**Order and disorder**

Ms Jhabvala entered the school compound as usual and sighed. She sighed because the buildings

before her reminded her of a medieval fortress, not a school. They were cruel and forbidding. What

had once been flowerbeds were now sandy deserts where poorly disciplined children threw soil in

each other’s eyes. She sighed again as she passed through the creaking door of her daily prison,

along the echoing, miserable passages, her footsteps the only sound in this place of torture.

Now her mind clicked into action, rehearsing the last details of the lessons she was to teach today.

Never mind the Principal’s ideas about learning, that children should choose what they wanted to do,

that they should have freedom. Ms Jhabvala had heard the shouting and disorder from too many

classrooms. She had seen the morose faces of sad children waiting to be taught but never able to

make up their minds as to what might interest them. These classrooms were lifeless, without energy.

Ms Jhabvala was the only person on the premises, except for the caretaker who was still unlocking

doors. She always arrived early so that everything would be ready and she would be thoroughly

prepared. She passed through Mr Raj’s room. It looked ransacked as if a wild beast had blundered

through. Scattered tables and chairs and ripped papers littered the room and broken furniture was

heaped into a mountain at the back. Ms Jhabvala stopped and looked at the symmetry of the ruin;

ironic, she thought, that it was the most orderly thing in the room. The walls were pitted with holes and

spattered with sticky substances. Not like mine, the teacher thought, thinking of her students’ neat

work displayed in her bright, friendly classroom. But, as she reminded herself, no one cared. Like Mr

Raj, they had all given up long ago.

At last she arrived at her own room, a haven of peace and industry. She switched on the computers,

checked the programs and put piles of textbooks on her table. Ten minutes later she looked out and

saw hordes of children slouching into school, despondent, not caring much about anything. Some

fights broke out, unnoticed by the few teachers who also drifted in, carrying their battered briefcases.

Ms Jhabvala did not imagine that these contained anything except pens, pencils and a few snacks.

The noise spread to the adjoining classrooms, and soon there were sounds of teachers trying to make

themselves heard above the screams and coarse laughter. Ms Jhabvala opened the door to her neat

line of beaming students. They wished each other good morning and Ms Jhabvala straightened a few

stray bits of clothing, and the children filed quietly in. One of them had brought a wooden sign with

‘Ms Jhabvala, her special room’ painted on it to go on the outside of the door. The teacher took her

own register (she was the only one to do so) and the lesson started. Forty minutes later, they had

read a story, learned something about punctuation and language, and were busy writing poems that

would decorate the wall before the end of the week. The brightest children were given special work to

do.

As they went, one little girl said, ‘I wish we could stay in your class all day. We have to go to Mr Raj

now, and we never do anything.’

Ms Jhabvala paused a minute as they went, to think how hard it had been for her. When she first

came to the school, no one had wanted to learn at all. But she had persevered, rewarding them for

being positive or just pleasant. She’d hardly ever lost her temper, and had always managed a smile.

The other teachers had given in to stupid ideas about teaching and the curriculum. Language and

mathematics had been given little time and there were huge gaps in the children’s knowledge, about

science, for example. There was a good deal of sport, though most of that was not about fitness.

‘They just loaf about,’ she thought. If you asked children what they wanted to do, they’d always say

‘Watch a DVD’, but after a time that bored them too. So the days were chaotic, and everyone lacked

any sense of purpose. Soon they grew tired of each other’s company.

Ms Jhabvala’s train of thought petered out at this point. Anyway her next class was waiting. She

opened the door and proudly hung up her new wooden sign.

**QUESTIONS**

A1 – List five things that show the environment is run-down.

A2 – How does Ms Jhabvala reflect on her arrival at the school (end of the extract)? Write about the language used.

A3 – What impression do you get of Ms Jhabvala?

A4 – How is tension and drama built up in the extract?

A5 – “The students deserve to be given up on” How far would you agree or disagree with this statement.