stop physical attacks by Yousef on other students.

Shortly afterward, the school principal invited the parents to the school for a meeting to explain the matter. He told the attendees that a successful integration of Yousef will be a success for all, and he emphasized that the process would require patience and cooperation.

Certainly, there were varying opinions on the issue. Some of the parents believed Yousef had the right to education as enshrined by Jordan's constitution. They understood that his disability was something beyond his control. They agreed that he needed special care and ongoing follow-up. They acknowledged that his family could not afford to register him in a specialty center.

However, those on the other side of the argument insisted that Yousef be returned to a disability center where he could receive special care. They argued that a specialized disability center, not a school, was the right place for such a case. They suggested that his father seek help from free-of-charge, government-run centers and relocate, if necessary, to stay close to these centers.

How could Yousef's father manage this ordeal? Should he leave his hometown and relocate to a city where centers capable of helping his little boy are available? What about work? Should he abandon agriculture and seek another job in the city, or should he insist on keeping Yousef at school and accept his fellow villagers' blame? Should he place the burden of Yousef's integration on the principal and other teachers?

REALITY VERSUS EXPECTATIONS

Some teachers never gave up their objections toward having a student with intellectual disability in the school. They pointed out that the school was not designed to welcome students with disabilities, that the school already had overcrowded classes, and that teaching tools would be difficult to adjust in a manner that would suit Yousef's case.

Despite all of this, neither the principal nor the teacher, Hammad, reversed his decision to accept Yousef into the school, and both pressed on with his integration. Still, there is a broader question that remains. How will Yousef's integration succeed when a large proportion of teachers and parents reject the idea? Was the decision to enroll Yousef in the school in his best interest?



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Why did some teachers not accept Yousef in the school? What do you think informs their opinions?
- What actions can Hammad and the principal take to help integrate Yousef?
- How should the staff frame the situation to complaining parents?
- What does integration into a school mean?



WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?



It had been raining all morning. Falha, the principal of the Future School, made her way down the hallway to summon Soad from her classroom. Soad, one of the third-grade teachers, capped her pen, put down the papers she had been trying to grade before school started, and made her way to the lobby with Falha.



At the main entrance, Falha motioned to a student sitting in a wheelchair and announced, *"We have a new student, Maha. She has physical disabilities, and I was hoping you could welcome her into your classroom."*



Soad looked at her new student. Maha was shaking slightly in her wheelchair and had downward-cast eyes. Though only a few early students were trickling past her at that time, Maha's body language indicated that she was nevertheless uncomfortable with the attention she was receiving. Soad had empathy; she knew that moving to a new school could be tough for any student and that Maha's disabilities did not make it easier.

Soad quietly thought about how she would engage her new student and ensure that the other students did not pity her or make fun of her. She knew the situation would require some planning and extra effort. But Soad was one of the most capable teachers at the school. She was distinguished, ambitious, determined, and loved by the students. She knew that Falha had decided to put Maha in her class for a reason.



Soad walked over to Maha, smiled, and asked, *"What's your name?"*

Maha immediately covered her face with both hands and cried. But Soad was patient. When Maha finished, the two went to sit in a more private area, and Soad again tried to initiate a conversation.

Soad was trying to understand Maha's personality and

disposition. Maha kept her responses to a soft mumble of few words, but Soad still noticed that she spoke with a heavy tongue, making her pronunciation somewhat imprecise. It was also difficult for her to hold small items, such as a pen. The teacher unintentionally lowered her head slightly.

Maha reacted, asking, *“Am I an odd person?”*

Soad quickly raised her head and showed a smile of warmth and understanding. That had been Maha’s first full sentence with her, the first of what she hoped would be many.

Soad took out her clipboard and pen and inched closer to Maha.

She asked Maha, *“Would you please write this sentence: I am Maha, and I am a very talented student.”*

Maha began writing the sentence without a problem but it took her some time to complete it. As soon as she was finished, she gave the pen back, seemingly in defeat, and started crying.

“I am so useless,” she said.



MAHA’S ADJUSTMENT

Maha had been born with a physical disability due to health problems her mother had encountered during pregnancy – something that had not affected Maha’s brothers or sisters. Before studying at the Future School, Maha had studied in a private school for students with disabilities. Although she is slow to process and react to what happens around her, she does not have any learning difficulties, nor does she have any major problem understanding or absorbing ideas. For that reason, her educational advisor thought she should enroll in a public school recommended by the Ministry of Education.

Maha’s new school is a mixed-gender public primary school with 300 students located in a rural area in southern Jordan. The Future School is known for supporting its students and nurturing their personalities and confidence. Students in this school are from different social, economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and from a range of countries in addition to Jordan, including Syria, Iraq, and Egypt.

It has not been easy for Maha to adjust socially to the new school and interact comfortably with her peers. This difficulty seems to compound her struggle to communicate effectively, which has unfortunately become problematic for the teachers trying to accommodate her. Noting this, Soad has been particularly determined to help Maha.

A COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY

Throughout the first week of Maha's adjustment, Soad was constantly checking in on how her peers were treating her. While some of Maha's peers accepted her readily, most of her classmates either passively ignored or actively mocked her. A student named Leen was particularly disparaging. Leen persistently ridiculed Maha, causing her to withdraw even further. However, Soad noticed that in contrast, a student named Asmahan always made an effort to make Maha feel comfortable. Asmahan usually sat next to Maha and helped her whenever she needed.

Seeing what that friendship meant to Maha, Soad decided to conduct a group activity to try to foster an atmosphere of cooperation and love in the classroom. She divided the class into four groups, making sure to put Asmahan and Maha in the same one. The assignment was for each group to create their own school. Each group member would have a set of responsibilities, such as selecting the class subjects or setting the school rules. Each member would also contribute toward drawing the overall design of the school on a big sheet of paper, which would be shown to the class at the end of the activity. Soad knew her students would like this kind of freedom and hoped that such a project could help them realize what they mutually liked and did not like about school. She hoped that this process would also help Maha make friends.

When time was up, Soad was very pleased with what she saw. One by one, each group shared their creative plans to the enthusiastic admiration of their peers. When Maha's group shared, it was clear that her group had not finished the school's drawing.



"Maha, why is your school not finished?" Leen asked loudly, for the whole class to hear.

Ahmad, one of Maha's other group members, tried defending

himself and blurted out, *"We all finished drawing our parts. Maha was just supposed to draw the front entrance, but it took her forever."*



Maha flushed with embarrassment and looked at the floor. Everyone examined the front entrance on the paper, and it was clear that the coloring and outline were incomplete. It was also apparent that Maha had spent most of her time drawing one feature: a set of ornate ramps leading to the school's front entrance, which is something that the Future School lacked.



Miriam, a member of Maha's group, worried how the unfinished drawing could affect her grade. *"Ms. Soad, it's not fair if we get points off for our project just because of Maha. She shouldn't bring the rest of us down."*

With those words, Maha buried her head in her hands and cried. Leen could not let that go.

"Maha, are you crying? You're such a baby! You haven't even learned to walk yet, either!"

Soad intervened, *"That's enough from you, Leen!"*

But it was too late. The classroom had already swiftly divided into two camps. Leen and her friends kept laughing at Maha and making fun of her wheelchair. Asmahan and a handful of other students came to Maha's aid.

Asmahan placed her hand on Maha's back and yelled at Leen, *"What is your problem?"*

Leen shot back, *"I'm not the one with the problem, she is!"*



Leen's friends continued to snicker as the class delved further into a state of frenzy.

Soad stood confused. Differences among her students had never led to such bullying in her diverse class before. This was not the outcome that she expected from this lesson. She felt that she had failed and had inadvertently created even more mockery at Maha's expense.

Maybe she had tried too hard and too fast to help Maha adjust. But if that

were the case, what could she do to make the students finally accept Maha? And how could she make Maha open up in the future, since doing so had only led to more pain? Too many questions flooded Soad's head as she remained temporarily stunned at the chaos unfolding before her.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What could Soad do in the moment to regain control of the class?
- Did Soad try to do too much, too soon in attempting to help Maha? How can Soad use this experience as a learning moment going forward?
- How can Soad help Maha adjust to the class? Furthermore, what efforts can Soad make to encourage the class to be more accommodating?
- What role should the principal, Falha, play in addressing this situation?
- What factors inform a classroom's culture?



IT'S NOT FAIR!



Hana' was going through her papers, books, and plans during the long summer vacation, in preparation for the new school year. She had been reviewing them with great despair and frustration since the new principal had made an unwelcome announcement:



"You will not be allowed to teach. This is a final decision, and it will not be reversed".

Hana' had a flashback to those long hours and the great challenges she had faced throughout the school year. Her own studies had been very difficult and full of hurdles. She remembered how she had struggled to reach her goals and how proud she was to have been finally appointed as a teacher. With this experience in mind, she had passionately exclaimed, *"This isn't fair! Why me? Why don't you release the new teacher who has just joined?"*



Having seen the principal's adamant look, Hana' wondered what else she could do to fight for her hard-earned post.

