Starting and Sustaining Writing Centers in Lebanese Schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of a project initiated in 2016 that aimed to introduce school writing centers in Lebanon. A review of the literature at the time reflected an urgent need for pre-university writing support systems. The spread of school writing centers stemmed from the growth of a leading university writing center in Lebanon. The project spanned over 3 years and covered theoretical and practical components, with 20 schools, represented by 52 teachers, and three universities, represented by five faculty members, attending the sessions. As a result, six schools launched their own writing centers, adopting their own vision to cater to their diverse student populations. In 2018, a progress assessment was performed with the school directors, and in 2021, a questionnaire was shared with the same group to trace their long-term accomplishments and challenges. Findings showed the project not only met its aims, but also exceeded expectations, as schools across Lebanon established successful writing centers. Although the American model of university writing centers inspired the project, it was reshaped to serve the needs of ESL/EFL students. In future initiatives, it will be important to consider certain fiscal and administrative restrictions that some schools, especially public ones, might encounter.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, writing centers have gained prominence in colleges and universities worldwide due to their vital role in helping students develop critical thinking and writing skills, thereby enabling them to become more effective global citizens. The Writing Center Directory documents the presence of writing centers in 54 countries worldwide (https://web.stcloudstate.edu/writeplace/wcd/index.html). Similarly, the Middle East and North Africa Writing Centers Alliance (MENAWCA) website, at one time, featured a comparable list of writing centers that began to emerge at MENA universities in the early years of this century (Hodges et al., 2019). Despite the expansion of university writing centers in the MENA region, school-based writing centers had not yet been established. This spurred efforts to establish school writing centers and secure their place on the MENA writing center landscape. Given the success of university writing centers in Lebanon, the need to extend similar support to schools became increasingly evident.

A study conducted by Esseili (2014) identifies several challenges faced by language curricula in private and public schools in Lebanon, challenges that could potentially be alleviated by the introduction of school writing centers. The major issues experienced in both sectors are evident in the diverse backgrounds of faculty members, the selection of textbooks–whether imported or government-issued–and the emphasis on varying language skills (Esseili, 2014). Private school teachers specifically identified the development of students' writing skills as a major problem. They believed that the lack of focus on grammar was a concern, stemming from the expectation that students learn it deductively while writing, a concern also raised by public school teachers, especially at the lower grade levels. Esseili (2014) further reports that a higher percentage of class time was spent on reading comprehension of texts with difficult vocabulary, and this reduced the amount of time spent on

developing writing strategies and writing processes. Class sizes, which ranged between 35 and 40 students, was another challenge that prevented teachers from giving individual attention to their learners. Another concern was raised by Jarkas and Fakhreddine (2017), who observed that incoming university students struggled to develop their own authorial voices, a difficulty that may be linked to the approaches used to teach writing in schools. This picture confirmed the needs of school students for writing support services such as writing centers.

After 5 years of successful operation, an English-medium university writing center in Lebanon sought to expand its services by launching a national initiative to encourage not only institutions of higher learning but also high schools to establish their own writing centers. The university writing center, therefore, developed a plan for working with schools to introduce writing centers. The key objective of the project was to train potential tutors in an initial three-day retreat before the beginning of the academic year. Follow-up sessions were then recommended to support newly appointed directors and tutors in managing their own school writing centers. The training was led by the director of the lead university's writing center, along with trained tutors who shared practical and innovative strategies during a series of workshops, followed by on-site visits to participating schools. Additionally, a special guest speaker was invited to the university's New York office to share her expertise via videoconferencing. The funding for this initiative was secured through a grant proposal titled 'Spreading Writing Center Pedagogy & Practice,' which was submitted by the Writing Center Director to the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. These funds were to be used to train representatives from other universities and schools to help them establish their own writing centers, organize them, manage their records and train their selected teachers to run them. The proposal was accepted, and the Small English Language Grant was received in 2016. The long-term vision behind this initiative was to assist feeder schools in promoting a culture of writing among their students, who, as non-native English speakers, would be better prepared for the language demands of university, specifically in academic writing. Eventually, these high school graduates would apply their acquired writing skills to succeed in any career they pursue.

