Arabic Language Teacher Training in the Arabian Peninsula

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Arabic language teacher training in the Arabian Peninsula: Great teachers don’t grow on trees.

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Abstract

Although teacher training has been described as the most important factor influencing students' achievement, it, however, has not been a priority for Arabic teachers in many Arab countries. With the race for knowledge economy and modernization, many Arab countries invested in English language to the detriment of Arabic. Rather than introducing national policies that adopt and celebrate Arabic as the language of a civilization that boasted a rich body of literature, scientific writings, and magnificent verse, what is witnessed nowadays is a shunning *en masse* of Arabic and adoption of English language as a misguided form of modernity. Student results on Arabic literacy standardized tests in the region have consistently been below the world average despite many educational reforms initiated over the last two decades. Those reforms focused mainly on curriculum reform and digitization of content rather than teacher training reform. Few schools around the region invest in their Arabic language teachers. This chapter will focus on a success story in terms of Arabic language teacher training in Saudi Arabia (KSA), telling the narrative and the many stories of what effective schools do in order to upskill their teachers and how quality, consistent and focused teacher training and follow-up can have an impact on students' literacy. A school in KSA whose students consistently rank highly on international and regional standardized tests of Arabic literacy will be highlighted as a case study to showcase success stories from the region in terms of teacher training. This might possibly help start the conversation that leads to the construction of a teacher training framework that could work for schools in the region.

Key Words: Professional development, Arabic language, Teaching and learning, standards-based instruction, student learning support

Total word count with Refs and Appendix: 7870

Where in the world are we?

Imagine walking down the hallways in School A. The hallways are adorned with children's art and written work in Arabic and English. Arab cultural artefacts including calligraphy pieces, artistic depictions of traditional Arab jewelry and different styles of incense burners that are on display, serve as pleasurable reminders of where in the world you are. Classrooms are visible to all via large glass windows that oversee the hallways greeting the passerby and inviting them in. No one really notices you when you walk into the Arabic language arts classroom. Every child is fully engaged in the story book the teacher is reading aloud. Classroom walls are adorned with students' work, drawings, writings and various crafts. Sight words are on side of the word wall, reading strategies' charts are hanging from a clothesline across the room and there is a reading corner that has a large number of Arabic children's literature books all arranged in buckets with a letter on each bucket depicting the books levels. Children ask questions about the book, share, tell a quick story on how this book relates to them while others ask the teacher to keep on reading. Wow, I think to myself. I want to be in this classroom enjoying learning Arabic.

Now imagine walking through School B. The hallways are wide, clean and empty. A hint of Clorox scent seeps through and fills up the air. You walk into a classroom and the teacher stops what they are doing and asks all the children to stand up and greet you in a nicely rehearsed and well-orchestrated chant. Children then go back to what they were doing, listening to the teacher explain meanings of new vocabulary words using a Power Point presentation and a video. Three boys in the back are busy playing with pencils rolling them down the desk and trying to get a perfect roll, a couple of girls in the third row are busy checking their lunchboxes and tidying their pink pencil-cases, another student is adjusting the straps on his backpack, another has his head resting on the desk struggling to stay

awake. No one asks any questions while the teacher keeps on going with their monologue and there are no activities in which children are engaged beyond listening and repeating the new vocabulary words. The walls in the class have a chart hung up with the classroom rules written in Arabic. Beyond that, no student work is on display, no word wall, no sight words and no children's art are displayed. There is no reading corner designated and no children's books to be seen anywhere around the classroom.

Both schools are real ones in which the author observed classes, and both schools are well funded and are in wealthy Arab nations. However, one leaves school A and school B with widely and wildly different sets of feelings, thoughts, ideas, and conclusions. One leaves with probably several big questions such as: what is it that makes Arabic language arts learning in school A so different and so exciting? What is the formula one can inject into all schools to make learning Arabic fun, effective and rigorous all at once? How does teacher training play into it all?

