

Learning Communities in Palestine: From Knowledge Consumption To Its Production

Wattan News Agency Speaks with Refat Sabbah, Director General of the Teacher Creativity Center in Palestine and President of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE)

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Welcome to a new episode of Educational Voices from the Teacher Creativity Center Association. In the Palestinian context, education is not limited to classrooms or official curricula, but goes beyond that to become a struggle for knowledge linked to the right to justice and human dignity.

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This is where the role of the Palestinian Education Coalition comes in, which has moved from an institutional model to an open space for expression based on individuals, activists, teachers, researchers, journalists, and anyone who sees education as a gateway to change. Within this transformation, learning communities have emerged as an evolved extension of the idea of educational cooperatives.

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They have become living spaces for the production of knowledge, the exchange of experience, and the construction of a critical educational stance linked to the Palestinian context and its complexities.

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To discuss this experience, its dimensions, challenges, and aspirations, we welcome our guest, Dr. Refah Al-Sabah, director of the Teacher Creativity Center and one of the most prominent actors in building the Palestinian educational alliance. Welcome, Dr. Refah, to this episode. Welcome, and thank you for joining us. First, what is meant by learning communities within the Palestinian educational alliance? ?

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The term “learning communities,” as you mentioned at the beginning of your introduction, evolved from the term “cooperatives.” We initially called them cooperatives, but later the Ministry of Labor requested that we not use this name

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because it is a term used in the law governing these cooperative associations, and therefore there could be confusion with the name, even though we are educational cooperatives. In any case, we responded to the issue and called them learning communities, which has the same meaning. What is meant by this

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that communities are individuals, institutions, and activists, and therefore it is a description of the community and its components. Educational meant that these communities focus on educational issues, and in practice, their establishment was based on the concept of transitioning from knowledge consumption to knowledge production, because in practice

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all associations, because they are cooperatives, are part of the Palestinian educational association, and the Palestinian educational association is based on institutions. Our previous experience with this membership is that, for the most part, these memberships consume knowledge more than they produce it.

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respond to pre-planned activities rather than producing knowledge related to these activities. Thus, the educational consortium has transformed from a membership based on institutions within a rigid and traditional structure to learning communities, the main goal of which is to allow and provide opportunities

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As you mentioned, anyone who wants educational change has an open space, free spaces for individuals, whether they are educators, journalists, activists, or even politicians. It is beneficial for institutions to join these learning communities, and all learning communities

are, of course, within specific topics because learning communities are also divided into three sections or three levels.

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The first level consists of regional training courses, such as training in Jenin, Nablus, Hebron, etc., or thematic training courses, such as disability, gender, feminism, etc., or the right to education and sectoral training courses.

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Such as training for teachers of people with disabilities, which sometimes even includes school health as part of it. What are the most prominent activities that you carry out on the ground in these training courses?

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First of all, these learning areas are characterized by their rapid development because they are free and open to everyone within specific criteria, because you cannot include all people, and there are thousands of people who meet the criteria.

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These instructions accept membership of institutions in their programs, either partially or wholly specializing in education, or individuals who are interested in education. Therefore, in these instructions, there is a process of joining, for example, retired educators, whether they are former deputy ministers, general managers, or even teachers, and most of them are teachers or distinguished individuals, meaning they have the ability to produce knowledge.

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These individuals, and the entry of this number of individuals who are distinguished in education and capable of producing knowledge, have pumped knowledge into the educational system through these programs. Therefore, these programs also provide a specialized space, meaning that not all people can be in the educational system and work on the issue of disability or in a program that works on the issue of disability.

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Some people are interested in disability, some are interested in teachers, some are interested in educational loss, and some are interested in their region or village, because the basic idea

behind the learning sessions was how we can transform national advocacy into local advocacy, because I need not only to advocate for policies, which is important, but I also need to advocate for the school level in a village. In many schools, whether they are Bedouin

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or in remote areas, or even in areas that are not important, many schools need improvement, whether in infrastructure or even in content and in the capabilities of teachers and in the relationship of the school with its communities. For this reason, the learning community can be in a village, in a city, or in a camp