AMBITION VERSUS CHALLENGE

Hana' comes from a middle-class, close-knit family. She is blind and has a brother with vision impairment. She is used to navigating the world as a blind individual and has been encouraged by all around her to continually rise above the challenges she faces. Hana' holds a BA in Arabic language and an MA in teaching the Arabic language for nonnative speakers. As a blind teacher, she had expected to be appointed to a school for blind students. She had been surprised, yet motivated, to have been appointed to teach at a mainstream school, and she worked hard to earn the trust of those around her. This trust was evidenced by testimonials from supervisors and colleagues who vouched for her skill as a teacher and praised her effective classroom management. A culminating moment that showed her ability to function in a mainstream school came when she played a major role in protecting students when a fire broke out in the science lab. She had

been sitting in the teachers' room with some colleagues, waiting for her class to start, when she smelled smoke. She reacted quickly by tracing the smell of the smoke to the fire and alerting everyone to evacuate the area.

She taught Arabic to students who were able to see, and she had proven herself to be a successful teacher. She used interactive teaching methods and eschewed the traditional approaches of lecturing and rote learning. Her students worked in groups and took charge of their learning, becoming more engaged than in other classes and achieving better results on their end-of-year tests. Additionally, her students had received awards in literary creativity at the directorate level. Determined to maintain her high standards for teaching, she spent many hours during her summer vacation searching for and preparing plans and activities.

THE SCHOOL

The Good Morals School is an urban secondary school with 600 students. Located on a hillside overlooking crowded neighborhoods, the school has a staff of teachers from the area and keeps a good rapport with students and their parents. Hana' is from the area as well and is well-known to her neighbors. She was given the responsibility of teaching Arabic to ninth graders and felt supported in the fact that her first cohort of students included children of family members and friends.

A NEW CHALLENGE

Samah is an experienced principal who believes that if the best possible resources are provided, teaching and learning will be successful. She had no previous experience with teachers with disabilities before working with Hana', and she had been skeptical of her performance throughout the year. Recently, some parents had expressed concern, stating,



"Miss Hana' cannot see everything that is going on inside the classroom. Students might get hurt on her watch."



Samah herself shared those concerns, especially given the growing number of incidents of bullying in the schools.



It was common to discuss teachers' assessments and teaching schedules in a year-end review, which led the school principal, Samah, to call Hana' in and announce, *"We will have to release you from a full teaching load."*

Hana' responded without hesitation, *"With all due respect, I think I have been doing my work effectively and I can see no reason why you would do so. Can you tell me why you've suddenly decided this?"*

Samah replied, *"The Ministry will be transferring two new teachers who specialize in teaching Arabic to our school. I think two teachers who are able to see are more capable than a teacher who might need support in the classroom. Look at it as a well-deserved rest for you."*

Hana' said firmly, *"But I didn't complain about teaching. I enjoy it very much."*

"I have made up my mind, and I appreciate your cooperation in this," Samah insisted in frustration.

The school counselor, Amal, had been listening to the conversation and decided to step in to support the new principal.

"Don't worry, Samah, I'll convince her," she said confidently.



Amal had more than twenty years of experience as a counselor. She had at one point been a principal herself at a private school. She understood why such a staffing decision needed to be made and how the parents would react to the situation.

After all, in her opinion, it was not reasonable to have two teachers without disability put in fewer teaching hours while a blind teacher was given a full load. Also, in the view of society, individuals with vision impairment are not able to function as effectively in an environment designed for persons without disability. While she appreciated what Hana' had gone through and how she had managed to succeed, she also recognized the

measures she had needed to take to adapt to her environment.



When the principal left the office, Amal moved closer to Hana' and said to her, *"Don't you face difficulties moving around the corridor when the lessons end and the corridors are full? I often see you having to wait or ask for help from students and colleagues at those times."*

Hana' replied, *"Yes, I do. However, I have managed it for the past ten years, so why would it be an issue now?"*

"Well, it does take away from lesson time, and if for any reason you were to get hurt, then the school would be liable. That's not something the principal can tolerate. Also, think of what you can get in return. Maybe you can now ask to leave school half an hour earlier, so you do not have to wait until all of the students and other teachers have left before navigating down the hill on your way home," Amal stated.

Hana' replied, *"I had requested this accommodation before, but it wasn't allowed."*

Amal said, *"Not as a full-time teacher, but in your new capacity it would be fine, I am sure. Besides, you will still be teaching, just not as many hours,"* said Amal.

Hana' responded sharply, *"Are you saying that after everything I have done to prove my worth as a teacher, I am now to be recognized as 'less than' and unable to do my work effectively? It is not true, and it would harm my case as a blind individual able to function in a mainstream school! What would my assessments say if I were not able to teach? How would my performance be evaluated?"*

The counselor smiled then said, *"You are taking this too far! You will be evaluated as any other teacher will be, except your circumstances will be different. After all, that is true enough."*

"I cannot agree with this, but I know that I am powerless to stop the decision from going through. I'm not giving up and will look for solutions," Hana' sighed.



She was determined to find other solutions.

PREVENTED FROM TEACHING

The new school year began, and all the teachers were busy preparing their own plans and assessments. As usual, Hana' had made all the necessary plans and organized her references during the school holiday. During the first week of the new school year, everyone was surprised to learn that the principal, Samah, had been moved to another school and a new principal, Noura, had replaced her.

Noura joined the school with more than ten years of experience in the field of school administration. She had been very successful and worked with great passion to address many of the problems she had heard and seen at other schools.



During the first week of the new school year, she held a meeting with teachers, welcoming them, and she said, *"I understand that the workload for each teacher was determined at the end of last year. Today the weekly teaching schedules and teacher allocations will be distributed to ensure a smooth teaching process and a successful academic year."*

Hana' was then formally informed that she had been fully released from teaching and that one of the newly transferred teachers had been given her full load. The news prompted her to respond emotionally, saying, *"This is not fair! I was told I would still be teaching! Why not distribute the load?"*

That's when the voices of teachers began to be heard. Farah, a fellow language teacher, said,

"Hana' is the most committed, caring teacher. Why did you make this decision?"

Some teachers murmured, agreeing with what Farah was saying.

Another teacher, Sara, stood and said, *"Yes, Hana' is a competent teacher, but she goes through too much every year, so she deserves to get rest and attention and must be rewarded and released."*

A teacher whose daughter was going to be in Hana's classroom that year interjected, *"Yes. The children get unrulier each year. She cannot keep up with them. She needs to rest now."*

Another teacher, Tasnim, said, *“How is that? Do you reward a person by taking away what she loves?”*



In the meantime, a series of questions came to Noura’s mind. Was it possible that her decision was wrong? What was driving the teachers to defend Hana? Wasn’t it in the best interest of students to be taught by a teacher with no vision impairment?



Noura found herself in a real dilemma. She realized that the situation demanded her response, and she said to the assembled teachers, *“Before we talk about justice, isn’t it fair for the newly appointed teacher to be given the opportunity to teach and benefit from the experience?”*

Hana’ answered with frustration, *“Yes, but is that my concern, ma’am?”*

“You are not guilty, nor am I. The teaching schedule had been set the year before, and all I can do is follow it,” the principal reasoned.

Hana’ begged, *“Please do not release me from teaching. You would be doing me and other people with disabilities a great disservice. I have been able to do my work well. Do not deprive me of what I love.”*

“That was possible during the tenure of your previous principal, Miss Samah. Now it is too late, and we must prepare for the new year. Listen, Hana’, it is also true that you will need extra attention due to your disability, and you may face problems,” said the principal, firmly.

“Like everyone else, yes. I might face problems, but I am willing to deal with them. How can I change society’s view of a blind person if I don’t teach?” Hana’ exclaimed with passion.

The principal replied, *“I do not disrespect the rights of others. What do you think of joining the Blind People’s Association, to work there? It is not far from here, and you would get to teach.”*

“No, my house is very close to the school and the Association is too far. When I was hired at this school, it was under the law that allows blind people to teach in the school closest to them,” Hana’ insisted.



The principal gently shook her head, and Hana' was left wondering how she could fight this decision, or if she even should.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is the role that the various characters play in reinforcing or changing the social perception toward teachers with disability?
- What might Hana' do next?
- What merits do the various perspectives that are presented in this case have?
- What would you do if you were the new principal?
- What does it mean to be a capable as an educator? How can that capability be manifested in different ways?

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS





A WAR OF WORDS



The sun had only just clocked in for the day when Suad set off from home with a mind full of ideas and plans for projects and creative initiatives. Her priorities and aspirations for her school constantly ran back and forth in her mind, sorting and re-sorting themselves in terms of importance.



As she approached the school, an old monologue of hers crept into her mind:

"Before making any arbitrary judgments about our school or forming any preconceptions about our staff, please do come and visit! Feel free to tour our facilities, meet the students, and speak to the teachers!"



She saved this blurb for prospective parents of the Talal School, her primary school with around 450 students and twenty-five teachers. The Talal School is one of the only schools in the area that keeps both boys and girls in the same school until fifth grade; elsewhere, boys and girls are usually separated into gender-specific schools after the third grade. Not until she approached her usual parking zone did she notice how distracted she had been while driving. She thanked God for her safe arrival and entered the school, burdened not only by her thoughts but also by the envelopes and paperwork that she had finished at home.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Suad entered the principal's office and started to organize her paperwork according to what needed finishing. She checked her daily agenda; when time flew by this fast, she could not afford to lose one minute. As soon as she picked up her pen to take some notes, a knock on the door signaled the arrival of a school visitor, Aisha, who had already been offered a seat and a drink by Suad's assistant.



After Aisha introduced herself, she said, *"I recently moved into this neighborhood and would like to transfer my son to your school. He is in the fifth grade."*

But I preferred to visit and personally hear from you about the important issues that I've heard about from other people about this school – namely, its faculty's qualifications and the subject of gender integration in the school, particularly in the fifth grade."