This chapter will try to take a look at all those questions and will attempt to deconstruct what is behind the success story of one K-12 school in KSA whose students have consistently ranked in the top five percent of all students in KSA. What are the components needed to have a success story in Arabic language teaching and learning that has been a quest of many schools in the region?

What is the current situation in Arabic language teaching and learning?

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international, standardized, reading comprehension test that fourth graders in primary schools take. The purpose of PIRLS is to measure students' ability to read in their first language and comprehend literary and informational texts using the following framework: (1) being able to access straightforward information directly from the text, (2) making explicit inferences, (3) explaining ideas presented

in the text, and (4) analyzing the meanings, language, and other features presented in the text (Mullis & Martin, 2012; 2013).

Results from the 2016 PIRLS test show that, out of 50 countries whose grade 4 students took the test, Egypt was ranked 49th, Morocco 48th, Kuwait 47th, Oman 46th, KSA 44th, Qatar 43rd, Bahrain 42nd, and United Arab Emirates 41st all scoring below the international scale average of 500. Countries who scored the highest on the PIRLS 2016 test were the Russian Federation, Singapore, Hong Kong, Ireland, Finland, and Poland. Grade 4 students in those high performing countries demonstrated a high ability to interpret, integrate, and evaluate reading comprehension skills and strategies (Mullis & Martin, 2012; 2013; Taha-Thomure, 2019). The PIRLS test administrators analyze five indicators affecting students' reading proficiency. Those are (1) home environment, (2) teacher education, (3) school resources for reading, (4) school climate, and (5) classroom instruction.

Scores achieved on the Arabic language reading comprehension on the PIRLS tests and other international tests including the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) are one of the indicators of the schooling system the students come from. Those scores from Arab countries reflect not only the home environment that is usually poor in literacy activities, but additionally reflect a school culture and classroom practices that do not put Arabic literacy front and center. Those scores could also be a reflection of a teacher pre-service preparation and in-service training system that has not effectively equipped Arabic language arts teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to teach reading and implement effective reading intervention plans when needed (AlDanan, 2010; Gregory et al., 2021; Obeid, 2010; Taha-Thomure, 2008; Wagner, 2017).

It has to be said, however, that recently and because of the unsatisfactory results students are consistently getting, many Arab countries have been trying to reform their educational system. One of the first things they usually tackle, probably because it is the most measurable and quickest to get done, is changing the textbooks. This, however, has not proven to be the magical solution everyone is looking for in Arabic language teaching and learning just because the issues are multifold and need to be looked at not only with a worm's eye view that focuses on one thing and one detail, but with a bird's eye view as well that can have 360 degrees idea of what's going on and what needs to be worked on.

The below section takes those 360 degrees view and describes the factors that could be affecting the quality of Arabic language teaching and learning in the most countries of the Arabian Gulf region.

The seven impediments to effective Arabic language teaching and learning

Taha-Thomure (2019) summarized the seven impediments to effective Arabic language teaching and learning as follows:

1. *Time allocated to Arabic language arts*: The first impediment is that Arabic language arts is not given the time it needs as a first language in schools. Time spent in the Arabic classroom in most schools does not exceed 45 to 50 minutes a day which is not an international best practice when it comes to learning a first language. Literature often refers to the 90-to-120-minute literacy block where teachers have ample time to engage students not only in foundational skills they need but in the various types of reading and writing that they ought to be immersed in (Underwood, 2018). Depriving students of the right of immersion in their first language means that students will not get the depth and breadth of

knowledge needed to be proficient readers and writers in their own language (Al Farra, 2011).

