

Parts of the Interview with Hanan Al Hroub at Harvard Graduate School of Education 2016

Fernandez: We know this idea of education as a human right began at the end of World War II in the hope that education and other human rights would contribute to peace, to global peace. In what ways are these skills that you help your students develop, and more generally, in what ways do you think that teachers, in their work, contribute to peace?

Hanan: I definitely think that peace starts inside the classroom and from the teachers themselves. It's impossible to teach peace to one student when you don't have peace within you, inside of you. Then peace will propagate across communities and societies like life itself. It becomes like part of life itself. Since learning is a right for everybody, then why not teach peace to everybody? I think that anger, all these negative feeling can completely disappear if we incorporate in our curricula values that promote something completely different, like peace, tolerance. ...

Fernandez: I can see from listening to you, Hanan, that you are a very reflective teacher, someone who has reflected on your life, who has reflected on the work you do with students, and that reflection helps you to continuously find ways to better reach your students. What has helped you develop that capacity to reflect? How can we help more teachers develop that capability to be deeply reflective in their practice, and to be in charge of their own learning, continuous learning?

Hanan: I think that the teacher has to proceed from believing in the importance of transforming the lives of their students. The teacher has to be convinced that he or she can be of positive factor. Of course the teacher needs to be trained for that, and this training has to be provided by the government. However, the starting point must be a belief from teachers in the importance of their role. Without it, nothing can happen; and of course you know, an external help can be instrumental as well, but nothing can happen if there is no belief in the teacher, in the importance of their role in being a factor for a positive change. As a teacher, my goal is to make people accountable, to give them a sense of responsibility. ... I want everybody to contribute to peace, to joy. I want everybody to feel happiness. And we also have to realize and be convinced of our solidarity as human beings, our commonalities.

Fernandez: You were just in the United Nations, and you gave a speech there. And as you know, the United Nations approved a year ago a new set of goals for developments, which includes a big emphasis on Global Citizenship Education. What do you think about this concept, and how is it relevant to students who you teach, or students of the teachers that you meet?

Hanan: in my statement before the UN, I asked world leaders to give utmost importance to education as a way to resolve problems in the world. I asked them to devote bigger budgets to education because any change must start from education and from teachers actually. I asked governments and decision makers to shine a light on the needs of teachers, and to be aware that teachers need to be assisted. As a former refugee, I asked many questions...and as a Palestinian I don't have the answer to all questions.

Fernandez: You were once a refugee, and today there are six million refugee kids and more than half of them are not in school today. What do you think are the most important things that all of us could do to support education of these children?

Hanan: First of all, it is important to give our attention to refugees, and I think that the solution devised by the world leaders are not enough with regard to the number of refugees and magnitude of their needs. We have first of all to ensure the dignity to every human being even before we talk about teaching and learning. When you have refugees living in camps, where is dignity? When you have to be subjected to huge variation of temperature. There is no dignity in life within a refugee camp. But I think that if refugees are given a decent life instead of you know turning for the worse and going down paths that are deleterious, I think you know they might have a more positive stance and more positive outlook. I think that refugees experience many traumas in their life. They experience a lot of suffering. How can we remedy all that? Of course education has to be part of the way we show that we care, but that is not enough because addressing educational needs is only part of the solution. I think that if refugees could find a habitat or a host country that would welcome them that would embrace them, I think that would solve half of the problems at least. These refugees need to find a place where they can feel at home, where they can be integrated, and then they will be able to learn new skills and new languages. But before that, we have to think of the root causes that led to the displacement of the refugees. Why did they leave their countries? What do you think pushes someone to leave his or her own country in order to go to a foreign country? I mean, think of it for a minute. What would prompt these people to leave their own countries is because they search for a better life; it is because life had become impossible. So they are looking for a new homeland, and it is like leaving your own mother; and what would prompt you to leave a mother?

Fernandez: I am sure that this award experience has given you and your finalist many opportunities to have a bigger stage, to learn from one another. But you are a small group of 50 finalists every year, and there are 60 million teachers around the world. What could be done to provide more teachers an opportunity to be recognized for their work, an opportunity to have voice over their work, an opportunity to gain and increase their own urgency in transforming the lives of their students? What kinds of things could be done that could be within the reach of most of us those teachers?