Review of the Literature

The History of Writing Centers in the U.S. and Beyond

The 2024 European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) Conference in Limerick, Ireland celebrated 40 years of Stephen North's (1984) "Idea of a Writing Center," a seminal article that marked the shift from the therapeutic writing clinics or labs to the supportive writing center spaces where student writers are coached rather than corrected. The conference theme revolved around the future of writing centers and invited participants to reimagine it. While reflecting upon the future, reference to history is essential on the transnational and regional levels. In the early 1960s and early 1970s, writing centers proliferated widely throughout American universities and became a common element of student support services on U.S. college campuses (North, 1984). Due to their growing presence, the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), an affiliate of the National

Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), was founded in 1983 as a platform specifically for writing center professionals. It initially operated solely at the national level in the United States but later expanded to include writing centers in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. These regional groups eventually became affiliates including EWCA and MENAWCA. The expansion of writing centers beyond the U.S. necessitated a change of name in 1998, from "National" to "International Writing Centers Association" (International Writing Centers Association, n.d.-a). In 1987, the NCTE, during its Annual Business Meeting, recognized the important contribution writing centers have made to student success at all levels of education. It currently has four affiliated regional writing center associations outside of the US, including MENAWCA, which was established in 2007 (International Writing Centers Association, n.d.-b). This international expansion further enhanced the association's value and illuminated the value of writing centers worldwide.

The Multilevel Value of Writing Centers

Several educators have highlighted the value of writing centers at different developmental levels. Childers et al. (2004) demonstrate how student writers, tutors and schools can profit from writing centers. These centers can also boost students' self-confidence, an aspect that Thonhauser (2000) found lacking in the writing of Lebanese students, especially when engaging in independent writing tasks. As cited by Honein-Shehadi (2007), writing centers can also improve student writing skills and help them become better readers. According to Childers et al. (2004), the benefits are not only academic but psychological as well. Furthermore, Harris (1992) highlights the social value of writing centers, where students need not feel alone, as their ideas are shared in a welcoming space free from judgement based on grades, as is often the case with their teachers. With the recognition of the various benefits of writing centers, secondary school writing centers were launched in the 1970s in the U.S. even though they were initially established to cater to college level students (Fels & Wells, 2011). In the MENA region, according to Honein-Shehadi (2007), the Middle East has seen the establishment of writing centers mostly at the university level with notable examples including the American University of Beirut (AUB), the American University of Cairo (AUC), institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, and five universities in Qatar.

Adaptation of Writing Center Practices to Local Contexts

Hodges et al. (2019) recognize how U.S. writing center models have been helpful for MENA writing center practitioners but emphasize the importance of adapting to the unique context of MENA writing centers to effectively serve the diverse tutor and writer populations at international branch campuses, such as those in Education City, Qatar. They also emphasize that secondary education in the region is heterogeneous, so the writing center pedagogy ought to be reworked continually. In that respect, Schiera (2020), in his review of tutor training material in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), strongly recommends adapting Western writing center practices to better suit local needs. In 2010, the Lebanese American University (LAU) responded to the growing need to improve students' writing across the curriculum, as identified in its 2007 Institutional Self-Study, which highlighted writing as an area requiring urgent attention (p. 51). In the case of LAU and several other

institutions, writing centers have proven to be effective in enhancing students' academic writing, positioning these universities as stronger candidates for accreditation. Since institutions with writing centers may achieve full accreditation more efficiently, universities may be motivated to adopt such innovative strategies to strengthen students' English language skills. Whether to pursue accreditation or to benefit from the writing center model itself, several universities in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon, established writing centers based on the American model. However, the concept remained uncommon in secondary schools. Once the value of writing centers was established at the university level, their potential impact in schools–the driving force behind this project–became clear and compelling.

The Value of Writing Centers for Schools

Several authors have emphasized the value of writing centers in schools specifically. Levin (1989) contends that writing centers ought to live up to their name, "making writing central in the school and in students' lives by involving students and adults in a collaborative approach to writing and encouraging a positive attitude towards it" (Tobin, 2010, p. 230). Tobin (2010) illustrates this through a case study demonstrating how writing centers can play a vital role in assisting students, faculty and schools to better prepare them for college performance and vocational success. Fels and Wells (2011) describe secondary school writing centers as a place to build both competency and confidence in writing. Since no grades are attached, the focus shifts to the process, not the product itself. In addition to supporting student writers, peer tutors are beneficiaries as well, for they gain reading and listening skills while the tutoring experience contributes to the improvement of their own writing.