2. *Rigor:* It can be said that there is a general lack of rigor in the Arabic language arts classroom due to the lack of teacher expertise and challenging and interesting curricula (Taha-Thomure, 2019). Rigor is romanticized but not tolerated, while getting As on the report card is an expectation. There is a need for in-depth teacher pre-service preparation and in-service training on the most effective literacy strategies and on how to maintain rigor throughout their classes by challenging students and at the same time offering multiple scaffolding opportunities. There is also a bigger need to educate the public at large on the value of rigor and learning even when it comes at the expense of getting high grades.
3. *Uninformed school leadership:* A third impediment to learning Arabic in many Arab countries has to do with two types of school leadership that are seen in the region (Taha-Thomure, 2019). The first type is often seen in private schools, is mostly Western and uninformed about Arabic language. This leads them to frame it as "I don't know anything about the language, so I'm leaving it to the Arabic teachers". This diminishes the value of the language and sends the message that it is an afterthought, a subject that is not of importance to the administration and that English is superior to it (Taha-Thomure, 2019). The other type of school leadership are the local principals in public schools who see themselves as "paper leaders" mainly shuffling paperwork, getting through the day doing scheduling, following up on attendance and responding to the Ministry of Education (MoE) paperwork requests. Those principals are usually untrained and unempowered rendering them, thus, hardly available to offer any academic help to Arabic language arts teachers (Taha-Thomure, 2019). Both types of academic leaders are uninformed in very different

ways; the first are uninformed about Arabic language arts and as such create a 2-tiered camp within their own schools, and the second are generally uninformed due to the lack of effective preparation and training as school leaders.

4. *Every teacher is not a teacher of reading*: Very few schools see that every teacher is a teacher of reading first and a teacher of the subject-matter they teach second. This confines the presence of Arabic language to the Arabic language arts classroom only and often times sends the message to teachers, parents, and students that Arabic is not an important language that needs all teachers working together to ensure that all children are reading by the end of grade 3 (Taha-Thomure, 2019; Tsimpera-Maluch & Taha Thomure., 2021).
5. *Pre-service teacher preparation:* A fifth impediment in teaching Arabic has to do with the quality of Arabic language arts teachers, be it because of the outdated pre-service preparation programs, or the ineffective in-service training they receive or a combination of both. Teacher preparation programs are for the most part outdated, based on rote learning, with minimal field experience required (Taha-Thomure, 2017). New teachers entering the profession are not offered the opportunity of an induction year that could ease them into the system and ensure that some hand-holding, mentoring and coaching are adopted to help them acquire the needed skills as junior teachers. This results in disenfranchised young teachers who are disappointed by a system that failed them and who tend to revert back, as a result, to old teaching methods that require little time, effort and preparation (Bannayan & Al Attia, 2015; Taha-Thomure, 2017; Taha-Thomure, 2020).
6. *Curriculum Quality*: Most curricula currently available in schools are textbook-based, grammar-based and are not well aligned with the 21st century skills nor with the other subjects in school (Faour, 2012; Harb & Taha-Thomure, 2020). There is a lack of

understanding of what curriculum is. In most ministries of education, the thinking is that if textbooks are changed, then the curriculum will be alright and teaching and learning will happen. There is little attention given to the importance of aligning content and performance standards with textbook design, students' linguistic profile, teacher training, teaching methodologies and formative and summative assessments. Many ministries of education have worked hard to develop cutting edge Arabic language standards, assessments, and literature-based textbooks, however, they left off training teachers and school leaders which has only led to more confusion and a replication of the same unsatisfactory student results (Gregory et al., 2021, Thomure & Speaker, 2018). Classrooms in almost all public schools around the Arab world lack a classroom library with enough children's literature books in it and, accordingly, students are not given the tools and resources to interact with books and acquire reading not only as a skill but also as a habit (Taha-Thomure, Kreidieh & Baroudi, 2020).

7. *Teacher professional development:* According to Fullan (2007), student learning depends on ensuring that every teacher is learning and developing all the time. Few teachers of Arabic in the region receive professional development and when they do, it is mostly ineffective, irrelevant and learning is hardly ever transferred into the class (England & Taha, 2006). Curriculum development is usually overseen by curricula directorates in ministries of education who operate on a quite traditional and uninformed model of Arabic language literacy. Accordingly, Arabic language arts curricula are mostly didactic in nature, disciplinary in outlook and miss the opportunity to engage students and teachers in learning experiences that could help them all grow and get inspired using the language.

