

Becoming a Teacher in Saudi Arabia: Female Role Models and Mentors

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Abstract: This autobiographical narrative explores the way in which stories about the author's early life informed her experiences as a teacher and a researcher. Having always thought that becoming a teacher was about pursuing a personal project, she discovered that it also involved and impacted other people along the way.

Keywords: mentor, Saudi Arabia, role model, narrative, teaching and learning, autobiography

The idea of narrative as life story includes the notion of teaching and learning beyond formal schooling (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). In Saudi Arabia, girls' lives outside of school have been particularly influenced by male family members, such as fathers, brothers, and husbands (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015). Abalkhail and Allan (2015) showed in their study that most of the women who participated from Saudi Arabia indicated that men in their family impacted their future success. However, in my life experiences, women—including my mother and my teachers—have had a huge impact on my career choice to become a teacher and on my choice to enter a PhD program in curriculum studies. Having women mentors helped in different ways, such as reducing isolation and navigating the complexity of a professional environment, especially in the context of Saudi Arabia, where women mostly study and work in separate sections from men (Alharbi & Renwick, 2017; Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016). By applying relational cultural theory (RCT), Alvarez and Lazzari (2016) examined the importance of improving the mentoring relationship among women who share personal and professional lives in the same context. The RCT theory focuses on human development in connection with others who share the same beliefs and advantages of the relationship (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016). By employing RCT to my life experiences, I have connected with other women in Saudi Arabia—both in and outside of school—who have and continue to support my professional and educational future.

Educational experiences occur in school and outside of school (Brinia, 2015; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011), where mentoring female students plays a key role in their future life in the context of Saudi Arabia. Based on this view, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) define the education process as “a narrative of experience that grows and strengthens a person's capabilities to cope with life” (p. 27). One of the important tools in a narrative reflection of an individual's knowledge and practices is an autobiography. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), “autobiography is the telling of our own history” (p. 37), and it is a useful tool for reflection, thinking back, and understanding yourself. In this manuscript, I construct a retrospective narrative from fragments of my autobiography, focusing on how I became a teacher. I use fictitious names to preserve the anonymity of the important role models and mentors who so strongly influenced me.

Growing up as a girl in Saudi Arabia with only two career options, which included nursing and teaching, provided very limited variety for making a choice. Being a teacher always seemed culturally ideal, as it does not involve any men. Saudi Arabian working environments are always separated between women and men, especially in schools where education systems divide men

and women. Boys study in schools where male teachers teach them, and girls study in schools where only female teachers and administrators are allowed (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). For most families, being a teacher is the desired career for girls. Having grown up in a family where I was often encouraged and facilitated to nurture my dream, I spent most of my childhood role-playing a teacher with other kids, hoping that one day I would become a teacher. I am the first-born child in a family of five children, and my mother, being a teacher herself, was the first teacher I had in my life. She was the first inspiration for me to become a teacher. Her impact on me has been enduring, and the lessons that she taught me continue to powerfully influence my current life as a mother and a teacher. Within the Saudi Arabian culture, to which I belong, women are responsible for all household chores, including looking after the kids, which is something I find to be too much for women alone. As the oldest daughter, my mother often relied on me to help her with housework and with teaching my siblings. She confided in me a lot, and I wanted to do anything I could to help. Often I took it upon myself to take charge of my younger brother and sisters.

Story Fragment One: Colors and Worksheets

I was in 5th grade, and my favorite subject was art. My art teacher's way of teaching, self-presentation, and approach to students inspired most girls in my class who wanted to become teachers. It was generally known based on the curriculum categorization in Saudi Arabia that girls could take up only one of the two prescribed careers, either nursing or teaching. My art teacher was Mrs. Jameela. She was tall and elegant, and she had a model-like poise and a warm and caring heart. Also, she was open-minded and did not restrict us when we wanted to ask questions in class. She instilled in us a sense of self-worth, and she often encouraged us to work independently, particularly when we returned home at the end of each day. That year, the paintings I made of my school, a flower, and a 5th-grade girl were most outstanding. I think it was in Mrs. Jameela's class that I learned drawing, shading, and painting, which I continued to practice at home every evening when I returned from school. When I told Mrs. Jameela that I had my own painting stand at home in my room and that I could teach my brothers and sisters, she gave me some paints, colors, and worksheets from the art room at my school for me to teach at home.