Honein-Shehadi (2007) observes that although secondary school writing centers were not widely or officially established at the time, some of the more visible examples existed in countries such as Denmark, Germany, Azerbaijan. However, few were documented in the MENA region. According to the Writing Centers Roots Project compiled by Mendelsohn and funded by International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) in 2018, 65 college/university writing centers existed in the MENA region but only five school writing centers were listed. Realizing that few researchers have investigated secondary school students' writing needs both in Lebanon and abroad, Honein-Shehadi embarked on investigating the writing needs in Lebanese secondary schools. She notes that educators in colleges tend to criticize students' writing weaknesses, so this alone may be an indicator of the need to better prepare students for the challenges of university writing, and to provide them with the fundamental skills in secondary schools. She proposes that writing centers can be part of the solution to those needs. To assess the needs, a questionnaire designed by Honein-Shehadi was administered to 76 teachers from four secondary schools in the Greater Beirut area in Lebanon. Results of the study indicated that 92% of the teachers surveyed perceived a need among their students for extra assistance and support in their written assignments, and 90% of the teachers favored the establishment of a writing center in their school to provide guidance for their students in any language. The overall results of the survey were encouraging, as Lebanon seemed to offer a

unique setting in which secondary school writing centers could flourish as reflected in most of the teachers' responses. Honein-Shehadi also notes that once a school adopts the idea of a writing center and promotes it, it may encourage others to follow suit. Honein-Shehadi's thesis, which was funded by an IWCA grant, is the only documentation of the readiness for having writing centers in Lebanese schools, so it could serve as a needs analysis source and was an appropriate reference prior to the schools' project. The focus shifts to the future potential of writing centers after examining their current status in Lebanese schools. Esseili's (2014) findings correlate with Honein-Shehadi's which further confirms the need for introducing writing centers into schools.

Project Aim and Objectives

The aim of the project was to share the experience of an English-medium university's writing center in supporting students' academic writing across disciplines. This project aimed at spreading awareness about the value of the one-on-one experience with a tutor and its positive impact on students' writing skills in all subject matters, ultimately contributing to their future career success. The vision revolved around the idea that if the same student support service is widely offered in other universities and schools, a ripple effect could enhance student success nationally. Schools could emulate the university writing center experience and adapt it to their assignments such as MUN position papers, university application bios, and mini-research papers for different subjects. Thus, the concept of writing centers–as opposed to writing labs or remedial programs solely for struggling students–was introduced with the hope that it would spread as a resource for students of all language abilities at both the college and school levels, including the gifted, the creative, and those facing challenges. Furthermore, the trained peer-tutors from schools would not only join universities cognizant of what writing centers can offer but might consider becoming peer tutors at the university level as well. Whether students tutor as part of financial aid work, for their CV enrichment, or as an internship, the benefits extend across academic, professional, and workplace contexts.

Project Implementation

Phase 1 - School Recruitment, Training Methods, and Workshop Assessment

The project covered several phases after the completion of school recruitment, which was done through letters of invitation to school administrators. Throughout April and May 2016, the university's Writing Center team conducted training sessions on its Beirut campus. Participants attended four weekly, in-person, three-hour interactive sessions. Fifty-two teachers and coordinators represented 20 Lebanese schools, and five faculty members represented three Lebanese universities. After surveying their type of schools, the results indicated that 69.2 percent of the attendees were affiliated with private schools and 69.2 percent had not heard of writing centers prior to joining the series of workshops. One of the participants underscored the potential of writing centers and reflected its novelty in their setting by describing it as "an initiative which [they] feel could greatly modify the perception of writing. The idea was quite new to [their] community."

Participants were initially given seminal articles to read from the literature of writing centers in the U.S. in addition to a list of references of online resources and books representing the field of writing centers as a supportive concept. Then, over multiple sessions, the same university's writing center experience, with the help of the organizing team, was shared, covering the philosophy of the center, its mission statement, short- and long-term goals, and the resources that were created in it through reading and workshopping. After that, attendees were assisted in writing their own mission statements before submitting them to their school administration. The writing of these statements involved a process where several drafts were revised in response to suggestions from training tutors, emulating a writing center session, before each participant decided on a final version. The participants left with actual content to apply to their institutions, so the workshops had a practical component that built on the theoretical discussion.