> Schools seem to be split into two camps when it comes to teacher professional development (PD). Some schools strive to train their general body of teachers well and provide them with annual and continuous professional development opportunities; however, when it comes to training their Arabic language teachers, they find themselves mostly training them in English language on issues that are irrelevant to the needs of Arabic teachers and is conducted in a language they do not fully understand (Taha-Thomure, 2017). Other schools (mostly public) do not have a well designed and targeted training plan for their teachers. Instead, all teachers are provided with two to three weeks of general training throughout the year where they attend any sessions they want, including sessions on flower-arranging, robotics, and cooking, which can be fun. However, this is an approach to PD that has wasted valuable time during which teachers could have been better supported via PD that is focused on content, pedagogy, and reflective practice (Allen, 2003; Coe et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond, Jaquith & Hamilton, 2012).

The rest of this chapter will be focused on a success story highlighting practices in a school in Saudi Arabia that has consistently ranked among the best in the kingdom on national and international Arabic literacy tests (Figure 1 below).

Methodology

Context:

Dhahran Ahliyya Schools (DAS) started as a family run, not-for-profit school in 1977 in the Eastern province of KSA Starting with 56 students and 6 teachers. Currently, DAS has two K-12 campuses with local student enrollment of 2,000 and over 200 teachers and staff (DAS website, 2021). The mission of the school found on their website is “to empower each student to be a compassionate, thinking, lifelong bilingual learner who makes a positive difference, locally

and globally" (DAS website, 2021). The school's philosophy posted on their website as well states the following:

> We believe that excellent education touches both the hearts and minds of students, developing their intellectual, personal, emotional, and social skills to learn and work in a rapidly changing and globalizing world. Moreover, it should provide them with a sense of belonging in their own country while also an openness to their roles as citizens of the world, committed to taking action to help make their world a better place (DAS website, 2021)

Methodology

A qualitative approach has been employed in this study, and that is using, namely, focus groups and interviews to solicit data from key stakeholders in the school due to the wealth of information about the nature of instruction that such a method can yield (Bogdan & Biklen,1998). Four focus groups were conducted including parents, students, student support teachers, and administrators (Flores & Alonsa,1995). In addition, a one-on-one interview was conducted with the head literacy coach in the school due to their wealth of knowledge and long 40-year tenure at the school. Each focus group and interview lasted about 90 minutes. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Data was then analyzed and based on the analysis seven major themes emerged. The researcher developed a semi-structured focus group and interview guideline or protocol that was shared with the school beforehand (example is provided in Appendix A). The research procedures upheld the ethical principles required of qualitative research where the participants agreed in writing to participate in the study. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, the focus groups and interviews were conducted with respectful attentiveness and all identifying information were omitted (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

Participants

Focus and interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks. All the meetings were scheduled with the help of the school administration. All meetings were conducted online. The below table (3.1) summarizes stakeholders interviewed and numbers of participant *per group.*

Stakeholders	N of participants	Type of interview
Parents	6	Focus Group
Students	12	Focus Group
Academic Administrators/leaders	4	Focus Group
Teacher Trainers/literacy coaches	7	Focus Group
Head Literacy Coach	1	Interview

Table 3.1: Participants

Data Analysis

Data collected from all participants were analyzed based on the guiding questions. Responses were grouped based on those guiding questions and then the data was organized reduced into seven main emerging themes with each theme given a distinct title. Analysis was then done on each theme looking deeply into the ideas that participants shared on that specific idea. Finally, all the data collected were reviewed again to ensure that all ideas linked to the seven major themes were included. Below are the seven main themes emerging out of participants' stories: 1) Continuous teacher training and coaching, 2) Knowing what to teach and how to teach: Curriculum and learning resources, 3)

Administrative support, 4) Student reading support, 5) What do students say? 6) What do parents say? 7) Cultivating common understandings.