My experience in elementary school was full of happiness, and I had perfect moments. My school was an all-girls school, and all my teachers were women, including the school's principal, workers in the administration, cafeteria workers, and cleaners. Thus, the norm in Saudi Arabian schools is that boys attend different schools in different buildings and girls have their own schools. I remember most of the teachers that I had in elementary school, and I had positive memories about them, but Mrs. Jameela was one of the most memorable teachers. Growing up as a girl in Saudi Arabia, I wore a school-green uniform, and other girls did too. Most of our teachers were mothers, and I think they looked at us as their children, as did Mrs. Jameela.

Nine years later I was a university student studying for a Bachelor of Education degree in Saudi Arabia. My sister, who was nine years old at that time, wanted me to go with her to her teacher because she had lost her book and was afraid to go to school that day. The next morning, I went with her. My sister introduced me to her teacher, and she was Mrs. Jameela, who I knew very

well. Mrs. Jameela said to my sister, “I know your older sister; she was one of my best students when she was in grade five.” She looked at my sister and said, “You too are a good student, and I know you lost your book because you left it in the classroom last weekend, and I kept it for you until you were able to collect it.” I could not believe that Mrs. Jameela still remembered I was a student in her class. I felt happy and proud of myself—especially in front of my young sister—that one of my elementary teachers had an encouraging memory about me. I was relieved when I found that my sister did not lose her book and Mrs. Jameela had kept it in her locker. I was thinking of Mrs. Jameela as a teacher, how she looked after her students even after they left the class to make sure she collected their belongings for them when they came back the next school day. What Mrs. Jameela did was not typical work for teachers to do; I remembered most teachers left the class before students, especially at the end of the day.

Six years later my family moved to a new house, and a neighbor invited my family to their son’s wedding party. I went with my mother. At the party, I saw a very familiar face—Mrs. Jameela! She was living in the same neighborhood. She had also been the 5th-grade teacher of the bride. She was delighted to see me, and I was amazed that she still remembered me. Not only that, but she also asked me about my sister. When she was asked to deliver a short speech, she talked well of her former students and mentioned me in particular. At that time, I graduated from the university, and I applied for a teaching position in public school, but there were few jobs available, so I decided to teach adult workshops about strategies for a successful job interview and developing Microsoft Office skills.

I hope that in my own teaching career I have had a sharp memory of my students and the ability to give my students their worth and affirmation like Mrs. Jameela gave me. Although now much older, she had a good memory of her former students, affirmed them, and made them feel their self-worth. She strongly believed that students drew upon their cultural background and that they brought with them their own knowledge to class. They were endowed with intelligence from which they drew their experiences and histories and progressed in learning at different rates. She took the time to get to know us and to understand each one’s strengths, and she always remembered us whenever and wherever she met us. She had pride in her former students, particularly those who were brilliant. She made us feel important and gave us the courage to believe that we could succeed. And, she encouraged us to work toward achieving our dreams.

Story Fragment Two: Teaching New Technology

My mother always wanted me to gain new knowledge and skills, so when I was 16 years old she registered me in a perfect computer institution in Saudi Arabia, which was run by a private organization. She bought me a personal computer so I could practice whenever I wanted. I remembered everyone in my family and my friends came to see it. My mother encouraged me to teach my friends the computer skills I had acquired. I was pleased and excited that I could teach people new skills that I had just learned. I got a summer job at a nongovernmental women’s community center in my neighborhood in Saudi Arabia. The center offered different classes about a variety of topics, such as textile and sewing, painting, English language, computer skills, and cooking for women and girls. At that time the computer was new technology, and very few people had the skills to use it, so it was an excellent opportunity for me to teach there because

there was a demand for teachers in that subject area. At the community center, there were some adults in the summer computer class that I taught. I became passionate about sharing my knowledge and newly acquired skills. I soon realized that in order for them to learn well, I needed patience, as I had to repeat the steps over and over again before they could master how to open the computer and start typing in Microsoft Word. I was soon talking to my mother about the friends I taught as my students. My students were excited to learn and visit me more often. Sometimes, I let them try some group computer games as another technique of learning computer skills.