A Special Final Session with a School Expert

Ms. Amber Jensen, president of the Capital Area Peer Tutoring Association (CAPTA), secondary school representative of the IWCA Executive Board, and specialist in school writing centers, conducted the last session from the New York campus of the same university via videoconferencing. This innovative approach, especially notable before the rise of virtual work due to Covid, involved Ms. Jensen travelling from Washington, D.C. to New York so her presentation could be broadcast to Beirut where participants convened in one conference room to follow her on a big screen. This final session was a chance for the attendees to learn from the American experience and the challenges that were involved in their establishment in different schools there. During that interactive session, teachers had the chance to voice their specific concerns and ask the expert about the existing scenarios in schools in America. This exchange allowed them to compare the American experience with their settings in different Lebanese schools and contemplate ways of adapting the idea according to the needs and available resources of each school. It is crucial to consider adopting a flexible approach that can serve a specific community or school with the writing center vision in mind, for the one-size-fits all method would contradict the philosophy of writing centers.

To mark the end of the onsite training, on May 6, 2016, a ceremony was held where certificates of attendance were given to each participant who was present during all the sessions. The Cultural Attaché at the American Embassy then, the Cultural Affairs Assistant, the President of the host university, the Dean of the School of Arts & Sciences, and 50 teachers and coordinators attended the ceremony that motivated the participants. The participants left with a sense of accomplishment, and the culminating event gave the organizing Center an institutional recognition and an esteemed external value as well. Teachers in Lebanon rarely have professional development opportunities, so this involvement empowered them in their schools to become decision makers and to advance in their careers.

Social Media Presence

As one of the grant's requirements, from the beginning of the project, a social media platform was specified, namely, a Facebook page was created for the group members to share insights and constantly interact about their centers, and to serve as a virtual space for announcing any upcoming regional and international conferences or activities that are of common interests. The page has reached 225 followers to date (Writing Centers at Schools @writingcentersatschools) and continues to be active for its followers. It also includes photos documenting all the events of the training and other pertinent developments or announcements in the field of writing centers. This page was then used as a platform to announce conferences, among other events; through it, several presented in the MENAWCA biennial conference(s) and connected their peer tutors to CAPTA who in turn, presented in conferences while others learned about IWCA summer institutes for professional development.

Post Workshop Sessions Feedback from Participants

As a preliminary assessment of the workshop series, the workshop organizers asked participants to complete a survey (including an objective and subjective section) anonymously reflecting on the overall experience. Reviewers could form a positive impression of the participants' experience based on the responses. Below are both numerical results of some of the questions and comments that were made by participants. Quantitatively, they can be summarized as follows:

- 43.6 percent strongly agreed that the content of the workshops was appropriate.
- 64.1 percent found the workshop activities stimulating
- 43.2 percent would recommend the workshops to colleagues.
- 28.9 percent felt that the content of the workshops is applicable to their institutions

The overall feedback about the workshops was promising, but the lower percentage related to doubts about the feasibility of the idea of having a writing center in their institutions or schools. Only 28.9 percent felt that the content of the workshops is applicable to their institutions. The value of this percentage could be reflective of one of the challenges.

The subjective section inquired about the most beneficial aspects of the workshop. Most participants indicated that the sessions addressed practical steps for implementing writing centers in high schools. A recurring comment highlighted the benefit of promoting a new school culture centered on writing. Additionally, when asked about aspects of the workshop that could be improved, several attendees expressed the need for more applicable ideas and processes on how to implement this concept at schools in contrast to the way they were adopted in colleges and universities.

In the final question on what topics should be addressed in future workshops; a few concerns were listed regarding the actual implementation of writing centers in schools. The main challenges identified included planning meetings with students during school's rigid schedules, attracting

students to the writing center, managing the distribution of sessions between middle and high school, and training peer tutors. The challenges can be labelled under three categories: management, logistics and implementation.

