

Week One

Counselling and Mental Health.

The purpose of this course is not to train you to be a therapist or a counsellor. You are a teacher, and your primary role is to educate. However, we know that a student who is struggling emotionally or mentally cannot learn effectively.

This week, we will lay the essential foundation for the entire course. We will define your role with clarity, establish the professional rules that protect both you and your students, and introduce the basic skills that will empower you to act confidently and appropriately.

The Modern Classroom Reality

A. The Teacher's Viewpoint: A Common Scenario

Think about your own classes. You have likely encountered students like these:

Student A: A previously high-achieving student who has become quiet and withdrawn. They sit in the back, their homework is often incomplete, and they no longer participate in class discussions.

Student B: A young child who seems to have endless energy, constantly disrupts others, and often gets into fights during breaks. They struggle to follow simple instructions.

In a class of 30 or 40 students, it is easy for these individuals to be labelled as lazy or a troublemaker. But often, their behaviour is not a choice; it is a symptom. It is a sign of a struggle happening below the surface. As their teacher, you are the first line of defence. You are the one who sees these daily changes. This course is about shifting your perspective from asking *What is wrong with this student?* to asking *What is happening with this student?*

B. The Context in Kurdistan

Our students do not leave their lives at the classroom door. They bring their family stress, social pressures, and personal worries with them. In our context, this can include:

Academic Pressure: The intense, overwhelming stress of the Baccalaureate (12th Grade) exams, which is felt by students for years.

Socio-Economic Stress: Financial pressures on families that directly impact a child's environment and emotional state.

The Impact of social media: Constant comparison, cyberbullying, and unrealistic expectations that affect self-esteem and identity.

Generational Trauma: The legacy of conflict and displacement can have lasting, often unseen, effects on families and children.

Your classroom can be a place of stability, safety, and support amidst these challenges. Your goal is not to solve these problems, but to create an environment where students can learn and to know when and how to connect them to further help.

The Teacher vs. The Social Worker

Understanding your specific role is the key to being effective and avoiding burnout. A misunderstanding of these roles can lead to teachers taking on responsibilities they are not trained for, which can be harmful to both the student and the teacher.

We will use an analogy: **A Teacher is a General Doctor; a Social Worker is a Specialist Surgeon.**

A. The Teacher's Role (The General Doctor)

The General Doctor is responsible for the overall health of every patient they see. They promote healthy habits, identify early signs of illness, and treat common issues.

Focus: The well-being and positive functioning of the entire classroom community.

Goal: To create a safe, supportive, predictable, and positive learning environment for all students.

Your Key Professional Actions:

- I. **Promote Health (Prevention):** You actively teach social and emotional skills, such as cooperation, respect, and managing frustration, through your daily interactions and classroom activities.
- II. **Observe (Early Identification):** You are an expert observer. You notice changes in students' academic work, behaviour, social interactions, and mood over time.
- III. **Listen (Initial Support):** You are an approachable and trusted adult who can listen to a student's everyday concerns about a friendship, a difficult subject, or a bad day.

- IV. **Diagnose the Need for a Specialist:** Based on your observations, you recognize when a student's problem is beyond the scope of a typical classroom issue and requires specialized, one-on-one attention.
- V. **Refer (Connection to Care):** You follow school procedures to formally connect the student and their family with the school's specialist, the Social Worker (تویژہری کومہ لایمتی).

B. The Social Worker's Role (The Specialist Surgeon)

The Specialist Surgeon is called in when the General Doctor identifies a problem that requires specialized tools, knowledge, and procedures.

Focus: The intensive, targeted well-being of individual students with significant needs.

Goal: To assess and provide direct, confidential intervention for students facing serious academic, emotional, behavioural, or family-related challenges.