"May I ask what you have heard?" Suad asked.

"That most female teachers here are substitutes, which probably means that they are underqualified and inexperienced," Aisha replied.

Suad had heard this criticism before and was prepared. She replied, *"Ma'am, if you would care to look to your left, you can review the list on the wall. The information listed will, I think, address your concerns regarding our staff's qualifications. We call it the Queen's Board."*

It took only a fraction of a moment for Aisha's facial expression to shift. Suad commented, *"Perhaps you have found the answer you have been looking for?"*

"Somewhat," the visitor replied. She continued, "I also heard that the number of students in the school is low because of many parents' concerns about the gender integration. Is this true?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is true that the school did start with a small number of students. But, through our hard work and with the cooperation of the district education office, we have a higher and currently growing number of students. Regarding your concerns on gender integration, male and female students do have separate classrooms. However, we do occasionally use integrated work groups and activities, which I think are quite beneficial for students of both genders, as they are stepping stones for the future, when they will attend mixed-gender universities," Suad replied.

Aisha stiffened. She clearly still had some reservations about the school.

She added, *"Thank you for these clarifications. However, I would like to point out that you must be more attentive to this issue, as it is a major concern in our conservative society. If it's okay, I actually still have a few more questions about how this gender mixing would impact my son's education.*

"



A MISUNDERSTANDING

The principal and her visitor, Aisha, were exchanging closing remarks when Suad noticed the anxious face of a teacher who was passing by her office. Suad did not hesitate to call her over. The teacher entered and greeted both the principal and the visitor.



Suad asked, *“Is there anything wrong, Sara? You seem a little unsettled this morning.”*

“No, no problem at all. Well, only a small issue, and if God wills, I think all will be fine,” Sara replied.

“Please share it with us,” Suad said.

Sara looked at Aisha, and Suad reassured the teacher. *“This is Aisha. I believe I can say that she and her son are now part of the school family, right?”*

Aisha barely gave a nod. Suad continued, *“So, unless this is a private or family matter, I’m sure Aisha wouldn’t mind getting some insight about how intelligently our staff approaches solving problems.”*

“No, it is not necessarily a private matter – I think it is a matter that concerns all of us here at the school,” Sara replied, looking down.

“Which is?” Suad asked, leaning closer.

“Yesterday, while I was visiting a sick friend in the hospital, a conversation came up with one of my friend’s relatives, who was visiting with her family. She raised the topic of gender integration and harshly criticized my job and my school’s stance on it, to the point where it was quite hurtful. She even said that she encouraged other parents not to enroll their children in our school!” Sara added.

“Yes, exactly! That’s what I have been hearing!” Aisha said.

“And did you participate in the conversation?” Suad asked.

“No, I did not reply – I didn’t know what to say!” Sara replied.

Suad was feeling somewhat irritated at hearing the school that she had worked so hard for was being attacked. She told Sara,

“In my opinion, I think that you should have discussed what she said in front of the group. It’s important that we defend

the truth and defend our school!"

"With all due respect, I think addressing her ideas would have only escalated the situation. I didn't want to prompt any more irrational discussion, especially in the presence of my sick friend. In fact, I left because I felt overwhelmed by the entire situation," Sara replied, with an edge to her voice.



SCHOOL WALKOUT



Suad began thinking aloud with Sara and Aisha.

"We need to start addressing these rumors and shed light on the educational and academic aspects of our school. How can we tackle these critiques of gender integration in a way that won't conflict with the norms of the local community but also won't compromise our code of values?"

Her stream of thought was interrupted by a sudden noise from the hallway. She found a group of female students gathered around Sawsan, the vice principal. Suad could sense tension. The principal made her presence known.

"What is the matter? What is happening?"

"These students are asking to leave this school and transfer to another one!" Sawsan gasped.

"We are fed up by all the talk in the community complaining about how we attend a gender-integrated school. Even our parents are tired of all of this negative attention," the students collectively insisted.

"And what do you think the answer is?" the principal, thinking quickly, countered.

"Isn't it obvious!? We need to leave this school and attend another one because of the community pressures!" one of the students indignantly snapped back.

"Come on. You know that is not the answer! You should stand up for what you believe in! You should face your critics with perseverance and determination, regardless of what you hear," Suad replied with concern.

"But the criticism is making it so hard for us. It's hurtful," another student responded.

Suad gathered her thoughts and said, *“I can’t say it is a simple issue, especially for young people such as yourself. But not being able to find a quick solution does not mean giving up! Your teachers and I are working hard to figure out how to address this. But, in the meantime, I kindly ask you to get back to your activities.”*

The students’ momentum was now stifled; they returned to their activities, leaving Suad to return to her office.

It was clear that Aisha and Sara had overheard everything.

Aisha said, *“I’m afraid it’s time for me to leave now. I am very grateful for your hospitality and would very much like to commend your endeavors and your open-mindedness to discussion and criticism.”*

“You are most welcome at any time. It’s your school and the community’s school after all! We will always value and appreciate your opinions and suggestions,” Suad responded, trying to appear gracious.

The visitor left, her mind clearly unchanged from when she had arrived.



THE PROBLEMS NEVER END

Later that day, Suad was in the teacher break room when she overheard a conversation between some of her staff members.



Najwa, who organized all noncurricular activities, was joined by Asma, a math teacher. Asma asked, *“So how are things in the extracurricular department? How is the planning for the field trip to the capital going?”*

“Praise to Allah, all is good, but it seems that one always runs into an obstacle or two. Some are quite simple and some —” Before Najwa could finish her thought, her phone rang. She politely excused herself from the conversation.

Najwa greeted the caller, *“Hello, this is Najwa.”*

The caller said something, and Najwa responded, *“Yes, I am the head of extracurricular activities. With whom am I speaking?”*

Suad, who was making coffee, could tell that it was a parent on the other line. Considering the recent turmoil surrounding parent opinions, she could not help but eavesdrop.

The caller began speaking. Suad was able to piece the conversation together from Najwa's words and what little she could hear from the other end, realizing that the discussion concerned the upcoming field trip to the capital. She paid close attention to Najwa's responses.

"Yes, the field trip will include both male and female students. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . I'm sorry that you have to deal with your friends saying that about your son's education. . . . No, we strongly encourage students to attend these kind of trips, as we think they are important for a kind of life education you can't get inside the classroom. . . . I understand, okay. . . . No, there should still be plenty of time to study for his exams if he attends the trip."

Then there was a long, indistinguishable speech on the other end of the call. Najwa's face looked tense.

When the parent had finished, Najwa responded, *"I understand. That sounds like something to talk to your son's teachers about. But I can also talk to the administration if you would —"*

There was a click on the other end.

"What happened?" asked Suad anxiously.

"She hung up," Najwa replied.

"What was she talking about at the end?" Suad asked, not caring that her interest would reveal the fact that she had been eavesdropping.

"She thinks her son's grades are lower than they were at his previous school, and she thinks that this is because of this school's gender integration," Najwa responded.

Suad was about to snap.



FACING CHALLENGES

At a faculty meeting at the end of the school day, after addressing school affairs and teaching processes, the discussion turned to the challenges regarding the local community and its attitude toward the school. Some of the teachers proposed outreach activities to brighten the school's image in the community. However, it also became clear that some teachers agreed with the opinions that were being expressed by members of the community. Suad realized that she would need

to bring about a consensus in her school in order to put forth a clear message to the community.

The school's secretary then entered the meeting room with a sense of urgency. Suad pulled her aside, and the secretary said somewhat breathlessly,



"I was phoned just a minute ago by the head of the education directorate. He is asking for you to attend an urgent meeting tomorrow in his office to discuss the school's progress."

"He said that some community members filed a complaint against the school," the secretary added.

"Of course they did," Suad said.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How should the principal address the gap between the community's opinions (including those of the students) about her school and what she feels is the reality?
- Is there anything the teachers should do to address the growing concern over the quality of education in the school?
- What is the role of a school in changing a society's perspective on gender and gender integration in schools? At the same time, to what extent should a school be sensitive to and respond to the culture and opinions of a community?



EXCUSED ABSENCE



It was a bright Monday morning in October. The warmth of the sunbeams charged the air. Laila had woken up early that morning, full of energy. Finally, it was the day of the parent-teacher conference.

Laila is the principal of a fairly small school called the New Generation School. The school is located in an impoverished village in the northern part of Jordan whose inhabitants work on nearby farms and do not have a lot of formal education. The school has 140 students, both boys and girls, with thirteen teachers. The small rented building features a computer lab and a small courtyard in front of the entrance.

Before recently joining the New Generation School, Laila had worked as an assistant principal for ten years at one of the largest schools in the northern province. She is characterized by her poise, kindness, and ability to effectively communicate with others. Laila, who holds a PhD in education administration, enjoys strong relationships with her colleagues from her previous school, within the broader education community, and with the area's directorate of education. Everywhere she works, Laila's colleagues attest to her respect and love for her job.

Laila began the day with her usual coffee, though she wasn't sure she needed it. Today would be the first time she met with students' parents as a group. She had selected her outfit the night before and prepared her welcome speech, and she was ready to go to her office.

To accommodate the schedules of those invited to the conference, Laila had made that school day a half day and set the meeting to take place after student dismissal. In the afternoon, she made sure the school was set to make a good impression, from the reception area to the hallways and seating. She prepared handouts that discussed the key role parents play in the educational process.

It was half past noon. Laila sat patiently waiting for the parents to arrive, but not one came.