Phase 2 - Project Extension, Further Onsite Training, and the Ripple Effect

After receiving multiple requests from five schools that had launched their writing centers, a no-cost project extension was granted by the U.S. Embassy. This allowed the team to provide further training and on-site follow-up visits at the start of the new academic year in September. The extension was granted until end of March 2017, which proved beneficial for several schools where further training took place on the premises for teachers, and in some cases peer tutors, too. The geographical areas where the schools were situated ranged from Roumieh, Brummana, and Aley in Mount Lebanon Governorate, Beirut, andto Sidon in South Lebanon Governorate, and those schools benefitted from further training to meet their individual needs. (Figure 1 situates new school writing centers in three different governorates of Lebanon with building icons representing the centers.) The impact of the project was felt nationally, and not just limited to Beirut, the capital, or other major cities. In fact, one of the schools in Sidon officially opened the first high school writing center in May 2017 making history in the South and Lebanon at large. Furthermore, because of this project, the writing center director of the school applied to a similar Small English Language Grant from the U.S. Embassy and was awarded one to support the new writing center and help her establish other writing centers in their sister schools' network.

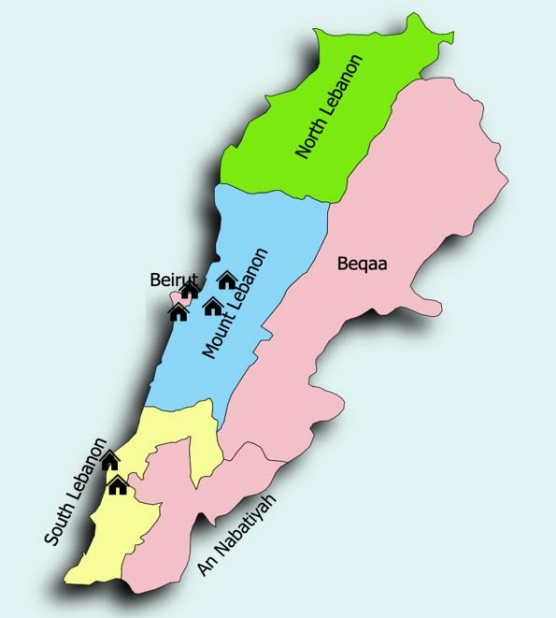

Figure 1: New School Writing Centers in Three Governorates of Lebanon

It is worth noting that this project created opportunities beyond the scope of its original vision. At the university level, one of the workshop participants proposed establishing a writing center at a sister university in Beirut and was awarded a $10,000 grant to do so. That center recently celebrated

its sixth year of operation. Beyond the grant period, a major school network in Beirut independently requested training to establish a writing center at one of its schools, covering the costs from its own budget. This demonstrates the growing ripple effect of the project and the expanding demand for training. Based on what was planned and developed, the project not only met its aims but also exceeded its expectations, to see several schools in and outside Beirut starting and spreading the culture of writing centers.

Unfortunately, some schools were still unable to benefit from the on-site training either because of the security situation in their areas or because of change of administrative leadership in their schools that delayed the opening of their centers. Consequently, a second no-cost extension until mid- August 2017 was granted to be able to complete this mission. Fortunately, several schools in Beirut and Sidon benefitted from that for training both tutors and peer-tutors. The team of the school in Sidon also had the opportunity to visit the host Writing Center to receive further training and observe live tutoring sessions with its students. This was an expansion of the initial methodology which enabled the new school team to observe sessions in a university writing center and to motivate them to adopt some of its methods and procedures. Eventually, the second extension benefitted the second school in Sidon, which became the first to establish a trilingual writing center offering support in English, French, and Arabic.

As a wrap-up session on tutor training, Dr. Amy Zenger, a MENAWCA board member, was invited to talk to all the school officials about her experience with training tutors. She led an interactive session not only about tutoring but also about the challenges that schools could be facing. Additionally, it was an opportunity for the audience to learn about how they could participate in writing center conferences–especially at the regional level–to share their experiences and challenges to date. The recommendation became a reality two years after the new centers began operating. At least three of the newly established writing center directors presented on their respective centers at the 2019 Biennial MENAWCA Conference, held in Beirut and hosted by the same university writing center whose director served on the regional affiliate's board.

Phase 3 – Follow-up with Emerging Directors, Challenges, and Accomplishments

A year after the establishment of four writing centers in different areas, from Sidon to Mount Lebanon, directors were invited to share their experiences in a one-on-one setting with the writing center director who planned the initial project. The main reason was to gauge whether these novice centers were operating smoothly and to understand what their primary obstacles were. Each director responded to a few questions, which focused on the successes as well as the challenges thus far (see Appendix A for all the questions). Their responses reflect several concerns as well as achievements and additions to their initial proposals.

