



Independent Schools: Through the eyes of teachers

Teachers are the backbone of K-12 education reform, and any reform is effective only when teachers become active participants. “Education for a New Era” interviewed a number of kindergarten teachers working at Independent Schools to highlight the challenges and rewards of the transition to a new educational model. The teachers offered their views on tailor-made curricula, innovative teaching methods, and adjusting to a different contractual relationship with Operators.



As with major change in any field, Qatar's educational reform drive has generated uncertainty, particularly among teachers at the Independent Schools who are daily on the frontlines of implementing the new policies. Even at the kindergarten level, the reforms have altered the way teachers teach and the way students study. While that can be unnerving, many of the teachers who have ridden out the uncertainty report they enjoy working in an atmosphere of greater flexibility

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and innovation -- and see gratifying results among their students.

The transition from more traditional methods has not always been easy. Teachers say the changes have increased their work load, at least in the short term, as they tailor curriculum content and search for the most appropriate learning materials.

"In the conventional system, we depended on memorization and recitation as teaching methods but now there is a phenomenal change. We no longer rely on a single textbook as we use multiple learning tools including games, activities, field trips, and so forth," says a kindergarten teacher at one of the Independent Schools.

That requires increased professional training, especially

in the start-up days and for teachers who will deal with students with special needs, kindergarten teachers say. A teaching assistant from Al-Qadeseya Model Independent School for Boys warns that schools which fail to provide such support to their teachers can "face problems especially at the beginning of operation. Some schools lack adequately equipped facilities to facilitate teaching, especially toys and educational tools for children with special needs."

Parents also have an important role to play, teachers say. They must become familiar with the new system, and actively support the academic activities of their children.

"Parental involvement is vital. Parents need to learn more about the Independent School system and the new teaching methods," says a teacher from the Al-Rafaa Primary School.

The relationship between teachers and operators -- the managers contracted by the Supreme Education Council to operate Independent Schools -- has required adjustment by many teachers, more accustomed to the job stability and predictability of public-sector employment. Some ask for greater transparency in the contracts between teachers and operators, and encourage an extension of contract terms, which is now one year. One teacher expressed concern that operators would hire unqualified teachers for subjects requiring specialized skills, and that a shortage of qualified teachers had forced some educators to teach three or four subjects. Another kindergarten teacher urged the Education Institute to hold open forums with Independent School teachers to address their concerns.

Despite the difficulties, and inevitable complaints, many teachers say the changes have made their jobs more rewarding. "We began the year with no clear plans or objectives but we have gradually acclimatized to the new system. Being a kindergarten teacher, I see that my students enjoy and respond to the new methods of learning using games and movement much better than the memorization method," says a teacher at one of the Independent Schools. "Its success is even evident from the number of parents seeking to enroll their children in the Independent Schools."

A teacher from Al-Rafaa Primary School recalls how, after graduating from Qatar's College of Education, she was asked to teach the very same curriculum she had been taught -- 16 years earlier. "The Independent School system is unique in that it makes the learning and teaching process very engaging, where we utilize various tools and resources. I believe that a textbook-based system is rather limiting to teachers who are to adopt best practices in teaching methods and to students who are deprived of the opportunity to explore other resources."

Hameeda Al-Jarmoozi, a former teacher for the Ministry of Education, is currently teaching at Al-Qadeseya Model Independent School for Boys. "We faced a lot of challenges and pressure at the beginning of the academic year and on more than one occasion, I considered going back to the Ministry. Towards the end of the year, I noticed a lot of improvement among my students academically and in their attitude and behavior. The students became more receptive towards the new learning method, they began to be more engaged, enjoy learning and tended to explore various learning resources on their own without depending on their parents." Ms. Al-Jarmoozi notes that the reforms offer teachers and schools greater leeway in many ways. "Without having a specific syllabus to follow, the school has the flexibility to obtain various learning resources to meet individual

students' needs. I, on the other hand, have come to know my students better and this atmosphere gives me the flexibility and freedom to select curriculum content that best suits the needs of each of my students."

The results are apparent, says Ms. Al-Jarmoozi. "My lesson plans and materials are tailored to meet the goals and objectives of the subject and it's thrilling to see mothers watch their children progress. I can sense a feeling of appreciation among them."

"It is gratifying to see mothers pleased with their children's performance"