A NEW FACE FOR THE NEW GENERATION SCHOOL

Laila had always embraced challenges. Fortunately, she soon realized

that the school would have no shortage of challenges for her to embrace. Its students did not do well on standardized tests, and they scored quite low across all subjects. The relationship between the school and parents was practically nonexistent, and there was almost no community presence.

On the first day of school, Laila had made her rounds to check the classrooms, where she found that extensive maintenance was required. Some doors were falling apart. Some windows were in poor condition, and the paint was peeling off some of the walls like the shedding trunk of a palm tree. As she continued her rounds, Laila recorded a list of the areas in need of improvement and noted questions she had regarding potential solutions. She was determined to provide whatever physical, mental, and emotional support she could to improve the school and to be as nurturing to its students as she could be. As she looked over the to-do list in her office, she began thinking out loud.



"It's not that bad. I can do it – it's just going to take time and a lot of help from people. From everybody."



In addition to her vision for the school's facilities, Laila was ambitious in how she approached her school's broader development. The Ministry of Education in Jordan relies on each school to formulate a development plan that highlights the school administration's action plans for growth over the coming years. Each plan must address four main aspects of education: learning and teaching, student environment, school and community, and leadership and management.

Laila wanted all teachers, students, and students' parents to have a role in making that plan. In creating partners who would help identify challenges and take steps to solve them, Laila hoped that everyone would feel a shared responsibility to implement the plan. She believed in the value of this partnership, and, more than that, she felt that it was desperately needed to effectively improve student learning.

To begin to identify the priorities for the school's development, Laila wanted to distribute questionnaires to the teachers, students, and

parents. She thought the parent-teacher conference would be the perfect occasion to roll out this questionnaire. At the conference, Laila could begin to build positive relationships with the families and gain their support for the impending uphill battle of improving the facilities. She could also fully explain the questionnaires and their purpose. Excited for the possibilities, Laila knew this would be an excellent opportunity to help the parents feel the importance of their participation in their children's learning journey.

She set to work preparing for the assembly. The school's experienced teachers told her that this kind of event had not been done before. In fact, parents usually came only for the occasional parent-teacher conference. Rather than finding this discouraging, Laila was energized by the opportunity to break new ground. The more preparation Laila put in, the more excited she became about seeing the parents' faces when they became part of a collaboration.

MARKED AS ABSENT



It was two hours after the planned start of the parent-teacher conference, and no parent had arrived. Signs of stress showed on Laila's face. She began asking herself, *"How could this happen? What could be the problem?"*

Her mind buzzed with questions but no answers. Salma, one of the older teachers in the school, approached Laila and asked, *"Why are you so tense?"*

Laila looked over at her, confused. Salma continued, *"Look, this is expected. We haven't invited parents to the school in the past. Honestly, most of us think this is a good thing."*

Mais, another veteran teacher, walked over and agreed.

"We actually prefer that parents don't come to the school. It makes our job so much simpler, not having to deal with the chaos of everyone's opinions. When parents come, they bring their complications with them."

A few other teachers joined the conversation. Laila thought about what had been said and wondered aloud to the group, worried that she already knew the answer.

“Do you all really think this is a good thing? Do you agree with Salma and Mais?”

They all nodded their heads.

Eman, who had taught at the school for seven years, offered an explanation.

“Laila, you know teaching here is a tough job. But it’s our job, and not the job of the parents. We were excited when you started to involve teachers and students in planning and setting goals. But with parents, it’s just different. In all honesty, we as teachers have been trained to teach, and they simply haven’t.”

Salma joined back in, saying, *“Plus, the parents are not educated. It can be hard for them, or even embarrassing, to try to support their child’s learning if they have not had this experience before themselves. And they know this. They received the invitations. If they felt like they were able to support the school, they would have come.”*



This was a somewhat new situation for Laila. At her previous school, problems certainly existed between parents and teachers, but overall there was a consistent and supportive parent-teacher relationship.



Mais could see that the principal was not convinced.

“It’s just a matter of what is realistic. When parents do come to school, even if well intentioned, they present some kind of complication. Inevitably, they will want to speak with the teacher in charge. If the teacher and parent meet, then another teacher has to stay in that teacher’s class until they are finished. So, the parent essentially just took away the time from two classes because they did not understand how we are doing our jobs.”

“That is a nice way of putting it,” said Salma.

“Sometimes they come to school ready to fight one of us because of their kid’s grades or some kind of misbehavior. How am I supposed to teach properly with stuff like that happening?”

The teachers continued to elaborate, but Laila’s mind

returned an encounter she had with one of the mothers at a supermarket a week ago. Realizing that Laila was the new school principal, the mother had said, *“Your school is not welcoming to us. Teachers don’t want parents to come to the school, and they never show any cooperation when we do. This is not only me; I have heard this from many other parents in my neighborhood. Your school is just uncomfortable for us.”*

When Laila recalled that conversation, the dilemma her school faced made more sense. She became reoriented to the teachers’ discussion as Salma was finishing a thought.

“We are happy to have you, Laila. We admire your enthusiasm for change, but we believe involving parents like this will only ultimately obstruct our ability to properly teach the way we want.”

Laila had been only listening until this point, but she now spoke up.

“The students who come to our school are the same kids that the parents see at home. We need to involve the parents so we can see all sides of the situation. That way, we can better identify the causes of the problems that their children face and collaborate to solve them.”

Two teachers nodded their heads. Still, the majority of them protested, emphasizing their expertise and the obstructions to teaching that parents can cause.

Raya, one of the teachers who had nodded her head said, *“I agree with what Laila is saying. We need to have parents on board. If we have them on our side, we can get a better control of a lot of things in the school, especially student behavior and discipline.”*

Ruba, the other teacher who had agreed with Laila, vocalized that if parents supplemented classroom instruction, there wouldn’t be many problems in class to begin with.

“Come on, be serious,” objected Eman. *“Many of these parents haven’t been formally educated themselves – it would be foolish to put ourselves in a position of relying on them for that.”*

Laila reconfirmed what had been said, *“I agree with what Ruba is saying. We can benefit from the parents who do have some education, especially when their children are in lower grades. We can also use their knowledge about how*

their children behave at home. Who knows our students better than their parents?"

Raya added, *"The community might be short of resources, but parents can also help the school by doing maintenance for the buildings. I would love for my room's windows to be able to work properly again."*

Salma, still adamantly against the idea of welcoming parents, persisted.

"No one objects to parents' knowledge of their kids or denies that some of them know how to fix windows. All I'm saying is that we eventually won't be able to pick and choose when we want the parents to be here. In general, more parent interaction to me feels like more complications that would hinder proper instruction any way you look at it."



Laila had worked in the world of education long enough to understand the frustrations that Salma and most of the other teachers felt. She also was socially adept enough to recognize that she was a new principal disagreeing with most of her staff about an issue that they felt strongly about. However, she also fervently believed that the real role of the school is not simply the transfer of knowledge to students. Rather, the school embodies its purpose best when the principal, teachers, parents, and students cooperate to build an encouraging community that can foster future generations who are capable of not only participating in society but also improving it.

With the eyes of all her staff on her, Laila thought very carefully about the next words she would say.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Discuss the importance of the welcoming culture in the school. What can a school do to be more hospitable to families? Is there such a thing as being overly welcoming?
- What are the priorities that Laila, as an educational leader, should

address in the school?

- What are the most important perspectives raised by the teachers about the school's relationship with the parents? Which viewpoint do you support and why?
- If you were in Laila's place, how would you reconcile your vision of the school with the reality of not wanting to alienate yourself from your new staff?



MY FAMILY OR MY PRINCIPLES



The words of Heba's father kept echoing inside Aghadeer's head:

"Leave our daughters alone. You don't know what you're doing here, so why don't you stop putting foreign ideas into their heads and go back to where you came from?"



Even when she was a child, Aghadeer had always believed in the value of the opportunity for education for all. At the same time, she firmly believed that any knowledge worth having should not be offered on a silver platter. Learners need to work for knowledge for it to mean something.

Her children were by now fast asleep, and Aghadeer kept tossing these thoughts around in her head as she turned in her bed throughout the night.

AGHADEER YOUNES

Aghadeer Younes is forty years old and strong willed. She has four sisters, all of whom excel in their respective professional fields. Aghadeer partially attributes this success to her family's emphasis on education while they were growing up, the same emphasis that had compelled her to become a math teacher. After graduating from university, she had taken temporary teaching posts for refugee education programs, along with some work in private schools, for five years. Finally, Aghadeer had been appointed to the position of a permanent teacher in an urban area in northern Jordan. She and her husband, Khaled, soon found a home nearby for themselves and their four daughters.

Unfortunately, because Khaled works at the southern tip of Jordan, in Aqaba, he is able to return home to see his family only on weekends. Thus, as Aghadeer was adjusting to her new job and work environment, she also was the sole caretaker for her family for most of the week. Although

finding a work-life balance is exhausting, Aghadeer would do anything to ensure that her daughters have a stable, safe, and nourishing home environment. Thanks to the self-described strong personality that she inherited from her father, she wants her daughters to believe that they can pursue their dreams and work in the profession they want when they grow up.

Aghadeer began working at her new school, Al Waha School, eager to impart some of the same motivation to her students.