Table 1 shows information about the new writing center directors, who were either full-time instructors of English or language coordinators for Arabic or French at their schools, held credentials in education or linguistics. The years of service spent in the institution ranged from 6 to 25, which reflects their stable belonging and commitment.

Table 1. Writing Center Directors Information

School Location	Language	Position Type	Years in Institution	Degree(s)	Writing Center Responsibilities	Date of Launching of Writing Centers
Sidon, South Lebanon	English	Full-Time Director	18	M.A. in Education (LAU)	Planning workshops and school-wide writing activities and tutoring	December, 2017
	Arabic	Full-Time Coordinator	22	License in Arabic Literature (LU)		
	French	Full-Time Coordinator	25	License in French (LU)		
Sidon, South Lebanon	English	Full-Time Language Coordinator/ Teacher	11	B.A. in English TD (AUB)	Planning workshops, training peer tutors and scheduling visits and tutoring	May, 2017
Aley, Mount Lebanon	English	Full-time Director/Instructor of English	6	B.A. in English, TD, MA Candidate in Linguistics (LU)	Planning activities, training tutors, and keeping visitation data	October, 2016
Broumana, Mount Lebanon	English	Full-time Director/IB Eng. Lit. Teacher and Coordinator	9	M.A. in English (LU)	Keeping records, planning workshops and tutoring	October, 2016

Motivating Factors

The directors' motivations stemmed from both internal and external sources: internal motivation came from the inspiration gained in the workshops and the belief in helping students become autonomous writers as they progress; external motivation was related to the school administration's endorsement of the idea of writing centers. Most directors recognized the added value of writing centers for college preparation and for their school accreditation purposes.

Encountered Constraints: Scheduling, Visibility, and Workload

Although the new directors were highly motivated, they faced several constraints. In many schools, teachers volunteered during their lunch breaks to tutor in the centers, and in some cases, they even offered to help on Saturdays for a couple of hours. While many administrators were concerned about the financial burden, some managed to provide a one-hour release for six faculty advisors, each of whom worked two shifts per week. These challenges can primarily be described as time-related, as finding the right time to meet all students' needs and demands proved difficult.

Another challenge faced by the school writing centers is the struggle for visibility. Although most centers have the necessary resources and can function with just a single computer in some cases, the issue of visibility remains significant. Faculty members, especially those teaching subject-specific courses or from other disciplines, need to be made aware of the value of the service. At the student level, since the concept was newly introduced, various strategies were employed to attract students to use the service. To encourage visits, some schools created video presentations, showed PowerPoint slides to grade 10 students, and even made announcements during parent meetings to inform guardians as well.

In describing the labor involved in guiding a writing center, the new directors identified three main categories. The first was paperwork tasks, including filing, scheduling, appointment logging, and record keeping. The second category involved communication with tutors and managing peer tutors, with one director noting that tutors ‘cannot be left alone.’ The third category focused on content-related responsibilities, such as developing general sessions on writing and research skills, as well as extracurricular activities like planning creative writing competitions, language games, and lyric writing. Many directors described their work as highly challenging, as they learned on the job. The editor mentality, essential in grading, remains prevalent, especially in schools where grading authority is significant, and tutors are often under time pressure.

Another source of pressure came from misinformed teachers who brought 'clients' to the center, expecting tutors to perform miracles by fixing poorly written essays. In response, one school director strongly recommended linking the writing center with fun activities as a successful strategy for engaging students. As for the types of assignments commonly addressed in the centers, they included personal statements, MUN position papers, SAT rhetorical analysis sections, response essays, and IB essays–primarily supporting students in their English classes. However, in some schools, the service expanded into content areas such as history and economics. Notably, the observed growth among students was not limited to language or lower-order concerns. Improvements were seen in idea organization, appreciation of the concept of second readers, and frequent use of center resources such as handouts.

Short and long-term plans

Since the newly established centers were still in their nascent stage, they made short-term plans for their immediate survival as well as long-term ones they aspired to achieve. The common denominator in the short-term phase was a focus on building more awareness about their centers among students and faculty. The proposed strategies ranged from approaching students during the schools' bimonthly assemblies, to including a section on the writing center in the school handbook, and informing all faculty from grades 7 to 12 about the services. Expanding to other disciplines such as mathematics and the sciences, and bringing more teachers on board, were also seen as ways to increase the center's success. The long-term plans targeted more students, such as those in grade 10, and involved sharing the experience with sister schools, in addition to documenting the service through annual reports. Undoubtedly, the challenges ahead were a key concern for the new directors. These challenges mainly related to the sustainability of the centers–with peer tutors and faculty being the main concern–along with maintaining the motivation levels of both tutors and directors and finding convenient schedules for all parties.