Findings & Discussion

1- This section presents the main findings based on the seven main themes mentioned above: Continuous *teacher training & coaching*

Research suggests that time allocated to teacher coaching inside classrooms may allow teachers to internalize the new classroom practices acquired and help them truly master the rationale and practices of the intervention introduced (Coe et al., 2014; Hindman & Wasik, 2012). Being aware of the importance of coaching, DAS has trained Arabic literacy coaches whose main focus is working with teachers and ensuring that each teacher is acquiring a set of effective strategies and skills that can be implemented in the classroom. In the interview with the head coach at the school, they mentioned that one of the main things that permeate throughout the school is a belief in change. This belief is engrained in teachers from the day they join the school so that they know that change is expected, valued and that change is a constant at the school.

The head coach interviewed for the purpose of this study has served the school for 40 years. They are a sharp, resilient, and well-read 80-year-old powerhouse who have worked with hundreds of teachers during their long tenure at the school so far. The head coach mentioned that teacher training and coaching at the school starts with working with all teachers on classroom and learning management. According to the head coach: “There is a no learning that can happen without first ensuring that everyone in class knows the rules, respects the rules and is ready to learn and help others learn as well. This can only be achieved if every teacher is able to manage learning well in their classroom”.

Other themes emerging from discussions with seven literacy coaches at the school included the following:

a- Coaches in the school are trained to accept teachers as they are and help them develop and change based on common goals and not on personal preferences. Teachers come to the school without sufficient preparation in college; however, if they are hired, then the school needs to invest in them and work with them to change their classroom practices.

b- Coaches are aware that any change in classroom practices has to be informed by research, evidence and studying what is happening in international best practices.

c- Coaches work with teachers on a standards-based instructional philosophy, where standards rather than textbooks are the driving force behind all learning. Textbooks and resources are used to ensure that the standards and performance indicators specified for each grade level are achieved by each and every student.

Coaches in the school work with the teachers but are focused on student learning as an evidence of teacher learning. They not only review lesson plans with teachers, observe classes and co-teach alongside teachers, but are responsible, as well, for checking that the school is sincerely following the standards and curriculum in place. Coaches get continuous training on Arabic content, pedagogy, and leadership skills.

Coaches at DAS work with teachers on unpacking the standards into mini skills and strategies that students need to acquire and they study the curriculum together in order to reach common understandings on what each performance indicator means and how it can best be achieved (Dufour, 2004).

The whole school, according to coaches' focus groups, reflects on students' results and plans professional development, instruction and intervention plans based on those results. PD takes several forms at the school. The first is by having external international experts visit the school and conduct workshops on targeted topics that are part of the strategic vision of the school. The second form of PD happens throughout the year via workshops that are internally conducted by the supervisors, coaches, and academic leaders who all focus on strategies and skills that are part of a well thought training agenda for that year. Another way of training is through having teachers attend conferences and come back to school to share what they have learned. In addition, the school has established a not-for-profit publishing house that translates into Arabic new and relevant research published in English on topics that are related to the work done in the school (literacy, numeracy, reading comprehension, early reading, differentiation, teacher professional development and other topics). DAS has monthly scheduled discussion groups within the school to discuss and reflect on ideas teachers, coaches and supervisors read in those translated best practice books.

The head coach at the school explained during the interview that teaching practices are continuously updated and revised to be in line with the needs of teachers, students and in line with what research and evidence from data tell them. The head coach added that they work closely with their teachers to ensure that they remain flexible, willing to be life-long learners and that they understand that using one teaching technique or method will not work for all students all the time. They added that they work with the teachers on ensuring that they have impeccable learning and classroom management skills and that they are able to support the learning of all students. Coaches work with teachers in the classroom on an almost daily basis, the head coach said. They plan lessons together, find interesting and engaging resources together, look at student results and work

together through the professional learning community in the school on coming up with intervention plans and ways to help teachers address some of the challenges they face.