AL WAHA SCHOOL

Al Waha School is in the Al Shumo' neighborhood in one of the oldest parts of the city. A sizable percentage of the neighborhood's inhabitants come from neighboring countries. The three-story building of Al Waha School was constructed with state-of-the-art facilities, including high-quality science labs, a theater, and a modern computer lab. The school seeks to improve the status and outlook for education for the girls in the area. The school educates 1000 girls of various academic interests and cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Many of the families in this neighborhood do not have steady incomes, nor do they support college education for their daughters. In fact, many families in the area believe in early marriage for girls. At the same time, Lina, the school's experienced principal and a native of the community, is trying to take advantage of the attention surrounding her excellently equipped school to change that. Through community engagement and holding regular meetings with her students' parents, the principal hopes to encourage these families to adjust their mindset concerning the importance of education for their daughters.

BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

Aghadeer and Lina had entered the school year with high hopes and ambitions. Aghadeer had been anxious to meet her students but excited to prove to herself that she could be a capable teacher to such a large, diverse group with differing needs. This year, Lina was eager to develop creative approaches and adopt new and effective pedagogies

to help her school excel. For example, Lina gave her teachers the liberty to choose their classes. Aghadeer chose grade 8 and was assigned to teach math for four sections and to be one of the homeroom teachers.

Lina also wanted to make sure that her teachers followed through on the school's goals after the initial momentum of the beginning of the school year faded. She had asked all teachers to prepare their teaching plans for the school year, which she would refer to throughout the year to gauge teachers' progress. She also had advised her teachers to prepare and administer diagnostic tests to identify the necessary points of growth for their students.

Aghadeer had not known what to expect but nevertheless prepared what she needed to administer the tests. The results had been lower than she had hoped – only a quarter of the students passed.

However, at least now she had a clearer picture of the academic level of her students. The drastic amount of improvement that was needed took Lina by surprise. However, Aghadeer had insisted that she only needed some time to implement a support plan for her students. The plan entailed offering students the opportunity to review their work with her during her lunch break, as well as providing remedial study sessions after school. Her students' reaction to her plan had varied from ambivalence to indifference, but Aghadeer had been determined to offer any help she could for her students, as long as they were willing put in the work, too.

Although most of Aghadeer's students were willing to meet her halfway, one particular student, Heba, was still waiting on the other side. Heba, who had Aghadeer as a teacher for both math and homeroom, showed no interest in the remedial study sessions and continued to openly express resentment toward them. Aghadeer had tried many times to contact her parents, but they never answered.



Recently, after Heba had failed yet another test, Aghadeer approached her student while she walked to lunch and said, *"Heba, my dear, did you know I offer extra lessons for our class? They really have seemed to help some of your friends."*

Heba stopped walking, clearly listening, as Aghadeer

continued, *“I have another one after school today – why don’t you come along?”*

Heba turned around at her teacher and replied, *“I don’t want to come to your study sessions. It’s useless for me.”*

Aghadeer thought she knew where this was going.

“Listen, I know you are smart. And you do too. But even smart people need to work hard to make –”

“No, it’s not about that,” Heba interrupted, her voice now filled more with sorrow than the irritability it had carried moments earlier. *“Mrs. Aghadeer, it’s no use for me.”*

She looked around a moment before continuing, *“My mom didn’t finish school, got married, then got pregnant not long after. My brother dropped out of school. School is . . . it’s just not in my future, okay? It wasn’t for my mom, and it won’t be for me.”*

Aghadeer was stunned. Heba shuffled away to lunch.



The rest of the year had been a whirlwind for Aghadeer and her students. Her students’ hard work at the remedial study sessions had inspired her, and she had continued to encourage all those who showed up. She had taken great pride in the increasing number of students who attended.

Unfortunately, Heba had never been among them.

EXAM SEASON

At the end of the year, Aghadeer eagerly awaited to grade the exams and see the results of her and her students’ persistence. Aghadeer came to school early one morning to finish grading the exams. She began correcting her stack of papers. She was incredibly inspired by the amount of improvement her students had made! One by one, she saw her former low-scoring students now achieving high scores. “Fatima, Maha, Salam, Nour, Amira . . .” She murmured their names as she saw the extent of her students’ hard work.

Then she got to Heba’s exam. She graded her booklet. Heba’s absence from the remedial study sessions showed. Aghadeer capped her red pen and leaned back in her chair. With this grade, Heba would fail her

class. However, the realization was made worse by the fact that, because Aghadeer was Heba's homeroom teacher, she also knew that Heba had failed two other classes as well. With three failing classes, Heba would have to retake grade 8.

During class, Aghadeer passed out the exam packets, face down, so students could briefly see their individual grades. Heba received her packet, already with a look of defeat on her face, and Aghadeer's heart began to sink. Aghadeer watched as Heba barely turned over her papers to see her grade — her face was blank. And that's when Aghadeer's heart fully capsized.

AN UNEXPECTED CALL

Later that afternoon, Aghadeer was sitting with her children when the phone rang. Aghadeer answered.



It was Heba's father. And he was furious.

He angrily growled, *"You have no business failing my daughter!"*

"And I have tried contacting you, but I never received an answer. She seems to think that trying in school is of no use because of where she thinks her life is going anyways."

Aghadeer explained and added that she did her best to help Heba improve her scores, but Heba had refused the help.

"Don't try to change the subject. My Heba is very smart and what is in the future is in the future. Right now, this is about your teaching and negative influences that have failed my daughter," the father snarled.

Aghadeer interjected, *"Sir, I understand that —"*

"Enough," the father interrupted. *"You are simply no longer welcome here. Go back to where you came from, and leave our daughters alone. It is not only I; many families think the same."*



Aghadeer's further explanations went unheard as the father continued his tirade about how Aghadeer did not belong. When he was done,

Aghadeer stood there, worrying about how this new knowledge would complicate the life she was trying to carve out for her family.



The next morning, Aghadeer consulted with Lina and Saja, the assistant principal. They were just as shocked at what had happened as she was. Lina sighed, apologized for the emotional turmoil Aghadeer had experienced, and asked,

“What is your initial reaction to all of this? What is going through your head?”



How could Aghadeer even start to answer that? Could she leave? Would that make her feel like she was surrendering her students and her principles to unjust forces of intimidation? How could she explain such a decision to her daughters when she keeps encouraging them to pursue their dreams? At the same time, as an outsider, did she need to try fighting this “good fight” against the community’s ideals, especially when such conflict could affect her daughters’ childhood?



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Could Aghadeer have dealt with Heba differently? Could she have approached the locals differently? How?
- What do you think the school principal could have done? Could she have taken any preventative measures?
- If you were Aghadeer, how would you respond to the decision at hand? How would you explain your decisions to your children?
- This case involves making a decision surrounding the intersection of one’s work and personal life. Generally speaking, and outside of this specific context, what steps can educators take to ensure a sustainable work-life balance?

BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT





SAVE ME BEFORE YOU LOSE ME



Located on a small plot of land, Al Ghad Elementary School stands tall, spreading light and knowledge despite the complex events it has endured. The school consists of two buildings separated by a small courtyard with pillars supporting a horizontal sunshade. The obstructive placement of the pillars across the courtyard, unfortunately, leaves hardly any space for playing safely. Within the school, there are fourteen classrooms and a small library and a computer lab.

The old institution is situated firmly between the houses of the neighborhood; it continues to graduate generation after generation despite its limited facilities. Accordingly, every parent nearby aims to register their children at Al Ghad, as they see it for what it is: a good school with a great reputation and a cooperative staff.

At first, the classrooms had been spacious enough for the small number of students enrolled. However, as the number of students kept increasing, the size of the classrooms stayed the same, and sometimes forty to fifty students were packed in a space of only twenty-four square meters. The school's overflowing classrooms now hold more than 600 students all together. Undoubtedly, this crowded atmosphere impacts the educational process for both students and teachers. All too similar to the courtyard just outside the old windows, the confined conditions of the classrooms create a world of limitations in what should otherwise be a space of nothing but possibilities.

The principal, Sawsan, has persistently tried to improve the situation by filing reports and making requests to add more classrooms; she has even suggested using the adjacent park as a playground. She has also tried contacting the parents to find ways that they could unite their efforts. However, she has always been faced with the same belief: it was the responsibility of the principal and the school to find solutions for this problem and to provide the students with a quality education, no matter the circumstances.

ALWAYS AIM FOR SUCCESS

Sawsan was her father's pride and joy. Her father, Ahmad, saw himself in her and thought of her as his greatest achievement. He had raised her to have proper morals and made sure to nurture her strong will. Furthermore, Sawsan's father had always encouraged her enthusiasm, perseverance, and sense of responsibility, giving her chances to make decisions and take matters in her own hands. Sawsan had internalized these values and took pride in seeing them through, regardless of the situation.



When she first informed her father that she was now the principal of Al Ghad Elementary School, he was ecstatic and said to her, *"Congratulations, my dear, this school is lucky to have someone like you. I wish you all the best. And remember that this responsibility is not to be taken lightly. Have patience, wisdom, and always aim for success."*



Four years had passed with the blink of an eye. The school developed tremendously during those years, but there was still a long way to go; there remained several goals to achieve and challenges to overcome.

THEY HAVE EXHAUSTED MY PATIENCE

Sawsan was managing some paperwork when a knock on the door interrupted her. It was one of her fourth-grade teachers, Muna, on the verge of tears, and she was accompanied by a group of students.



"Principal Sawsan, I cannot stand having these students in my class any longer. They have exhausted all of my energy and patience. I will not – I cannot teach a class with them in it," Muna said.

"Please calm down. I can see that you are under pressure today, but we can find a solution. There's a solution for every problem," Sawsan said.