Hanan: I think we have to shine a light on the status of instructors and teachers in the world. We have to bring out their importance. We have to give them more prestige. We have to glamorize their profession. There is nobody who can graduate from university without having gone through the hands of a teacher. Therefore, the teacher is extremely important. So we have to give an enhanced status, enhance prestige to teachers. Teachers are not recognized for what they do. I am talking from my region in particular, we are not recognized. We have extremely insufficient salaries ... We would like to have more recognition. More appreciation because any program, any endeavor that neglects the contribution of teachers is doomed to failure. So the needs of teachers must be recognized. Once teachers have a better life, have better salaries, once they get a proper recognition, like for example in my case—I got this wonderful award from the Varky Foundation and I thank them for that because now the world is speaking of the

needs of proper teachers; so this problem has acquired prominence. I think we have a lot of problems that could be avoided if we gave proper status the teachers. How can I encourage my son to learn how to become a teacher if he doesn't think that this is going to bring him an added value? I have some students in Palestine who had very high marks in their undergraduate studies, but didn't want to pursue education any longer. I have offered them to become teachers, but you know they didn't want to. They would rather be doctors, engineers, and lawyers.

Fernandez: What do you do or what can be done so that within the schools the experience of having a wonderful teacher for a student is not an exceptional experience in their lives, but is what they experience in every single grade that there are in that school. What could be done at the school level or outside the school to help all teachers reach the levels of excellence that you have reached in your practice?

Hanan: ...This is going to bring new awareness among other people. I think that other teachers have also to speak about their own experiences. They have to say to others the role they have played and the contribution that they were able to bring. They have to bring a new awareness to the role of teachers. Actually, what I did was to motivate other teachers. What I started in university was the role of motivation, but I have never thought that this motivation would apply to this area of teaching that was my specialization in university ... I think we have great teachers and I would like to be able to motivate them and that it is important to shine light on what they do, and the real contribution that they bring. For example, mass media, they are very prompt in talking about great arts. Why can't they talk about great teachers? I respect journalist, but why can't they say something about teachers? (Cheering).

- ...

Hanan: In my own life what I can say is that this award has made people talk about teachers. Before nobody was talking about them. Now, people have paused and started to reflect about teachers and the role of teaching. We have formed this community of teachers who are exchanging experiences, and we have become good will ambassadors to the Foundation [who awarded the prize]. We all have this unique experiences, however, we can still be role models for others. ...

Hanan:.... But as a refugee, you know, I have resourcefulness in my mind. We don't have many things as refugees, but we learn how to recycle things in our environment; and if I can't recycle something, I buy it. For example, I have a certain chair for a good student that I took from the refuse of my neighbors, and I ... painted this chair, cleaned it, renovated it, and it became like a throne; it became like, you know, the chair of the good student who gets his recognition... I sit him on that throne. There is no limit to what imagination can achieve.

Fernandez: Great! With the award you have received, you and the work that you do are now publicly known and as a result, you have become very influential. So how do you plan to use this power moving forward in the future? What are your plans after this year when you're going to be travelling?

Hanan: My main goal is to attract people's attention to the importance of teachers; so I'm going to use everything I can, and I'll not leave any stone unturned in order to get people's attention to the

importance of teachers because nothing, but nothing, in life can be achieved without the teachers' contribution. This is a fact.

Fernandez: I think we have one more question. What role did your upbringing – your growing up – play in shaping your values and your teaching style? In what way is the teacher that you are today, as a result of the way in which you grew up?

Hanan: It was a very difficult childhood. There is no doubt it played a big role in shaping the woman I am today. But my childhood was extremely difficult and I suffocate when I think of it. Whenever I see an unhappy child I can immediately know if the child is not happy because I was an unhappy child myself; ... I want children to be able to dream, to play, and to be happy. I think that childhood has been stolen from today's children. I think this is a crime. ...We are duty-bound to lift children out of this situation. And on more positive note, I can say that I try to instill my kids with the hope in a better tomorrow. But I also tell them in order to get there they have to learn the right things.

Fernandez: Is there a question that we have not asked you that you wish we had or anything else that you would like to say tonight.

Hanan: No.

Fernandez: So Hanna, in this school we share your conviction that teachers can actually prepare their students to invent the future that is much better than the present. And we try to do our share in this school with our students in preparing teachers and some of those people who are going work with them. But we thank you for your conversation in helping us understand just how it is that teachers can do that work as you do so well, that has hope, that has tremendous creativity to work with resources that may not always be what is necessary to do what is absolutely the best for each of your students. And so, thank very much for sharing that and for renewing our own hope in teaching, in teachers like you. Thank you. [Applause]