2- Knowing what to teach and how to teach: Curriculum and learning resources

Academic leaders and the head coach at DAS emphasized that in every Arabic language arts class at DAS, students have to engage on a daily basis with reading texts that are appropriate to students' proficiency levels and writing about what they read. Coaches in the school, as well, are expected and encouraged to finesse their practices by reading and learning on a daily basis. They, in turn, take the new concepts learned to teachers they work with.

The school adopts the International Baccalaureate program where the whole school from preK-12 is based on that educational philosophy. Additionally, the school has adopted standards-based instruction and the total integration between the themes taught in Arabic and English language arts. This integration between the two languages, one of the supervisors mentioned, allows teachers to talk together, plan together and share best practices and resources that can help them achieve the goals set for each theme they work on. In Arabic, they work on thematic units in addition to introducing the various literary genres starting in primary school all the way through high school (AlHashmi et al., 2022).

3- Administrative support

Principals at DAS are not considered administrative leaders, but are mostly expected to be chief academic leaders who are heavily involved in all academic decisions, directions and practices adopted in the classroom. Academic leaders are continuously following up on student progress and have weekly meetings with supervisors, coaches, and teachers to discuss classroom practices,

student progress, and to find ways to best help teachers and students achieve the standards and goals set for each grade level. Academic leaders agreed in a focus group they participated in that the main question that everyone asks in their school is: Did students learn? That question is the focal point around which the whole school revolves.

The academic leaders added that parents are considered partners at their school. Parents receive weekly communications explaining the themes their children are working on. Parents are also invited to workshops that aim at raising their awareness to the ways in which they can help their children at home. They are given tips on how to help improve their children's literacy doing fun and engaging activities. Academic leaders added that the school encourages parents to read for and with their children at home and sends them ideas and tips on how to do that.

4- Student reading support

The school has a dedicated unit for student academic support that includes among others four Arabic support teachers. The supervisor in charge of the unit explained that students are referred to the unit for reading intervention based on a diagnostic test that all students have to take prior to starting a new unit. If students are found below the needed standard for reading and comprehension, the teacher refers them to the intervention unit who study their portfolio and meet with the parents to ensure that they are aware of their child's reading level and ensure that they are able to support their child at home in ways that would be beneficial and targeted. An intervention plan is then designed and implemented with the child within small groups for eight weeks. The child is evaluated again after eight weeks and results are discussed in the presence of the grade level supervisor, the teacher, and the parents. If the student is ready to go back to their regular class, then the intervention has succeeded, and the goals have been met. If the student is not yet

reading at grade level, another intervention plan is drawn with the approval of the parents. The reading specialist in the academic support unit works with the student on a one-to-one basis or might work with two students at a time. The intervention plan usually consists of smart mini lessons that break down the needed reading skills and strategies into smaller chunks that the specialist works with the students on. Lots of visual and auditory materials are used to help engage the student with the skills needed in Arabic. Texts chosen for the intervention usually target similar themes to those used in the classroom which helps form a connection between the intervention plan and what is happening in the classroom. Intervention might be extended until the end of the term or until the student has learned the needed skills to enable them to work at their grade level.

One of the literacy coaches interviewed mentioned that support for all students is also available via the vast number of resources and Arabic children's literature available in the school and classroom libraries. Making those resources available and accessible to all students with the expectation that all students will be readers and ensuring that there is time in the classroom dedicated to engaging in all types of reading is a message that permeates throughout the school.

5- *What do students say?*

Twelve students from various grade levels were interviewed (ranging from grade six to grade eleven). One of the recurrent themes emerging from students' focus groups is their awareness of the importance of being proficient in Arabic language. Students said that they find the curriculum they work with at DAS interesting and filled with texts from various genres and varied topics. The curriculum is focused on reading novels and articles that can be at times challenging but that teachers are always available to help scaffold learning for students. Most students agreed that they feel they have acquired the needed skills to analyze any text that they

read including translated texts. Most students interviewed said that they have a close relationship with their teachers, that teachers were caring and communicated with them after class. Students added that teachers follow up with them to ensure that they are indeed learning and acquiring all the skills expected of their grade level. One student said that their teacher consistently suggests titles of books that might be of interest to them, and that the teacher is always available to answer any questions students have. All students interviewed agreed that they feel they are indeed bilingual and that their Arabic and English skills allow them to use both languages comfortably to read, write and analyze high level texts. Most students mentioned that homework is not extensive nor hard and it is focused on specific tasks or skills that they need to practice. A female student in Grade 10 said: "We are proud to belong to this school and this community. We value social responsibility, serving our community and preserving our language and heritage".