Remembering this experience at the community center brought back memories about the last year of my teacher education program in the 10th grade. As part of completing my degree, I had to do a practicum. Amani, one of my 10th-grade students, was always bothering her friends in class. Her talking distracted them all the time as I taught home economics class. I asked other teachers if they had a similar experience, and they all told me she was doing the same in their classes and that she was quite distracting. I became attentive to her in order to help her concentrate and to allow others to learn. Whenever we had a cooking class in the kitchen, I made Amani my assistant because she had told me that cooking was her favorite subject. I also arranged some group activities during the cooking class, which always made Amani fully engaged as she, together with me, had to constantly monitor what students were doing. Amani became a different student from what I had known her to be; she became composed and very focused.

I met Amani a few years ago at an elementary education teachers workshop at the regional education office, and that office is a branch of the ministry of education in the region. The primary responsibilities for the regional education office are supervising public and private schools in the region, monitoring both revenues and expenditures, managing the ministry of education property and facilities, providing curriculum material and school equipment, and offering different workshops on teaching and learning. She was thrilled to see me; however, I did not remember her at the beginning. She was a student at the teaching college, and she was working on her dream to become a teacher.

My experiences with teaching my friends computer skills and teaching Amani taught me the importance of creating interest and using a variety of techniques. In the computer class, I included computer games that would appeal to 10th graders. Figuring out how to create interest also influenced my teaching of home economics. It was so easy in home economics to get caught up in the experiential learning of hands-on activities. While this was of great importance, I also tried to know what it was that distracted students from concentrating and from effective learning and to tap into their potential to ensure that I could get the best out of them and they could get the best out of themselves. I have also learned that being kind, nurturing, and caring toward students is part of being a good teacher.

Story Fragment Three: Teaching Roots

During my last year of middle school, a teacher asked me if I could help one girl, who was a relative of mine, learn how to go about using her exercise book. She was given an exercise

package on different subjects, like math, Arabic grammar, reading, and writing, to take with her over the holidays. I was very proud of myself that my teacher could rely on me to help another student with her exercise books. My family allowed the girl to come to my house over the holidays so I could understand her difficulties and explain to her how to go about her prep work. She explained to me that during class she felt uncomfortable, the teachers talked fast, and she could not keep up with the class, which eventually caused her to feel frustrated. My mother bought me a whiteboard and pens to facilitate my teaching. I was delighted to do this “job.”

One day in 12th grade, my teacher had a cold and could not complete the history lesson, so she asked the class if any of us could carry on for her. I was not sure if I could teach my classmates anything meaningful. The class was silent and nobody seemed to be ready to teach. I became brave and raised my hand, indicating that I wanted to try. The teacher invited me to the front. I started by asking a question to involve the rest of the class and to see how capable I would be at controlling the class. After inviting four to five students to respond, it was time to end the lesson. After the class was over, my teacher called me and said, “Hmm, I can see you have some potential for being a good teacher one day. You have the basic skills.” I was excited after the feedback I got from my history teacher, and that made me more comfortable about getting positive comments.

I have found that mothers and teachers are such great role models for young people. I believe a mother is her kids’ first teacher, as my mother was in my life. There is always something about a teacher that is inspiring. It may be the way the teacher talks, teaches, walks, or cares. Having role models in Mrs. Jameela and my mother, along with such opportunities as role-playing a teacher, the practicum, and helping my relative learn how to go about her prep work, nurtured my dream toward becoming a teacher. I notice that sometimes students pursue a career, but they do so with hardly any assurance that they have any potential for it. Tapping into students’ possibilities and bringing that potential to their awareness can give students insights into their prospects and capabilities regarding possible careers. This goes hand-in-hand with appraisal. Besides, providing hands-on activities can also bring students’ aspirations closer to real-life situations so they can fantasize and keep pursuing the goal.

Lessons Learned

I discovered that a narrative that includes an autobiographical approach helped me by looking back at my life, and I can say that my desire to become a teacher has been nurtured over time and facilitated by my family and my teachers, classmates, relatives, and other related events. There have been meaningful outcomes along the journey to achieving my dream of becoming a teacher, namely the relationships that I have had in my life with women who were role models, particularly my mother and my teachers. Currently, I am a PhD student in Canada, and I have a dream to work in any one of the women’s universities in Saudi Arabia. My success thus far was achievable because I had several supports and opportunities in school and at home, all of which provided a safe environment in which my development was nurtured. Recently, Saudi Arabia has been under a reform economically and educationally, and I think women should “learn to relate to one another and treat each other as sources of knowledge” (Smith, 1987, p. 35). I hope that understanding the relevance and usefulness of developing a connection in schools,

universities, and workplaces will improve the mentoring relationship among women in Saudi Arabia.

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