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and be more than just a learning community, depending on the country's needs and the identification of needs in this context. That was my question, Doctor. Why do these learning communities seem to be so important in the Palestinian context in particular, where we see many different and varied obstacles to the educational process? Their importance lies in the fact that people find a space through which they can influence and organize

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People's work, people's criticism, people's complaints, people's concerns. I mean, if you have a village, people tend to complain more, they tend to criticize more. People always take negative issues more than positive ones. I like the governor of Nablus at one of the conferences

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which was about learning, and at the time we called it cooperation, and they cooperated in righteousness and righteousness, and did not cooperate in sin and aggression, meaning that its importance is that people cooperate in righteousness and righteousness and goodness in order to succeed or improve a particular issue in education, whether it is formal or informal education, and this also provides you with its importance

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Because it is voluntary, and it is important that you invest human capital, and you have frightening human capital, right? I mean, if you ask me about research output, for example, these learning sessions have produced frightening research. We have a conference

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in February, at the beginning of February, I think it will be on the third of February, and we finished the research evaluation process yesterday, and all of this is the product of the educational alliance and the educational alliance's learning, which means you've burned one of the questions I had prepared in this field. You know that approximately thirty-nine research papers have been approved

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This means that most of them are publishable, and this research will be released on the third Monday of the month. What are the most prominent problems that this research has highlighted in the Palestinian educational context? The main title of this research was education from a developmental perspective, and we mean education in the basic sense.

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This comes in the context of the fourth development goal, His Highness's fourth development goal. Therefore, the title of the conference was to see the link between education and development, and whether there is development and whether education can be developmental. All these questions are among the most pressing issues we face in Palestine with regard to education.

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Sometimes the concepts are vague. What does development mean in the Palestinian context? This is important for people to respond to. If you answer this concept in the Palestinian context, you will be able to draw up education strategies, because right now, everything is an emergency, and therefore the word "development" sometimes provokes

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some surprise and astonishment, but in the context of Palestinian education, it refers to a frightening educational deficit, a psychological, moral, and social deficit.

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a loss of educational security. If we talk about the four pillars of education, which are provision, acceptance, and adaptation, all of them have been struck. Schools are unable to provide safe access for students, nor do they provide them with teachers and curricula in a safe context, nor are they able to adapt to the circumstances, and so on.

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Things have reached the point where schools have been completely destroyed, as happened in Gaza and Jenin. Educational deprivation is therefore an additional fundamental factor to what I mentioned about the loss of psychological and social factors, security, and so on. Another problem is that, despite the fact that we have been living in a state of emergency for a long time, the strategies and content of education in emergencies are still more traditional than creative.

we are still living in a state of emergency, even though it has been going on for a long time, but the strategies that follow are more traditional than creative. The content is also problematic, even the curricula, which need to be reviewed in terms of educational content.

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Yes, of course, the idea in the past was based on educational institutions, as you mentioned, but there was monotony or there were restrictions on these institutions, and therefore the results were not at the required level. Is that correct? Correct. The structure of the old educational coalition was institutions, and these institutions

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Sometimes part of the problems we face are institutions that sometimes come with an institutional vision stemming from their institution or the agendas of the funder, for example. It is possible that the funder's agendas control many issues, unfortunately.

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It continues to increase rather than decrease in this regard, but institutions operate in a traditional context, meaning that it goes back to the director and does not go back to the director, and so on. These institutions sometimes take a position, meaning that it took days and nights of discussions and different positions, and each institution has a vision in this context. These lessons also give room for freedom of thought for

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People's experience is transformed into practical and creative suggestions. When people are confined to free spaces, they become creative. Fear does not accomplish or produce creativity. People are creative when they live or are in a safe environment.

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These learning spaces are safe spaces because they are not binding, bureaucratic, or authoritarian. This was my question, Doctor: How do you maintain the independence of these learning spaces today, away from the significant partisan polarization that exists within our Palestinian society? A procedural guide has been developed based on the idea of these learning spaces, and part of this procedural guide prevents partisan conflicts.

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I don't mean politics or policies related to education, but rather sectarian, narrow-minded, and partisan policies. This is therefore part of the criteria.

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People have different backgrounds in these educational institutions, and there is no discrimination against anyone as long as that person is morally, socially, nationally, and educationally acceptable in this regard. Therefore, these cooperatives are practically independent but linked in their vision of unity and agreement with the educational institutions.