6- *What do parents say?*

One theme that re-emerged in focus groups with parents from the school was their satisfaction with the school for focusing on Arabic reading comprehension, communication skills and keeping parents informed. Parents interviewed said that the school teaches Arabic in unconventional ways and does not focus on memorization and rote learning. Parents highlighted the importance of children's literature and the well- written curriculum the school uses, in addition to the clarity they have when it comes to what their children are learning and what they are expected to do to help their children with Arabic language.

Parents sounded pleased with the fact that their children are becoming indeed bilingual and proficient users of both Arabic and English. Parents mentioned that their children's teachers are well trained and know what kind of homework to send back home. They mentioned that teachers

are focused on teaching reading especially in the lower grades and ensuring that all students are readers early on (McCoach et al., 2006; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). Two parents mentioned that the school makes Arabic language a priority not only in the Arabic language classroom but across all other subjects as well and that this was unlike any other private or international school they have seen. “The school, according to them, doesn’t undermine the children’s first language like other schools do”, one parent said. Parents mentioned that there are classroom libraries in each classroom that the teachers actually utilize and that this has contributed greatly to their children’s engagement with reading. There are reading contests being announced regularly, achievement certificates to encourage reading in addition to awards and other incentives for reading and for encouraging their kids to orally present to an audience. Parents mentioned that they are regularly informed by the teachers about their children’s progress and that teachers come to the meetings informed with evidence from their children’s work. Parents added that teachers and the school administration display great flexibility and listen to their concerns with great care. Parents mentioned that their high schoolers prefer to read in English because of the vast choice of interesting resources and literature they have available to them, but that they are still proficient and capable in their first language.

7- Cultivating common understandings

One of the recurrent themes in the interviews we had with the literacy coaches, academic leaders, parents and students that kept on revisiting is the notion of using a common language and having common understandings. All parties the researchers spoke to understood that the Arabic curriculum they have was a standards-driven one. Even students used words like standards and performance indicators in the focus group. All teachers took part in unpacking the standards the

head coach said in the interview and as such they become partners in constructing and building the Arabic language arts curriculum at DAS. Moreover, academic leaders, coaches and teachers all took part in building the Arabic language arts scope and sequence based on those content standards which helped all of them become closely familiar with the curriculum and shared in planning it. This community work allowed them as well to speak the same jargon, have a similar understanding of the terms and approach adopted to teaching Arabic language arts at DAS. This focus on professional learning communities (Senge, 1990) and reflective practice (England & Taha, 2006) at DAS was evident in all the focus groups and interviews conducted. Weekly professional learning communities (PLC) meetings are held across every grade level in which teachers, coaches and school leaders discuss common challenges, clarify understandings, and reflect on classroom practice.

Conclusion: is there a formula?

When ten of the academic leaders and coaches at DAS were asked to rank their school's Arabic language arts program out of ten, the average ranking they gave was a seven. When asked why they ranked themselves as average when their Arabic language arts program is one of the best in KSA, if not in the region, the response was that they are not happy with all that they have done and that there is so much more to be done in the future. This mentality of growth and continuous development could be one of the main reasons behind the secret of this school's success. Contrast that with a primary school the researcher visited and observed less than mediocre Arabic lessons in. When the researcher asked the principal of this latter school afterwards, what kind of PD do they think the Arabic language arts teachers might need, the response was "Nothing, our teachers are well trained and don't need any more PD!"