Phase 4 - Post Five years of Operation: Short-Term Achievements, Constraints, and Long-Term Goals

In 2021, five years after the launch of various school writing centers, the same four directors were revisited–this time through an online survey–and asked about the operation of their centers in light of new developments at their schools, in addition to changes at the national and global levels (see Appendix B for the questions). The value of their centers to their institutions remained relatively stable, except in one case where a change in administration affected its standing. They described the center as a meeting place for both teachers and students to work on a variety of writing related material. It was deemed vital by the administration when they saw what students could achieve, but at times, they questioned whether the writing center was duplicating the work of the support for learning center by providing student assistance beyond class hours. In one school, the 'Right Place' was highly supported by the administration despite the many challenges in Lebanon with the shift to online teaching, and it continued to operate during teachers' scheduled office hours. However, in another school, the center was highly valued during its inaugural year, but its importance waned the following year since the new principal was not aware of its value. Hence, the leadership of any school can have positive as well as adverse effects on its writing centers.

Major Constraints

The constraints over the five-year period were mainly connected to scheduling and became more apparent with the shift to online platforms during the pandemic. This new mode made the involvement of peer tutors more challenging than having them trained and working on-site. Another significant constraint was financial, as teachers were not compensated for tutoring in the center, which led to a decrease in motivation. Additionally, a lack of support from the school

principal was a major challenge. A third constraint was logistical, again exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, some schools that had previously offered services during breaks or after school on Friday afternoons had to adapt to virtual sessions, with one school, for instance, requiring students to email for an appointment via Microsoft Teams.

Available Resources

As far as resources are concerned, most centers maintained the same resources, except for one, which faced budget cuts, while another received an increase in funding. This variation reflects the level of administrative support, which directly impacts the availability of resources. When asked about whether changes occurred in their job description as directors, the majority felt it remained the same with many of them doing the tutoring in addition to directing to ensure the continuity of the center due to a shortage of tutors. Some also volunteered to lead workshops, and in one exceptional case, a director's teaching load was reduced to allow for more focus on the center.

Successes and Achievements

To describe their major successes, one director highlighted helping graduating students compile properly written e-portfolios for universities in Lebanon and abroad. Another noted success in positioning the center as the only place where writers could receive clear, constructive feedback on their work. A key achievement for one director was initiating a team of passionate tutors who provided free SAT analytical essay writing lessons, as well as encouraging staff at other schools to establish writing centers. Clearly, some successes were short-term, while others were long-term goals. The most significant success for one director was the ability to better support middle school students in an online setting. This demonstrates how such a support system can enhance student learning in alternative formats, not just face-to-face.

Multilevel Failures

Reflecting on their failures and shortcomings, the directors' descriptions were similar. The failures were at the level of tutors, teachers, students and record keeping. Some directors struggled to involve student tutors, as they were reluctant to give up their lunch breaks. At the teacher level, the failures were more concerning; some teachers still resisted recommending the center to their students, believing that tutors could do better than them. This reluctance stemmed from their fear of inadequacy, even though some had been trained as tutors themselves. At the student level, attracting young learners without teacher encouragement was difficult, and motivating high school students to visit independently remained a challenge. Marketing the center was a concern, particularly when other departments, which assigned writing tasks in their content areas, were not involved. The shift to online learning did not always result in effective tutoring sessions. Documentation of services also proved challenging; while some directors managed to submit annual or semi-annual reports, others were occupied with administrative duties. Time constraints were a major issue, as some directors also coordinated English for middle and high school and taught

multiple classes, which made record-keeping difficult. Paradoxically, one director found it easier to track visitation data in the online setting using TEAMS. Looking ahead, while timetable conflicts remained a concern, the country's unstable conditions–frequent power cuts, electricity shortages, and weak connection–were seen as the most significant challenges for staff performance.