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We are even open to initiatives to establish new educational institutions. This means that if a village in Hebron or Jenin says, "We want to establish an educational institution so that we can be under the umbrella of the coalition in order to improve the quality of education in our village, contribute to the improvement of education in our village, or contribute to helping students in our village," this is also acceptable to us, and we will respond within this framework.

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These educational programs are linked to the coalition's vision. The coalition's strategies are not fluid, as they say, and therefore their freedom and independence stem from their

commitment to the coalition's vision. The coalition's vision is based on the idea that educational programs are, for example, a workshop in strategic planning, meaning that they are educational programs that reflect the coalition's vision and mission and the coalition's strategy. strategy of the coalition

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Therefore, the guidelines are an integral part of the coalition in drawing up its strategies. They are independent as guidelines that we do not interfere with because there are two centers, and these two centers are ultimately in

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coordination framework for the organization. They meet with them and communicate with them, but they have the freedom to organize activities and express their thoughts openly, meaning they can criticize whatever they want and say whatever they want

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But it's all in the context of education, and that's the advantage of the programs. They are free programs that produce free thinking, and that's part of the challenge. How can the destruction pick up all these ideas that these programs produce?

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and formulate them within an educational framework capable of providing an educational vision for the country. In this context specifically, I mentioned in a previous article on this subject, and I will quote the title of the article: These communities or educational institutions must free themselves from the constraints of traditional routine.

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which reduce science to mere attendance, training, and formal participation, and become a space for the production of knowledge and critical awareness that links theory and practice. The question is how this can be further developed in Palestine in light of the difficult circumstances we are living in. What I mentioned in the article is a reality that more than one of the learning coordinators contributed to, and

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It was presented as a philosophical and intellectual framework for learning, and we presented it to all learning programs to add to this framework, so that the philosophical and intellectual framework for learning would be agreed upon by all, and these learning programs in particular.

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In the beginning, all production was activities, meaning seminars, lectures, and training, and this framework is still in use in the learning programs, with the exception of some learning programs that have begun to produce knowledge through research. However, the vision of those in charge of the learning programs is that these learning programs

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will shift from consuming knowledge to producing it, and this depends on how much experience is brought into these educational programs. First, clarity of vision and thought. What do you want to offer the country? What can develop the country's vision? This is a question for the educational programs, and therefore, now the shift needs

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It takes time for these lessons to be internalized, and then there will be more clarity on how to set foot on the path to knowledge production. Knowledge production does not necessarily mean books or manuals. Knowledge production also means producing ideas and solutions.

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So you have a crisis in education, and we say there is a crisis in Palestinian education and a crisis in Arab education, and therefore there are challenges facing the education system. The role of these educational institutions is to propose solutions. This is knowledge production, right? For example, if you have a crisis now with teachers, then these educational institutions should...

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in the context of their communication with teachers, in the context of their communication with the ministry, in the context of their communication with institutions, to propose solutions, to offer solutions. This is also knowledge production. Part of knowledge production

is that you offer ideas, you offer solutions to help the educational framework in your country move forward.

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But so far, perhaps there has not been enough media coverage of its role, and it has not raised radical issues or solutions to many of the problems facing education in Palestine. Do you agree with that? It's true that in terms of media coverage, we are still in the news cycle, which is news about activities, and that is not media coverage.

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The media is what you mentioned, that it should be

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Education is capable of providing something tangible that the media can cover, meaning practical proposals and specific solutions, or the production of knowledge related to strategies, curricula, educational vision, supervision, guidance, evaluation, and many other issues that education can produce. For example, some educational issues are related to integration., meaning

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The question is, have these learning processes begun to produce practical ideas? Have they begun to have a practical impact on tangible change with regard to people with disabilities or the structure of schools being able to accommodate people with disabilities? We still suffer a lot as people with disabilities. We suffer from a lack of provision in schools in terms of tools, equipment, and strategies that help

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We are still lacking in many areas, such as providing good education and a safe, inclusive, and interactive environment.

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We say that the education strategy needs a lot of development, meaning reaching the stage of creativity.

