

Evidence-based supervision at the middle tier in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan



© EDT. Jordanian supervisor celebrates graduation from Evidence-Based Supervision programme.

To improve teaching and learning outcomes, teachers and head teachers need whole-system support to build professionalism and enhance their practice. Roles at the middle tier of education systems, or those professionals working between the school and central level, offer unique capacities to facilitate collaboration, broker knowledge, scale innovations, and provide instructional direction to school-level practitioners.

This research, conducted as a collaborative partnership between IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust (EDT), explores how middle-tier instructional leaders can become a nexus for change to improve the quality of education. It focuses on highlighting promising practices globally and is designed to draw out insights and lessons for both policy-makers and practitioners.

IIEP and EDT conducted case studies in five jurisdictions – Delhi (India), Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai (China), and Wales – where new roles have been created or existing roles re-oriented towards coaching and support. The studies explored the professional practices and perceived impacts of instructional leaders, and the enabling factors present in the systems in which they work.

This country note shows how existing middle-tier supervisor roles in Jordan were strengthened to include a greater emphasis on teacher support, coaching, and formative evaluation.

BOX 1

Methodology

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, this case study drew upon substantial existing primary and secondary data from 2019 to 2020. These included an end-of-programme evaluation conducted in 2019; focus groups and interviews with 12 supervisors, 16 teachers, and 12 students; and surveys from supervisors and teachers. Additionally, three remote interviews with programme staff were conducted, and secondary sources, including programme materials, monitoring and evaluation data, and policy documentation, were drawn upon.

Country context: Supervisors as instructional leaders

Beginning in 2015, the Jordan Ministry of Education (MoE) began placing a greater emphasis on their middle-tier supervisors providing enhanced developmental support for teachers. While the role of a supervisor had always combined the evaluation of a teacher's performance with support and

development, the changes in 2015 mandated that all supervisors take on increased teacher training and coaching and establish communities of practice (MoE, 2015).

In the context of these reforms in 2015, the MoE sought the assistance of EDT, in collaboration with the Queen Rania Teacher Academy (QRTA), to pilot a programme that would bring the MoE’s vision of the supervisor role to life and demonstrate proof of concept at small scale. This country note studies this innovative pilot programme, which offered professional development to 46 English language supervisors across Jordan, working across 230 schools and reaching 53,000 students between 2017 and 2019.

Reflecting another national priority, namely supporting teachers of refugee students, all selected supervisors had teachers of refugees in their caseload. As of 2017, Jordan was hosting 233,000 school-aged refugees as a result of the conflict in Syria (UNHCR, 2018). This resulted in hundreds of schools operating on a double-shift system, with the MoE hiring

numerous new teachers to meet demand. Officials hoped to better utilize supervisors to support these mostly inexperienced new teachers.

Programme overview: Strengthening professional practice using the Evidence-Based Supervision model

EDT designed an innovative methodology, namely Evidence-Based Supervision, inspired by practices developed in the health sector, and used this as the foundation for the professional development programme offered to supervisors. Evidence-based practice in healthcare involves the patient in both the process (often using motivational interviewing – an approach akin to coaching), and the evaluation of the intervention’s effectiveness. Similarly, the Evidence-Based Supervision programme taught supervisors to work with teachers to develop their teaching and improve learning outcomes. At its heart is the idea that supervisors should help teachers understand how their teaching practices affect student learning and coach them to use

Figure 1. Evidence-Based Supervision model used in the initiative



Source: Programme materials

classroom techniques based on international teaching effectiveness research.

In the Evidence-Based Supervision model, supervisors are taught to give clear diagnostic feedback to teachers based on lesson observations in a four-stage cycle, namely: (1) diagnosis; (2) selection of an appropriate pedagogical intervention; (3) coaching the teacher to put the interventions into practice; and (4) evaluation (Churches, Dommett, and Devonshire, 2017; Churches and McBride, 2012; Coe et al., 2014). Student learning is at the heart of these conversations between supervisor and teacher. It involves the systematic identification of strengths and areas for teacher development by first focusing on learning outcomes (what children know, can do, and understand).

As a key principle, supervisors do not promote a single ‘right way’ to teachers through this process. Instead, supervisors support teachers with a critical thinking process to help guide and support teachers in selecting appropriate classroom interventions.