The Social Worker's Key Professional Actions:

- I. **Assess (Deep Diagnosis):** They conduct one-on-one meetings with the student, communicate with the family, and gather information from other teachers to understand the root cause of the problem.
- II. **Counsel (Specialized Treatment):** They provide ongoing, confidential counselling sessions to help the student develop coping strategies for issues like anxiety, grief, family conflict, or trauma.
- III. **Intervene (Case Management):** They create a formal support plan, coordinate with outside agencies if necessary, and act as the main point of contact for the family.
- IV. **Manage Crisis (Emergency Response):** They are the designated first responder for any urgent mental health or safety crisis, such as a student expressing thoughts of self-harm or reporting abuse.

Your job is to manage the health of the whole forest. The social worker's job is to care for the individual trees that are seriously ill. If you spend all your time trying to perform surgery on one tree, the whole forest will suffer.

Ethics, Boundaries, and Confidentiality

To be a trusted professional, you must operate within a clear ethical framework.

A. Confidentiality: The Foundation of Trust

The Rule of Trust (Definition): Confidentiality means that when a student shares something personal with you, you will not gossip about it or share it unnecessarily with other colleagues or students. This is how you earn their trust.

The Limit of Trust (The Rule of Safety): This is the most important ethical rule. Confidentiality is not absolute. You must break confidentiality and immediately report the situation to your school's administration or Social Worker if a student reveals:

1. Harm from Others: *Someone is hurting me.* (Abuse, neglect, or violence).
2. Harm to Self: *I want to hurt myself.* (Thoughts of suicide or self-harm).
3. Harm to Others: *I want to hurt someone else.* (Threats of violence).

Your legal and ethical duty to ensure safety is always more important than a promise of privacy. It is good practice to explain this to your students proactively: *You can always talk to me. I will keep what you say private, unless it is a serious safety issue. My number one job is to make sure you are safe, so if I hear that you or someone else is in danger, I have to tell someone who can help.*

B. Professional Boundaries

Boundaries are the clear lines that separate your professional identity as a teacher from your personal life. In the close-knit communities of Kurdistan, where you may be a neighbour or family friend, these lines are even more important to maintain consciously.

Be Friendly, But Not a *Friend*: You are a warm, supportive mentor, not a peer. Keep your communication professional.

Don't Share Your Personal Problems: It is unprofessional and burdensome to share your own private struggles (financial, marital...) with your students. You are the adult in the room.

Listen, Don't Advise on Life Decisions: A student may complain about their parents. Your role is to listen and validate their feelings (That sounds really difficult), not to give advice or take sides (You should tell your father...). Guide them back to their own support systems (Who in your family do you feel comfortable talking to about this?).

Manage Dual Relationships: If you teach a child who is also your nephew or your neighbour, be very clear. At school, you must treat them the same as every other student. Their family relationship does not give them special privileges or expose them to different standards.

The Professional Habit; Simple and Effective Documentation

Keeping brief, objective notes on concerning student behaviour is not about creating trouble for the student. It is a professional practice that helps you understand the situation and communicate it clearly.

A. Why Write It Down?

- I. **To See Patterns:** A single bad day is normal. But a written record might show you that a student has been withdrawn and irritable *every Monday for the past six weeks*, suggesting a pattern.
- II. **To Be Factual:** When you talk to the Social Worker or parents, emotions can run high. Your notes provide objective, factual data, not just feelings or opinions.
- III. **To Protect Yourself:** A record of your observations and the steps you took demonstrates that you are acting as a diligent and responsible professional.

B. How to Write It: The FACT Method (Factual, Accurate, Concise, Timely)

Your notes should be objective descriptions of behaviour.

- **AVOID Opinion/Judgment:** *I think Zara was depressed today because her parents are fighting. She was very lazy and disrespectful.*"
- **USE Observable Facts:** *Date: Oct 26. Student: Mahmood G. Observation: During math class, Mahmood had his head on the desk for 20 minutes. When pressed, she said 'I can't do this.' She did not turn in the assignment. During the break, she sat alone and did not speak with her friends. Action Taken: Spoke with her briefly after class to ask if she was okay. She said 'I'm just tired.'*

This type of factual note is incredibly powerful. It provides a clear, professional basis for a conversation with the Social Worker or the student's family, focused entirely on the child's observed well-being.