In effective schools, Arabic language is not seen as a language that is taught only at a specific time of the day, but rather it is looked at as an overarching umbrella that extends to all other subjects in the school and that everyone from staff to parents, administrators, leaders, and students are aware of. Using common themes and strategies in Arabic and English have also helped bring awareness to different ways of thinking about language arts and helped integrate best practices from both languages for the benefit of students.

One of the academic leaders at DAS said that: "Success is a series of small keys you empower everyone with in schools that learn. It's a collaborative relationship where we influence all teachers around us and get influenced by them". This was a recurrent theme heard from all the people interviewed at DAS. Everyone in the school rallies around those common understandings. Understanding that student learning comes first, understanding that teaching does not necessarily mean that learning has happened, understanding that everyone in the school, including parents are all one community with one goal that they all work towards were key elements that colored the main story the researcher heard.

Knowledge of practice at DAS is constructed while in practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Effective schools operate under the assumption that all teachers need to have knowledge, skills and attitudes that will ensure that all students will learn and be able to succeed. Rasmussen, Hopkins & Fitzpatrick (2004) suggested that it is not necessarily the quantity of PD and its format that make teachers effective, but rather it is attention to coherence, working with research and evidence-based practices and teacher and school leaders' capacity building that need to be emphasized. Whether the DAS model can be replicated with success in another Arab context is another question that might need further research. The resources needed, amount of reskilling and upskilling needed on all levels at the schools and the patience to see results are all challenges that

will need to be available for such a model to be successful and replicable to some degree. However, many schools in the region with similar resources and dedication might be able to replicate the DAS model with the variation that any replication necessarily entail. This success story might inspire others school systems to look deeper into what type of a teacher training framework can work for them based on knowledge from the field and the challenges that face Arabic language teaching and learning. This chapter is a call to all stakeholders to consider a teacher training framework for the Arab region that is focused on both content and pedagogical knowledge, that is long term, cultivates common understandings, and is built around student support and early intervention.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Discussions—Administrators

<< Check that the session is recording >>

1. *Welcome*

    a. Welcome participants to this focus group and thank them for their time.

    b. Explain the purpose of this paper and that this focus group is one of several we are gathering data for this study.

    c. Explain that we are interested in hearing their views on this topic based on their experiences.

2. *Introductions*

    a. Introduce the moderator, then give a brief on the researcher/author of the paper

    b. Ask participants to introduce themselves by saying their name, and what they do (role at the school), how many years they have in this role

3. *Ethical standards and procedures*

    a. Explain that this is a confidential discussion and that the information collected will be used anonymously as part of the review. No names will be used in the review.

    b. Inform participants that we are recording this session to help us analyze the focus group discussion, but that all data will be stored securely and destroyed after the study has been completed.

    c. Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions being posed, and that we are very interested in their thoughts and ideas.

4. *Main questions and supplementary prompts*

Main questions	Supplementary prompts

1. How do you, as an administrator, see your role working with Arabic Language teachers?	
2. Can you give me three reasons why you think the Arabic program is successful at DAS?	
Elaborate using the following examples	○ Teachers doing their job well? ○ Parents following up continuously? ○ Selection of books / Curriculum? ○ How much do you think the level of Arabic Language teaching is important compared to other subjects?
2. Teaching Strategies and Resources	
Elaborate using the following examples	○ What is the instructional linguistic approach used at your school? ○ How does the school encourage students to use Arabic language outside the classroom? ○ Do you have classroom libraries? ○ What resources and materials do you provide for teachers to use other than the textbooks? ○ Do you access international resources? Such as reports on new teaching techniques?
3. Assessments and student support	
Elaborate using the following examples	○ How are students assessed? ○ How are weaker students supported? ○ How do you assess teacher performance and how do you give feedback to teachers?
4. Professional support and training	

Elaborate using the following examples	○ How do you decide what training your Arabic teachers need? ○ Does the school invest in continuous PD and training? How frequently do you provide trainings for the Arabic teachers? ○ How frequently do you as administrators receive training?