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and innovation, which requires a great deal of effort. We are still far from that, Dr. In order for these educational methods to establish themselves in today's educational and academic arena, what are the most prominent challenges you face at this moment as a result of the political, economic, and social conditions we are experiencing?

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The first challenge is security. People feel insecure. There is pressure from the occupation. Movement is fraught with danger. Sometimes you cannot move to hold a meeting in Ramallah.

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We have to think carefully, and people have to think carefully. Many conferences and meetings have been postponed due to road closures and so on. These are challenges,

economic challenges too. People are in a bad economic situation, including salary cuts and salary fragmentation. You're talking about government employees, teachers...

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I mean, they don't get their salaries regularly, not to mention the economic situation of workers, who are prevented from going to work as a result of the events. All of this is also affecting your work as soil destruction, and because the destruction and their members are part of this society, they suffer what society suffers in this context, but there are other challenges.

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Challenges that I don't know about are psychological, social, cultural, and moral. These challenges lie in individuals, in how they deal with each other, sometimes personality clashes, weak communication between people, team building, and teamwork. This is part of the challenge. I feel that sometimes people tend to be individualistic.

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This is what kills teamwork the most, because if you want to talk about successes and change in an individual without teamwork, that's right, and this challenge is how you, in the

educational community, reinforce this internal structure and make people believe that they are already united in the educational community in order to promote teamwork that leads to change. We are the people who believe that you can change educationally come to this gathering

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Despite this, people remain individualistic in their perceptions that it is possible, meaning that as individuals they can influence this moment

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Individuality and uniqueness are sometimes a big part of the challenges in many issues. How do you get people to work together? How do people sometimes use dialogue or discussion? I am talking to you about the truth, not to impose my opinion on you and force it on you. This is part of the challenges. Sometimes people

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open up a situation of debate and discussion as if they want to prove their opinion more than they understand others and understand the other side and understand the other side's argument and reach the truth together. This is part of what we mean in this context, in the big challenge of how we promote unity as a body that believes in teamwork that leads to change and improvement of the situation. Yes, we continue with Educational Voices with Dr. Refaat Al-Sabah, but after a short break.

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Welcome back to Educational Voices, Dr. Refaat Al-Sabah. You said in previous press statements that learning communities must embrace their role as incubators for the transformative vision of Palestinian educational unity. What are the most important aspects of this vision in your opinion?

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I mean the transition in the alliance and membership of the alliance from institutional membership only, which means responding according to seasonality in response and even slow in providing feedback on many issues, to an alliance based on learning communities, institutions, alongside educational activists, journalists, politicians, and other stakeholders.

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You are talking about groups with vast experience and energy. If these spaces are to be strengthened, they need training and empowerment.

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They need financial support to get started, and they need to connect and communicate with their counterparts at the regional and international levels.

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They need to examine their expertise and give them the space to put everything they think of into practice. These spaces, if given the freedom, scope, possibility, and provision of everything they need, will ultimately produce

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These learning spaces will ultimately and certainly produce results. They need an administrative structure, a coordinating structure, because randomness cannot produce knowledge and cannot bring about change.

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We considered the idea after the birth of these learning spaces, and now the learning spaces are growing, so we need these cooperatives to reach maturity. If the learning spaces reach this maturity, then they will begin the production stage. Learning spaces are like humans.

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Any living being, any country, grows and matures, and then it sees, it produces, whether it is a human being or even a bird, it can produce from within. This may be the most important issue of maturity and awareness, because maturity and awareness are very important for resilience.

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We also believe that for people to be able to persevere, they need awareness and maturity. These are important factors in a person's ability to persevere and even to produce. What we are experiencing as Palestinians now is an attempt to destroy people's awareness and hope.

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This is what we must work on, and therefore I am convinced that these learning spaces, if they are cleansed internally, meaning that people must deal positively with this, positively with their situation and with those around them, if we can reach this stage, you can sow hope in people's hearts, and this is very important, but

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We must work on raising awareness and also on maturing thought and human maturity so that people understand their abilities and potential, understand themselves so that they can understand others in this context. Yes, as I mentioned a moment ago, this is a global experience. How do you assess the regional experience in Arab countries, and where does Palestine stand in this experience today?

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I agree with you that the idea is not an original Palestinian idea.