A key innovation in this process is the use of a suite of intervention cards that summarize evidence related to effective pedagogical techniques and classroom practice. Cards contain a description of the approach and subject-specific illustrations, as well as information about the robustness of the evidence (type of research and extent of its replication). For example, one intervention card addresses the question of classroom layout by illustrating various options for layout and suitability for different types of learning activity. For the first phase of intervention card development in 2017, covering generic pedagogical approaches, EDT drew on a range of existing evidence summaries and systematic reviews. Card topics were chosen based on a situational analysis of the needs of teachers being supported. This analysis was carried out in conjunction with the QRTA. For the next phase of development between 2019 and 2020, EDT conducted a systematic review of the literature from developing country contexts on English as an additional language, using a systematic review protocol.

The programme combined a mixture of training and workplace-based assessment to prepare supervisors to adopt these new methods. Initially, supervisors completed a ‘how to supervise supervisors’ training programme over four days. This covered the concepts in the Evidence-Based Supervision model and techniques such as coaching. Thereafter, a practicum component asked supervisors to complete a portfolio over the course of six months that documented how they had put their learning into practice. The portfolio included items such as learning logs for different teachers they had supported, diagnostic lesson observations, videos of teachers they had worked with, and a reflective essay. Lastly, the programme facilitated peer-to-peer learning among supervisors. This included sharing best practices and evidence through WhatsApp groups, as well as building a website with resources such as videos, diagnostic tools, and evidence summaries.

Impacts on the Jordan system

While this was a pilot programme testing proof of concept at small scale, the initiative demonstrated encouraging results for participants. Some of the key impacts include:

Supervisors developed more supportive relationships that resulted in a stronger focus on the improvement of teaching. By shifting the main focus of their role from judge or inspector to mentor, partner, or coach, supervisors enhanced their relationships with teachers. In turn, this improved the quality and nature of the feedback process. One teacher recalled that supervisors used to ‘just tell you the mistakes’ and that ‘you have to follow the instructions –

As a supervisor, you need the ability to organize teachers. You need patience, you need to listen more than speak. This breaks down the barriers between them and us. One of my teachers would say ‘No’ to me coming in. After I started using coaching, she was more open. Before she had an image that I was there for assessment. (Supervisor)

but this has been transformed from monitoring to coaching'. Additionally, the Evidence-Based Supervision model gave supervisors a defined coaching methodology and encouraged the asking of constructive questions. This resulted in teachers feeling more comfortable with supervisors, seeking advice more often, and sharing their difficulties in an honest, open way.

Supervisors became evidence translators. Through this programme, supervisors became promoters and brokers of evidence on pedagogy drawn both from international evidence on teaching effectiveness and their own experiences. Since teachers often struggle to find enough time to sift through research or best-practice strategies, supervisors ensured that this type of information reached teachers through coaching and mentoring sessions. Supervisors helped teachers put findings into immediate use in their classrooms by taking research and evidence results and turning them into an easily digestible, usable format. By providing an individualized and reflective coaching process to teachers, supervisors further felt they raised their professional standing while finding a better channel to share their expertise.

Development of optimistic attitudes concerning new methods and student potential. Student learning was at the heart of the conversations between supervisors and teachers. This renewed focus on students and supportive relationships builds teacher confidence and encourages them to try new teaching strategies. Related improvements included doing better lesson planning, managing classrooms more effectively, asking questions to check students' understanding,

We are looking for evidence and teaching inside the classroom. Teachers now accept it is their role. The culture has shifted to not blaming children for being weak. Now they [teachers] are starting to think they are accountable for their students' weakness. (Supervisor)

engaging the whole class, and even bringing coaching techniques into the classroom. Lastly, supervisors saw an improved sense of professional efficacy. When teachers began taking more responsibility for all students' outcomes, they developed more confidence in their students' potential. For example, teachers no longer felt that some students were simply beyond reach.

Building a sense of community and collaboration across and within schools. Along with improved one-on-one relationships between supervisors and teachers, new professional networks developed between sets of both supervisors and teachers. Supervisors created WhatsApp groups for teachers in different schools to share ideas and best practices with one another. One supervisor shared that teachers recorded themselves and sent videos to the supervisor and other teachers in the group. 'This led to positive competition between the teachers' (supervisor). Supervisors also established their own groups to share best strategies, resources, and ideas for improvement. Whereas before teachers hesitated to share either problems or things that worked for them in the classroom, now one supervisor said that teachers are more cooperative and adapt their lessons to their students' needs.

Changes in teaching practice. Teacher self-assessment survey results from a project evaluation found that the shifts in mindset led to shifts in teaching practice. This included at least a one-point increase (on a self-assessed scale from 1 to 5) in all areas assessed, including skills in student feedback and assessment, engagement, and classroom behaviour. Teachers used a wider array of strategies and new practices, and had good results. Student focus groups also reflected these changes, with all surveyed students noting that they enjoyed the more engaging and interactive methods their teachers had utilized.