As far as the type of assignments they were receiving, minimal changes were noted, such as the addition of test preparation courses. However, a more noticeable trend was the increased interest from adults in having their work reviewed. In terms of staffing, most centers maintained their teams, with greater involvement from English teachers and, unexpectedly, an overt interest from other departments as well.

These accounts serve two purposes: they reflect the struggles and successes that were experienced by these school directors and can become useful references for future directors who might benefit from the experiences of established writing centers.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Lebanese schools that successfully launched writing centers through this project can share their experiences with public schools in need of language support, despite limited funding. While securing financial resources is crucial, alternatives can help alleviate budget constraints. For example, a school representative could attend writing center training workshops at a university and then train future tutors within the school. An alternative recommendation would be for a university writing center, or an already established school writing center, to reach out to another school in need and mentor its staff to manage a potential center. Additionally, twinning projects of schools from different regions can help them exchange ideas as well as resources. This project revealed the importance of aligning the needs of schools and universities, with higher education institutions serving as advisory references to help schools meet expectations and achieve common goals. Collaboration opportunities should be considered at the national and regional levels.

For sustainability, once school writing centers are established, whether public or private, ongoing tutor training is essential to adapt to new developments in the field, ensuring long-term success. Launching writing centers is not enough; sustaining them is crucial for their growth. Additionally, involving all subject matter teachers, not just English teachers, is vital to fostering respect for the service and helping them understand its value.

One recurrent challenge is the need to attract peer tutors, so one solution could be to have honors students serve as tutors. Moreover, those who show interest but are not necessarily honor students can be trained and their hours of tutoring can be counted to fulfill their community service requirement, which has recently been introduced in some schools. Success stories occur mostly when the writing center can be linked to specific school needs.

Other factors to be considered, given the regional linguistic background, are the specific needs for ESL writers that should be catered to following the pragmatic approach advised by Thonus (1993). The American model cannot be blindly applied without considering the unique needs of second language learners such as the knowledge of grammar and language mechanics that affect unity, organization, and coherence when writing in English. Schiera (2020) has cautioned that in the MENA region, students are learning English and learning how to write in English, which dictates specific needs that a writing center can supplement. He insists that tutoring materials should cater to multilingual writers, so directors should not only rely on U.S. manuals or other imported handbooks. He uses the metaphor of understanding the make-up of the 'soil' to aid in its treatment to produce better plants, much the same way that understanding positioning in tutor training documents supports how tutors and students interact. The connection between writing center practice and theory, in and outside of the MENA region, is still lacking. This project confirmed that novice directors were able to take an American seed, plant it in Lebanese soil, and cultivate it into a germinating crop with the potential for export to other MENA regions.

Finally, Honein-Shehadi's (2007) prediction about the uniqueness of writing centers tailored to their setting proved accurate, as the emerging writing center directors addressed the specific needs of each institution. This was evident in the school writing centers established in Lebanon following the 2016 project, where the multifaceted benefits of such centers were demonstrated.

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Appendix A

Phase 3 Follow-up Questions with Emerging Writing Center Directors

1. What motivated the work you took?
2. What does the work mean to your institution/school?
3. What are the motivators and constraints of your job?
4. What resources are available to you?
5. Do you struggle for visibility? (Administration, faculty, student levels)
6. What is the work of directing WCs? Non-tutoring work?
7. Tell/ describe your work lives (conflicts, successes & emotions, tips for other schools)
8. What are the short/ long-term plans?
9. What are the challenges ahead?
10. What type of assignments was popular at your Center? (English/ non-English, etc.)
11. Have you observed any improvements?

12. How are your Writing Centers staffed? (English faculty, faculty from other disciplines, peer tutors, volunteers)
13. How do you document the service (annual reports)

Appendix B

Phase 4 Follow-up Questions with Emerging Writing Center Directors

1. Can you describe the level of your motivation at present?
2. What does the writing center mean to your institution five years after its establishment?
3. What constraints of the job have you experienced over the past five years?
4. Do you still enjoy the same resources you previously had?
5. Are there any changes in your job description as a director? Are there new responsibilities to the work you already do?
6. What were your successes and failures so far?
7. Were you able to achieve your long-term plans?
8. What are the challenges ahead?
9. Have you noticed any changes in the type of assignments?
10. Were there any changes in the staffing of your center?
11. Have you managed to document your service in annual reports? If so, were they effective?

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