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I mean, we are not the first people to come up with this idea. This idea exists globally, and as the head of the campaign, I mean the head of the global campaign, I presented it at the global level, and it was adopted and named in English as “community learning,” meaning communities that are also cooperative in learning. I can tell you that soon, in

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the idea of Palestinian cooperatives was presented at the international level.

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And you can imagine the surprise at the ability of the Palestinians, despite the situation they live in, to develop these learning communities that help integrate people. I mean, all the funding you see globally sometimes talks about equality, fairness, and integration, and other things. The Palestinian participation in this initiative in creating these learning communities has contributed to the integration of

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people and institutions near and far. These lessons do not depend on abilities, meaning that people's abilities do not necessarily have to be equal. For this reason, there is also room for people to learn from these cooperatives, now in these lessons as well, at the levels of active members, supporting members, observer members, and so on, because I

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Or maybe I'm just a normal person who loves to be in the learning process. Welcome, this is a dream, and whoever has the ability to contribute more to the circle called active membership.

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The Global Campaign for Education, even the Global Partnership and the Oxfam Foundation, have requested that this experience be officially circulated. It was presented to the Global Campaign for Education and was submitted by members of the Palestinian and Arab coalition.

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I want the coalitions around the world to adopt it, and I mean that as the head of the Global Campaign for Education. I am responsible for all educational coalitions around the world, so now my message is that first, these lessons must be matured in Palestine.

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But we will present it globally as a mature, conscious, and clear idea that people can accept in this context. Yes, at the local level, what is required of the government, specifically the Ministry of Education, in order to support these educational initiatives? The Ministry of Education supports them and has supported them from the beginning, which means that many people, some of whom are members of the Ministry of Education, are members of our educational initiatives. And this

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The educational approach We see the ministry as a partner. They are our ministry, our teachers, our minister, our deputy minister, and therefore we deal with the Ministry of Education as our ministry. It is not something distant from us, and therefore we agree with

them that we can criticize them, we can offer solutions, we can disagree with them, but we do not attack them or belittle anyone. . That is why we have their support

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specifically from the Deputy Minister, Dr. Nafea, and the Minister of Education, Dr. Amjad, because they see that the educational coalition in this context is helpful and a pillar of the Ministry of Education, not a competitor to the ministry in this context. What is really needed is for people

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think about the interests of students. If people think about the public interest rather than personal and individual interests, people will accept it because, in the end, you are a civil society organization, not a media organization, not an individual, and not a ministry. In the end, your goal is to improve the quality of education and the benefits and advantages for students.

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So where is the harm in us agreeing and being part of the collective thinking in developing a community vision for education? That is why the ministry must consider that civil society is a genuine and historical participant in protecting education in Palestine and protecting the right to education in Palestine, and therefore it is

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a serious and active contributor to the production of knowledge at the educational level. The ministry's relationship with civil society is a duty, not something I have to thank you for. It is our role and our duty to meet and think together. Of course, the ministry is opening up spaces

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Whether it is called the education sector or the Clusters, what is required of society is to be active and to leave behind negativity, because negativity does not produce results. One must always have good intentions towards others. Your final message to every researcher, every writer, every Palestinian journalist who is not yet involved in these initiatives, what would you say to them? My message is first to the members of the educational coalition

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and to the coordinating committee of the educational coalition: don't be afraid, open the door for people to join these cooperatives, and for researchers and educators. I ask them to join, and therefore this coalition must be a national coalition par excellence, meaning for everyone, not just four, five, ten, or twenty institutions or founders.

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In other words, this cooperation should be a Palestinian national cooperation that reflects a Palestinian educational movement that seeks to improve the education process in Palestine. We have reached the end of this episode. In conclusion, we say that educational meetings are not just educational meetings or discussions, but rather a new culture in education, a culture that believes that real change begins in the field.

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It starts with the teacher, the writer, the journalist, and everyone else, through cooperation between the individual and the whole in Palestine, where education becomes a form of resilience. Of course, educational communities stand out as a model that restores the power of the group and learning as a shared human activity. I would like to thank our guest, Dr. Refah Al-Sabah, Director of the Teacher Creativity Center, and everyone who followed us in this episode.

See you next time. Thank you, Dr. Thank you. Thank you.