This programme meant I change the way I teach totally. I now engage with the whole class when teaching. (Teacher)

Initial challenges faced in implementation

In addition to the positive impact noted above, several lessons emerged that could guide future policy decisions involving instructional leadership at the middle tier. First, plans need to be developed to involve school principals in any type of support programme. Principals initially felt out of the loop as to what was going on between supervisors and teachers, so a dedicated orientation now takes place for principals. Secondly, a wide range of knowledge and evidence products have been created as a result of this initiative. There needs to be good dissemination and management of these assets as a public good, ensuring materials are kept up-to-date with the latest research and that access is extended to other supervisors. Early on, the programme relied on paper-based intervention cards for supervisors to use with teachers. To facilitate dissemination, the programme designed a website to act as a portal to an ever-expanding knowledge base, as well as to provide an opportunity for supervisors to contribute to the materials, as ‘producers’ of knowledge.

Finally, such programmes need to carefully consider opportunities for scale and institutionalization. As a typical supervisor’s case-load can reach 100 teachers, most teachers normally receive a visit once per semester or even once per year. Supervisors visited teachers monthly in this pilot programme, so creative solutions – such as providing enhanced support to teachers most in need, or building an in-school supervisor role – will need to emerge to scale this programme to all supervisors nationally. As a first step towards scaling the approach, in the summer of 2022, EDT began a further, more extensive, collaboration with the MoE. The new programme will take Evidence-Based Supervision to scale across the country and involve all 106 English supervisors and the teachers they support.

Takeaways

Looking beyond simply the supervisor role in the Jordan system, this programme can enable insights into policies and plans for other middle-tier systems. While all systems will need to consider their own unique challenges and opportunities, the following takeaways can offer policy-makers some ideas to consider.

1. Developing a professional partnership with teachers

The professional partnership between teachers and supervisors illustrated how middle-tier instructional leaders can offer constructive formative assessment for teachers. However, shifting from a more authoritative role does not always come easily in practice. One member of the programme staff noted how supervisors initially felt that ‘they don’t have that authority anymore and teachers aren’t listening to them’. However, by providing a methodology and support to supervisors, the programme helped them work through these initial struggles to develop a sense of joint responsibility with teachers, with improved student outcomes as the shared motivation for the work. It seemed clear that a motivational style of coaching, along with focusing on specific diagnostic feedback from lesson observations, built strong relationships and trust between supervisors and teachers. It further appeared that this trust and enhanced relationship helped supervisors to carry out their dual function of evaluator and teacher developer with less conflict.

2. Using social media effectively to strengthen collaboration

A key feature of this case study was the use of social media in support of middle-tier engagement with school-based staff. Supervisors used WhatsApp groups in addition to face-to-face training to engage with teachers. The social media platform encouraged teachers to collaborate and share ideas about subject pedagogy. The project also established a WhatsApp group for each cohort of supervisors being trained, allowing them to create a community of practice.

3. Bridging the gap from evidence to practice

A major challenge faced by education professionals is translating theory from traditional training programmes into improved teaching practice on the ground. This theory-practice gap is too often the cause of failed investments in reform and professional development. Through the use of local expert practitioners, this case study highlights how middle-tier leaders can bridge this gap. Supervisors used their skills to translate and discuss evidence and best pedagogical practices in a way that teachers could easily understand and, together with the use of well-designed materials (the treatment cards), supervisors ensured teachers could quickly mobilize research into real-world practice.

4. Harnessing existing middle-tier roles and local system strengths to bring about change

The initiative illustrates how existing middle-tier roles can be strengthened to gear them towards effective instructional leadership for teachers and that building or strengthening instructional leadership does not always require recruiting or hiring new personnel. In Jordan, supervisors have long been respected as highly experienced professionals, often

with many years of teaching experience as subject specialist teachers. This case study is an interesting example of how an available and well-qualified cadre of the workforce can be harnessed as change agents to bring about a culture of school improvement at local level. By providing structures and support for supervisors to use these strengths, this initiative was able to bring about change in teaching practices.

5. Ensuring a mindset shift towards experimentation, learning, and continuous improvement

Instead of simply offering a blueprint or specific strategy for teachers to adopt, supervisors in this case study helped teachers develop a critical thinking process. This seemed to lead to a mindset shift in teachers that empowered them to be professionals who can use their skills to adapt their practice. Going a step beyond this, EDT and the QRTA further supported supervisors as adult learners. They provided support and guidance along the way, ensuring that supervisors had the training and scaffolding necessary to best implement new strategies of coaching and modelling a learning mindset.

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