"Except for my problem," Muna replied, *"since it's not only the students but also their parents."*

"Let's meet at the end of the day to see how we can solve this," Sawsan suggested.



THE BITTERNESS BETWEEN TRUTH AND EMOTION

Joining Muna in the principal's office was Safa, the students' previous third-grade teacher, and Hanan, the school's guidance counselor.



Sawsan greeted everyone and explained how she had instructed the guidance counselor to collect some data about the group of fourth graders in question. She let Hanan discuss her findings.

"Thank you, Sawsan. I have noticed that the group of students Muna brought to the office today share several traits such as hyperactivity, distraction, and misconduct. This not only can make it hard for teachers to conduct a healthy class, but it also poses a physical risk to their fellow classmates that can no longer be tolerated. It doesn't help that not one of them has a very nurturing home environment."

"And what do you think, since you were their previous teacher?" the principal asked Safa.

"I agree that the students are exhausting and can be a huge burden on the teacher. While I sympathize with Muna, they are also victims of challenging circumstances. Some of them have suffered from war and had to flee their country, and like Hanan said, others have unsupportive home environments. I know Qusai's parents are separated, and he rarely gets to see his mother because she is always working. Of course those kids can be frustrating. But my heart also breaks for them," Safa replied.

"Safa," Sawsan intervened, *"I have to emphasize the alarming complaints we have been receiving. A week ago, Qusai almost injured his classmate's eyes, and yesterday, Karam pushed another student in front of moving traffic at the main gates. This is on top of the fights they get into during lessons."*

"I also disagree with Safa. I have tried to help and support them," interrupted Muna. *"I have motivated Karam with incentives and other things, but he keeps going back to his old habits. I am not a social worker! My job is to manage the class and deliver proper instruction. That's it."*

Sawsan saw where the conversation was going. She began formulating her thoughts on how to maintain control of the

discussion, but Safa continued, *“And their success in life, isn’t that our concern too? Isn’t that why we’re here in the first place? We should be asking ourselves what we can do to help them be better humans and citizens, instead of just letting them be victims of their circumstances.”*

Muna took a deep breath as the pressure of the day was now fully starting to hit her.

“I’m sorry, but this philosophical talk doesn’t convince me. Let’s be realistic: my job as a teacher is to teach. The increasing number of students per classroom is enough work already, and now you are asking me to fix their parents’ marriage and provide for their families? What about the other fifty kids in the class who wouldn’t be getting any attention because I’m giving it all to a handful of them?” Muna said.

The conversation made Sawsan recall what her father had said to her four years ago. She fully felt the significance of his words. She intervened,

“Muna, I understand your frustration. But I firmly believe it is our responsibility to help these students and ensure that the school is not just another stop for these kids on their way to who knows where. We are at least partially responsible for how they turn out in the future, and if we let the burden of their circumstances rest solely on their shoulders, many of them are going to collapse.”



Like most issues Sawsan had surmounted at the school, this dilemma could not be solved solely through words around a table. It was clear to her that the responsibility of the school lies with something greater than just instruction. At the same time, having unrealistic expectations for what they could accomplish would be irresponsible. Frustrated at not knowing where to start, the principal concluded that the topic needed more analysis. She explained that she would form a team led by Hanan to contact parents, gain additional perspective, and conduct research on finding the core of the problem.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Sawsan was staring out the window of her office, watching the children playing in the courtyard. They too had complained about not being able to play many games with the pillars’ obstruction. Nevertheless, Sawsan

was observing a game of hide-and-seek underway outside. There was something inspiring about the creativity and self-agency that these kids were showing despite the obstacles.



“Where is the principal? Where is her office? I want to see her immediately!” Saeed’s mother was causing a commotion in the main entrance, and she had a quiet Saeed in tow.

The shouting had abruptly halted Sawsan’s contemplation. Sawsan guided the mother into her office and calmly asked how she could help.

Furious, the mother replied, *“Do you only see Saeed as a bad kid? Isn’t it enough that he has speech difficulty? And now you have made him the laughingstock of his classmates.”*

The principal tried to listen and contain the mother, but she went on, *“I am a working mother and my child comes home complaining every day about his teacher, who dismisses him completely. It has gotten to the point where he no longer wants to come to school. Plus, he brings home the worst language and behavior from your other students.”*

Hanan had heard the commotion. She entered the office and addressed the mother.

“Ma’am, we have contacted you several times to discuss Saeed’s actions. He continually hurts his classmates.”

The three adults all looked at the fourth grader, who was currently trying to make himself invisible.

His mother replied, *“I don’t have the time to be on call whenever you can’t handle your students; it’s your job to prevent these things. Otherwise, what’s the point of sending him to school?”*

Hanan said plainly, *“Today he injured his classmate with the blade from his sharpener. Two days ago, he slammed the door on another student’s hand.”*

The mother replied incredulously, *“That is not true! My child has never hurt anyone! In fact, it’s the other students who are hurting him – even his teacher humiliates him by isolating him from his friends. And you expect Saeed to just take this disrespect and do nothing? Well, I won’t! I am filing a complaint against this school!”*

The mother left without listening or saying any more. Saeed

quietly followed.

With a sigh, Hanan also left the office, but not before adding, *“To be honest, we face disrespect from the parents before getting it from their kids. Don’t bother; it’s no use.”*



Sawsan was left to reflect on the situation and imagine what Saeed’s future might look like if things were to stay the same. Changing Saeed’s behavior in school would be one thing, but it would be another thing to do so without his mother’s encouragement.

The sheer complexity of the situation was discouraging. Sawsan also knew that there were plenty of other situations just like it.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are the challenges facing Al Ghad Elementary School? What are the causes of these challenges (the school’s physical space, its culture, its rules, etc.)?
- If you were the principal of Al Ghad Elementary School, what are two concrete steps you would take, in the short term, to address these problems?
- If you were a colleague of Muna, the students’ current teacher, what are some tools or advice you would give her on how to discipline her class?
- During the discussion between Hanan, Muna, Safa, and the principal, did you agree with one of the arguments more than the others? Why?
- How could the principal approach encounters with parents such as Saeed’s mother in the future?



I DON'T CARE



Sanaa' sat at her desk at the end of the day with Mira's words echoing in her mind:

"Why do you care whether I learn or not? It's useless anyway. I'm just here because it gets me out of the house. I'm not going to be anything anyway, and no one cares. I don't even care, so just leave me alone!"



No child should be this adamant about being unable to succeed. Moreover, no teacher should feel this hopeless helping a child who is facing such terrible conditions. But what could she do? She had already been warned to leave the student alone. Groaning in frustration, Sanaa' wondered what she might do next.

THE TEACHER

Sanaa' is a 25-year-old novice teacher. She had earned her BSc in mathematics with distinction before deciding to go into teaching and completing her MA in curricula and teaching methodology. She had gone on to complete a teacher education professional diploma, which armed her with the knowledge, skills, and strategies required to be a professional teacher. Her passion for education and her love for children led Sanaa' to take this route because she wants to help new generations love and understand math and to be able to link math to their daily lives. She is determined that no student of hers will be left behind and that she will play the role of teacher and mentor to her students.



Sanaa' had been appointed at Al Ahlam School after completing her teaching diploma. Within the short time she had been at the school, she had gained the respect of her colleagues and her principal, often hearing, *"You were born to be a teacher!"*



In addition to her outstanding teaching skills, Sanaa' regularly followed

the academic progress of her students and communicated with the school counselor to provide any necessary attention and support to students. Some teachers viewed this as her pushing her nose in issues that do not concern her, but she ignored this criticism.

THE SCHOOL AND CONTEXT

Al Ahlam School is a rural public school located among rolling green hills and surrounded by olive trees; the idyllic setting radiates an atmosphere of quiet calm. The school caters to the residents of one village, who come from the same socioeducational background. The teachers are working for their own community, and they are eager to improve their skills. They continually pursue professional development opportunities. The focus on skills-based teaching and developing soft skills has led to high graduation rates and more students going on to complete higher-level degrees.

Because of the small size of the community, the staff, parents, and students know one another and at times even know details about one another's personal lives. While working close to home is advantageous to the teachers, it also means that personal tensions could easily transfer to the school setting and that there were clear lines staff would not cross with families.

To further support children's psycho-social well-being, the Ministry of Education has investigated training counselors in order to provide more-effective support for schoolchildren. However, some communities, especially those in rural areas, think schools should not interfere in such affairs, as it would mean that personal family matters could be scrutinized publicly.

THE STUDENT

Mira is a fourth-grade student at Al Ahlam School whose family has long resided in the village. After her parents' divorce, her father left the country due to financial problems and her mother remarried. As a result, Mira moved in with her aunt. An older, unwed woman, Mira's aunt, Firdaus, did not show any interest in her niece and would often

ignore the principal's phone calls to discuss Mira's academic standing. She never followed up on Mira's progress nor would she respond to the notes the school sent regarding Mira's performance.

Mira's records from second grade showed that she had been an affectionate and curious child who always wanted to gain the attention of those around her. More recent reports had revealed a troubling profile of a disengaged child who was growing more morose and uninterested in school and beyond. Mira's teacher is now Sanaa', who had recently overheard Mira replying to a classmate's rebuke that Mira would not pass if she did not change.



"I don't care. I'm only here to get away from my aunt and the house chores. When I get back to my aunt's, I still have to clean the house. I have barely time to rest. I can't do homework in addition. It just won't work," Mira had said back to her classmate.



