

## Layla from England

### Teaching and learning through reading and faith

Meet Layla, an experienced and confident teacher with 7 years of experience working in a middle school in England. For the past 10 years she has been working as a specialist reading teacher in a primary school. Her main task is to work with children, one-on-one or in groups, and with their teachers and parents, to promote reading. That could be through interventions, book-clubs or projects. She also liaises with teachers, leads school counsellors and does the weekly assemblies. The school where she works is a fairly large school with about 450 pupils.

### Context

Her job is not very common: not every school has a specialist reading teacher. She started the training with about 40 others, only two of whom haven't since gone back into mainstream teaching. Her being able to continue her work is insecure: 'obviously when there are cuts, I know that my job will be at risk, because I'm not as needed in terms of filling a classroom. In that sense, I am the added bonus.' Whatever might be changing, it never seems to worry Layla, who has her faith to rely on: 'if things go wrong, there's always some good that comes out of it. So I never see a disappointment as something that makes me sit there and cry, no! It's ok, that happened, what can I do now, what's the other option? I don't have this concept of getting depressed or disappointed. At the end of the day: it's a job, I enjoy doing it, but I've got a family, I've got other things. And it's a big world out there and there's lots of opportunities as well. The way I see it: when one door closes, another one opens.'

Faith in general has an important role in the school. This is important to her, having had that experience herself. 'That was how I grew up, as a child who was a minority in the school. I've always felt that I can express myself and feel confident to do that.' Making sure children in her school share that experience is important to her.

### Organisational issues

The school puts a lot of effort into keeping the staff up to date. During weekly staff meetings, all sorts of subjects are covered. 'It depends, we have very different staff meetings. Sometimes it's to do with the curriculum, sometimes it's to do with the tracking of children's progress, or there may be new initiatives coming in. We may have some extra training on ICT, every week it varies. A couple of times I delivered the staff meeting, I've led them. (...) Once every half term we have the twilight sessions where we have an extra bit of training. For instance, we've introduced a new assessments system into school, so everyone's been given the iPad and we all need to know how to input the data and how to get the graphs out so see which children are stuck and what percentage have made it. So we're being trained on that at the moment.'

## Power relations

Being the only one with her specific task in the school, she is able to work very autonomously, whilst always liaising with teachers on specific children. Whether she does her job well is assessed by both teachers and through collection of data. The data are gathered on pupils to track their progress and collected through extensive testing and assessing. It is also used to set targets for the staff. Some may find it uncomfortable being monitored like that, but not Layla. This helps her in her work, because the data also work in her favour: they show whether a child has improved after her intervention. In other words: whether she has done her job well. But even then 'there are still question marks and you do get worried because you don't want to miss something in a child, because it can have such an impact on them. So always in the back of your head, it's like: 'is this right?' But it's never a decision you make on your own, it's always backed up with teachers, their response as well, and usually they agree with me, because the teacher knows the child a lot better than I do, they see them all the time. Then I feel comfortable with it. But that's been the main reason I went back to my studies. It's to make sure that I know as much as I possibly can. We're forever learning and we're human, we get things wrong. But you try as best as you can. And you monitor things. So if I'm concerned with a child I will always turn back to them. So if I do miss something, I'll get another chance with them. It's not a life and death situation.' This also means changing the lessons if you feel that is necessary. To be proactive you need confidence, knowledge and experience. 'There were certain things about that lesson that I thought were a waste of time. Because I'm not part of that: change it! I can do what I want with it. But if somebody is to ask me, I can justify it. So a confident teacher will be able to justify and say: I've stopped doing this, because of this. And I've seen it work here. That probably comes with experience as well. The two, caring and confidence, are pretty key, pretty high up there.'

## Change

Layla is a great believer in things happening for a reason and, at the same time, being in control of your own life. 'I think, what I've learned in life, is when you don't ask, you won't get.' 'I'd only been at the school 3 months [working fulltime] and I said: look, I want to go part time. Either you can say yes or you can say no. And there's a teacher who's been there for a couple of years and she really wanted to, but she'd not even asked. And she said to me: how come you have gone to part-time? And I said: well, have you ever asked? And she said no! (...) It's this idea, and it's the same with any, if I wanted to go and study, no one's told me to do it, I've gone to do it. And I think there are lots of teachers who don't go on to study because, either they've got too much going on or they want somebody to give it to them and say: go. Whereas you've got to be proactive. If you want something you've got to go after that thing. And you've got to make it work for you. Also I'm quite religious, so I believe things happen for a reason. And I always believe that if things become too difficult there's a reason for that. I always let my heart follow that way through.'

### Good teacher

The most important thing about being a good teacher is caring for the children. It's impossible to build a relationship with the children without caring for them, and the relationship between the child and the teacher impacts massively on the child's progress. Caring also helps build children's self-confidence, which is a massive thing, especially for primary school children. Confidence would be the second most important thing. Especially confidence in the teachers: that they know what they are doing. That they will be confident to change what they are doing if they feel it isn't working.