This exchange had made Sanaa' aware of how Mira's unfortunate circumstances were negatively affecting her and had also caused Sanaa' to question her own role in the situation. Sanaa' was convinced that one of the key factors to successful learning was providing a safe and supportive learning environment that motivated and inspired students. Mira's appearance at school in untidy clothes and with uncombed hair showed that she might be experiencing neglect, which was probably why she had lost interest at school. Sanaa' wanted to motivate Mira to learn and rise above her circumstances, but this was a child. How much could be achieved through encouragement without real action? Additionally, Sanaa' was a math teacher, which gave her limited capacity to work with Mira. How much could she do without being reprimanded? Sanaa' convinced the counselor to join her in raising this issue with the principal and in mentioning the Ministry's interest in this aspect. They had a long conversation with the principal and managed to convince her of the need to take some action.

THINGS COME TO A HEAD

The principal, counselor, and Sanaa', as homeroom teacher, met with

Mira's aunt to try to address Mira's needs and her disengagement. The administration was transparent with Mira's aunt and reminded her that she is responsible for her niece's psychological and physical well-being.



"I love my niece. My brother left us in dire straits, and I am getting old. I have bad eyes and worse knees. If the girl doesn't help around the house, we will not be able to manage," the aunt began to protest loudly, insisting that she was doing all she could for the girl.

"But is it fair on the child? She cannot have a better future if she is left like this," argued the principal.

"Like what? I feed her and clothe her and send her to school. If she doesn't like school, I can't do much about it," Firdaus replied.

"Please, Aunt Firdaus, think of her future and what chances are being wasted," Sanaa' chimed in.

"Not another word from you! How dare you interfere in my family. Everyone knows I am doing the best I can. Who are you to pry into my personal life and accuse me like this? I know this is all because of you. I hear the neighbors talk about your prying!"



The meeting became heated, and the principal could get the aunt to calm down only by asking both Sanaa' and the counselor to leave. She later updated them that Firdaus had promised that she would take better care of Mira.

When the counselor looked into what action they could take, it became clear that regulations did not give the school any leeway beyond communicating with parents or guardians. There was no mechanism whereby this issue could be escalated; moreover, there was no system in place that might look after the child.

All they could do was hope that the aunt had been sincere in her promise; however, while there was slight improvement in Mira's physical appearance, her demeanor showed no change. The child's depression increased, and she became more sullen and uncooperative. Some teachers did not know how to deal with her and simply left her alone in class, expecting nothing from her. More seriously, Mira started to miss

school frequently, especially on exam days.

Sanaa' was troubled, and her questions had no easy answers. From whom could she seek assistance, when everyone seemed to have given up? Should she report this to family protection services? What would happen if she did? Should she consult the village elders? They already saw her interference as unwelcome. What could she do?

Every time she met Mira's eyes, all she could do was lower her own, and she felt real shame and a deep sense of failure every time she attended a talk on supporting challenging students and dealing with those with disabilities.

All she could do was pray to God to lead her to the right path. What else could she do?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- If you were Sanaa', what would you do next?
- How should the school's staff support Mira while respecting the aunt's role in Mira's life?
- Is Sanaa' crossing a boundary by attempting to take an active role in this issue? Are school-to-home boundaries defined only when one eventually encounters resistance?
- How would you describe an ideal home-school relationship? How might your answer be affected by the school's environment, location, number of students, and other factors?



YOU CAN'T FORCE IT!



EXPLODING TENSIONS

The bell rang, and the students were dismissed. It was the end of a long and exhausting week for Talal, the school counselor. He was struggling with how to deal with a sensitive issue. His last conversation with a seventh grader, Muayyad, was still ringing in his ears.



"You don't have the right to tell me who to play with! As team captain, I will choose my own team, and I don't want him on it!"



Talal remembered the student's sharp tone and couldn't forget the look of fury that twisted Muayyad's young face. He knew he was about to spend the whole weekend wondering what he could do to thwart a potentially violent situation on Sunday.

THE COUNSELOR

Talal is a 21-year-old man who chose to go into counseling to help young children find safety and security in school, after his own difficult start. With black curly hair and brown eyes, he could often be seen laughing with the boys in his charge and giving them encouraging high fives. Talal had been born with a physical disability that left him with a pronounced limp, a fact that meant he once had to put up with teasing and exclusion at school. Yet it was the same disability that led to him getting hired directly after graduation because of the disability quota. He knew how lucky he was to find a job and was determined to ensure he did his best for his students. Yet, the reality he faced was strikingly different from the theory he had studied at university. Counseling was not as straightforward as theory had made it seem. The tensions at school reflected tensions in the surrounding community.

AL QASABAH HIGH SCHOOL

Located in the suburbs of the capital city of Jordan, Al Qasabah High

School is a school for boys from sixth to twelfth grade. It comprises two buildings with two floors each. The Ministry has chosen this school to try an inclusive approach of integrating refugees with local students rather than establishing a second shift at the school for refugee students. The school had already been overcrowded, with an average of forty students per class. The school has limited resources that cannot meet the demands of the high number of students.

Out in the community, there are feelings of resentment about the influx of refugees and how their presence impacted their quality of life and employment opportunities. Community members have been vocal in their complaints, claiming that the increased class sizes will diminish the quality of education at the school.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT

According to a recent report by UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR Jordan Factsheet, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/unhcr-jordan-factsheet-may-2019>), Jordan has been seriously affected by the crisis in Syria because it has been host to the second-highest number of refugees per capita in the world. Of the 48 percent of refugees who are children, 83 percent live in urban areas while 17 percent are divided among three refugee camps. More than 123,000 Jordanian work permits have been issued to Syrian refugees; for some, the large number bolsters the sentiment that refugees are being given work opportunities that have been taken away from Jordanians.

THE STUDENT, A REFUGEE

Zaid, a 12-year-old boy, used to live happily with his parents and sisters in Damascus. He had never traveled outside of his hometown and never felt that he was missing anything. His family had never thought that they would be forced out of their home and their country. The trauma of crossing into Jordan without his father and suddenly being without the necessities he had taken for granted is something he still has not come to terms with. Zaid had been excited to go back to school, since he had missed a year of schooling.



"It will be great! I'm sure there are boys who want to start a football team, and I'm a great striker."

Zaid worked hard and soon was competing with Muayyad for the top spot in the class. Zaid could tell that Muayyad didn't like having competition.



Despite his good grades, things were not so great for Zaid. He felt that the other boys were picking on him. He was sent to the school counselor and explained that his classmate Muayyad had made it impossible for him to join the football team. Muayyad even told the other boys that anyone who played with Zaid would not be invited to his family's farm.

One morning, Zaid returned to the classroom after a break to find his textbooks and notebooks torn and thrown around the classroom. Bending to pick them up, he could hear the snickers behind him, and he turned and saw Muayyad. Zaid became furious and attacked Muayyad with his fists.

The homeroom teacher saw Zaid and Muayyad tussling and exchanging blows and pulled Zaid away from Muayyad to bring him to the principal's office.

Sitting in the counselor's office, Zaid cried and protested the principal's decision to suspend him. He explained everything that had been happening to the counselor, Talal, and begged him for help.

MUAYYAD

Muayyad is a likeable student whose academic achievement and leadership skills mean that he has influence in setting the tone at school. He takes his role as team captain very seriously and had even convinced his father to donate money to get the team new uniforms and high-quality equipment.

Throughout the semester, Zaid has been competing with Muayyad for the top academic spot in the class. This threatens Muayyad, who is worried that his efforts to become the team captain and gain the top grades will not be recognized.

IN THE COUNSELOR'S OFFICE

Walking into the counselor's office, Muayyad exuded indignance that was matched only by his refusal to listen. He was already feeling offended that he, the star student, was being blamed for the violence. When Talal turned to him and said that maybe he and Zaid could be friends and solve the problem, he made a suggestion.



"Why don't you give Zaid a spot in the football team?"

Muayyad interrupted, *"I'm sorry,"* he said quietly but with anger, *"Our team has been playing together for years, and we are familiar with how we can execute moves to win matches. The school championships are coming up and we don't have time to train Zaid. He won't fit in!"*

"What about my books, why tear up my books?" Zaid shouted in annoyance.

Muayyad responded, *"It's not my fault if you aren't careful with your books and someone stepped on them. It wasn't me! Stop blaming me for your problems."*

Talal put his hand up and said, *"Can you each imagine how the other feels? Can you say what you think the other is thinking?"*



Talal had learned this method in his university classes, but now it only encouraged the boys to make snide comments about the other. The exercise was making the situation even worse, so Talal asked the boys to leave so that he could speak to each student individually.

A CONVERSATION WITH THE HOMEROOM AND P.E. TEACHER

Feeling unhappy and frustrated and not knowing what to do next, Talal made his way to the teachers' lounge in the hopes that he might find support from his colleagues.



The physical education teacher was having a cup of coffee while filling in the attendance sheet. Talal asked if he could

have a word with him.

"I'm here to talk about Zaid and his situation in the school with his classmates. What have you noticed?"

He continued, *"Do you think we can convince Muayyad to accept Zaid?"*

Saleh looked at him and his mouth tightened a fraction.

"What exactly do you see as wrong? Seventh-grade boys are born to be physical. Their age means they are negotiating becoming men and will act out. They will solve it eventually. I shouldn't need to tell this to you. You are a counselor, after all!"

Talal countered, *"Perhaps you are right, but could you help by involving Zaid more during P.E. lessons?"*

Saleh interrupted, *"What do you mean?"*

Talal replied, *"The boys don't pick Zaid for their teams and he ends up alone with two other boys, playing on the sidelines. You could assign him as one of the team leaders to make sure he is involved."*

"P.E. is the one lesson where the boys are learning to take charge and make their own decisions. I will not force a team captain to do things that he does not want," Saleh responded.



TALKING TO THE STUDENTS

Still worried about the conflict, Talal assembled the seventh-grade boys for a meeting. He suggested that Zaid be included as part of the team.



Reacting intensely, Muayyad cried, *"Now he wants to take my top spot and also be on my team? No! No one can come to my school and push me aside. He is the one who brought violence with him. You have no right to tell me who to play with!"*

A few boys near him nodded.

Another added, *"My father lost his job because a refugee agreed to take less money for it. How is that fair? What is he supposed to do now?"*

The meeting devolved into complaints and tension.

Then Zaid spoke up, *“Do you think we want to be here? It’s not our fault that we had to come here. If we work hard enough to be given jobs, that’s not our fault either! All we want to do is to live.”*



AT THE SCHOOL LIBRARY

Talal returned to his office. He glimpsed a copy of *35 Strategies Every Counselor Should Know* that he had borrowed from the library. Ironically, not a single strategy proved useful for him in this case. Remembering that the book was due back that day, he picked it up to return it.



As Talal handed the book to Jehad, the librarian, he noticed Talal’s confusion and turned to him,

“Do you have a problem, Mr. Talal?”

Talal recounted the whole story to him.

Jehad said, *“A while ago, Zaid apologized for not returning a borrowed book, as it had been torn. I thought at the time that something must be going on, as he is a good student. I calmed him down and suggested we mend the book together.”*

“It seems that Zaid is being bullied by a group of boys, and I suspect that Muayyad is encouraging this,” stated Talal.

“This must be very hard for the boy. It is through no fault of his own, yet he must suffer. I am willing to help work with you on how we might tackle bullying at our school and provide all students with a safe environment,” Jehad responded.



Before Talal could answer, the janitor came in to inform him that the principal was asking for Talal go to his office right away.

PARENTS STEP IN



On Thursday morning, Muayyad’s father made an appointment to see the principal. Talal was called in to the meeting halfway through. Saleh, the homeroom and P.E.

teacher, started to speak:

“Mr. Talal, Muayyad’s father has said that during your meeting with the students, you used words that hurt Muayyad’s feelings and that you blamed him for the violence that happened. We all know what an excellent student Muayyad is, and I assured his father that he must have misunderstood what you meant.”

Surprised, Talal looked at the principal and did not know what to say. He took a breath and started to explain.

“Sir, I was trying to get the students to see the importance of behaving with respect and fairness toward one another. We cannot ignore that we have a serious problem that we need to address here at the school.”

The principal listened to Talal and then said, *“Mr. Talal, please come in early on Sunday with a plan on how to address this situation.”*



Talal left the principal’s office thinking about how he could effect change. How was he to make sure no new violence erupted without turning the school into a segregated community? He was feeling extremely dejected as he made his way home.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What plan could Talal give on Sunday?
- What role could the librarian play in promoting inclusive education in the school?
- What would you do if you were the P.E. teacher?
- What role could the school play in defusing the tension in the community?
- If you were the principal, how would you have addressed the conflict between Zaid and Muayyad?



CAN COACHING HELP EVERYONE?

Teaching and Learning

This case focuses on the struggle that an instructional coach encounters when teachers in a training session are not convinced of the training's merit or feasibility. While instructional training may seem beneficial in the abstract, implementing it is usually not seamless, especially when teachers do not feel that their students are ready for the various pedagogical techniques that may be recommended. Thus, the case brings into question the relationship between staff attitudes, reform, and teachers' expectations of their students.

CONFLICT OF DESIRES

Teaching and Learning

This case is about the different desires of students, teachers, and parents with respect to teaching methods. Some students want direct teaching and do not trust active learning. In their opinion, the active learning is not serious, whereas others prefer active learning because it breaks the status quo of class instruction and makes it easier for them to learn and remember. The teacher is experienced in teaching and wants to apply modern methods, against the wishes of worried students and worried parents.

COSTLY CHANGE?

Teaching and Learning

The dilemma in this case surrounds the friction that arises when a new English teacher tries to introduce more student-oriented pedagogy at a school where the other teachers practice the traditional teacher-centered, though test-effective, methods. Furthermore, the context of high-stakes testing can create an atmosphere where any slight deviation from a rigid but ostensibly results-proven pedagogy may engender harsh backlash from parents and students alike.

DON'T LEAVE ME BEHIND

People with Disabilities

This case asks whose responsibility it is to ensure that students with varying intellectual abilities receive a proper education. It examines the rights of students with disabilities to enroll in nonspecialist “regular” public schools and explores some of the ways in which other students’ parents may react when those rights potentially infringe on their children’s receipt of a quality education. At the same time, should this issue be seen as one of education rights or merely one of how to best integrate a student properly into a school?

EXCUSED ABSENCE

School-Community Relations

In this case, a new principal uncovers the existing friction between her school’s families and an apparently unwelcoming staff. The case explores the extent to which a school should involve its local community in its functioning and decision-making processes. While parents can be assets in some situations, some teachers feel that more parental presence necessarily entails more complications. Furthermore, the case shows how new staff members, in this case a new principal, must communicate their leadership and vision while taking care not to alienate new colleagues.

I DON'T CARE

Behavior Management

This case explores the convergence of teacher responsibility and school-home boundaries. The protagonist, a math teacher, notices that one of her students is becoming increasingly despondent in class; however, the student’s guardian is not sympathetic to the issue and interprets the teacher’s outreach as overstepping her professional role. Ultimately, this dynamic explores the extent to which teachers should involve themselves in the personal lives of their students. If their personal life is clearly affecting the student’s academic performance, where does the school’s responsibility end?

IT'S NOT FAIR! **People with Disabilities**

This case centers on an Arabic teacher with vision impairment who, after ten years of successful teaching, is informed that she will be replaced by novice teachers who have no disability. The case involves the issue of teacher qualifications and how staff and administrators should approach this issue to ensure that they, in a nonbiased way, are providing their students with the teachers who are most capable of providing quality instruction.

MOMENT OF TRUTH **Teaching and Learning**

This case discusses the tension that can emerge between a new, ambitious, and motivated teacher and existing school teachers. How can new teachers manage and adapt to real-life schooling while still effectively employing the techniques they practiced in their preservice preparation for the profession?

MY FAMILY OR MY PRINCIPLES **School-Community Relations**

This case focuses on a clash of cultural values between a new teacher and her school's community. To what extent should a teacher combat the prevailing culture of the community, especially when the associated effects are exacerbated by the involvement of one's personal life?

PASS IN SCIENCE . . . FAIL IN ARABIC! **Teaching and Learning**

This case illustrates the challenges associated with the reflections of students' weakness in language skills on their achievement in other subjects of study. The dilemma facing the teacher in the case is how to vary evaluation methods and how to balance the different perspectives regarding the evaluation tools that avoid language barriers.

SAVE ME BEFORE YOU LOSE ME

Behavior Management

This case dives into the complexity of differing perspectives on how to deal with student misbehavior in the classroom, especially when this misbehavior may stem from unstable or violence-ridden personal circumstances. Providing compassion to students may be hard to disagree with as an ideal, but balancing discipline, compassion, and safety in an overcrowded and strained school proves to be an especially complicated dilemma.

SHOULD I CONTINUE MY STUDIES?

People with Disabilities

This case centers on how instruction and assessment should be tailored to individual needs. When the arrival of a new principal and staff reveals that some teachers had been tailoring assessments for one particular student over the course of several years, the school must grapple with how to address the special treatment of the student. What is a fair course of action going forward for the student and for her peers? Should fairness be achieved through trying to compensate for students' differences or through not acknowledging them across the board?

A WAR OF WORDS

School-Community Relations

This case highlights the conflict that arises when a school's local community is increasingly skeptical of how the school's gender integration may affect the quality of education. It analyzes what the role of the school should be in responding to and shaping community opinions and explores how a principal should approach negative public perceptions of the school.

WE DON'T WANT YOU

Teaching and Learning

This case illustrates the impact that high-stakes testing can have on a school's culture. When students receive private tutoring, their perspectives and evaluation of the quality of their school education can change. At the same time, the case explores how teachers must also grapple with

stark differences in how their students and students' families value (or devalue) students' in-school education, and the negative behavioral effects that these differences may cause.

WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

People with Disabilities

The case discusses difficulties a teacher faces with merging students with disabilities into the classroom and how the class culture might affect that transition. Are teachers sufficiently trained and prepared to handle students with disabilities in their classes? What they can do to ensure all students are receiving the education they deserve?

WHERE TO START?

Teaching and Learning

This case explores how problems in schools, such as the gap between what teachers intend to teach and what students learn, can be deeply interconnected. While immense effort and perseverance are key to any successful school, this case shows that they are not enough to effectively introduce solutions. Sometimes it can be difficult enough identifying what the core problem is and how to approach combating it.

YOU CAN'T FORCE IT!

Behavior Management

This case considers the dilemma of having to negotiate between community tensions that spill into the schoolyard and manifest into conflict between seventh grade boys and the determination of the school counselor to set up models of inclusion in the school. It examines the role that a school counselor can play in resolving tensions that arise between students.

DILEMMAS IN SCHOOLS.

A CASEBOOK FOR EDUCATORS



Edited by Katherine K. Merseth



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