

Islamic School of Seattle unique for blending individual pace, immersion language lessons



JIMI LOTT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Hannah Kalinoski, 7, helps lead the class in a song at the Islamic School of Seattle. The children's lessons are conducted entirely in Arabic.

Arabic meets Montessori

BY KEITH ERVIN
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What makes Nada Shaath's class at the Islamic School of Seattle unusual isn't just that the lessons are entirely in Arabic.

The class is unique in the United States, and perhaps in the world, because it combines Montessori, a nontraditional teaching method that lets children learn at their own pace, with total immersion in Arabic as a second language.

On a recent morning, the 6-to-9-year-old children worked in clusters scattered around Shaath's small classroom. On the floor, two boys used a pegboard to multiply large numbers.

Girls and boys seated around a table honed their reading and writing skills in an Arabic workbook. Parents who want their children to learn reading and writing in English at this age must tutor them at home. Other children sat at computers with Arabic keyboards and software. They addressed "Sister Nada" in English, although she spoke to them only in Arabic.

At times, the whole class gathers for songs and games in the language of the prophet Mohammed. The students also pray together each afternoon.

Some of the children are immigrants whose native languages are neither English nor Arabic. Only one,

Moroccan-born Omar Bertaia, speaks Arabic as a first language.

The unusual combination of Montessori, Arabic and Islam has raised some eyebrows.

Shaath recalled a recent conversation with a substitute teacher for her class. "The substitute said, 'I'm in a mess. Some students are doing math, some are doing science, some are doing Arabic.' He thought this was a big mistake." But Shaath told him it was normal.

The children have varied reactions to the Arabic-language curriculum.

"It's kind of rough," said Sofiel El-Mehrik, 6.

"It's easy," said Hannah Kalinoski, 7, noting that she has

moved to the second-level Arabic-language workbook.

The Montessori Method, developed by Italian-born physician Maria Montessori early in the 20th century, is sometimes viewed as excessively permissive because children don't sit in rows of desks and they make decisions about which activities they will do. In fact, the technique - which relies heavily on manipulation of objects and children's natural curiosity - is highly structured.

"It is not unlimited choice," Shaath explained. "They know they have to do Arabic and math. When they do it or how they do it is up to them. They have a choice."

Using Montessori in a foreign-language immersion classroom is not unheard of, and Montessori advocates claim the method is well-suited to learning languages.

The 21 children taught by Maria Montessori in a demonstration class at the 1915 World's Fair in San Francisco spoke 12 different languages, said Mike Rosanova, director of InterCultura, a Chicago-area Montessori school in which children are immersed in Spanish or Japanese.

A scattering of French-immersion Montessori schools have been opened in Canada, but the mix of Montessori and foreign languages is unusual in the United States. Rosanova said he was aware of only four Montessori language-immersion schools in this country.

The choices children make in a Montessori classroom build self-discipline, a quality critical to a religion based on submission to God, said Principal Nurul Iman Abdullah. "This self-discipline translates into obedience, which is one of the most ideal, precious qualities that are valued in Islam. We're going the same way. It's just most people don't understand the relationship between Montessori and Islam."

Unlike more traditional Muslim schools in which children memorize the catechism, teachers at the Islamic School look for "teachable

moments" in which to introduce Islamic principles into other classroom activities, said Ann El-Moslimany, the school's co-founder and curriculum director.

Islamic School students are introduced to the sacred book, the Koran, and are taught Arabic at all grade levels. The school has 53 students from kindergarten to sixth grade.

Teacher arrived last year

Founded in 1980, the Islamic School is located one block north of Garfield High School in Seattle's Central District. The brick building was constructed in 1930 as the home of Seattle Talmud Torah (now Seattle Hebrew Academy).

Since the school's inception, the founders have envisioned an Arabic-immersion curriculum but for years were frustrated by a scarcity of native Arabic speakers trained in Montessori or other "child-centered" teaching methods. They moved closer to that goal with the creation of an Arabic half-immersion class for kindergartners and first-graders four years ago.

But a true Montessori, full-immersion Arabic classroom had to wait until the right teacher was found.

Shaath, a citizen of Jordan, was visiting her brother, a Microsoft worker, last year when she spotted a woman wearing a hijab, a distinctive Muslim head covering, in the downtown Seattle bus tunnel.

The women introduced themselves. The woman wearing the hijab was Joyce McMahon, managing editor of the Northwest Islamic Journal, which rents space in the Islamic School building. Learning that Shaath was a certified Montessori teacher, she took Shaath's resume and passed it along to the Islamic School.

Not long after, Shaath was hired.

A unique school

Arabic is spoken by more than 200 million people. And the world's other 1 billion Muslims are expected to

learn Arabic in order to understand the Koran and to pray in the language of the Koran.

But Arabic instruction outside Islamic schools is scarce.

For the past two years the U.S. Department of Education funded a summer language camp in Seattle to train teachers who are fluent in Arabic and four other "critical languages" key to the nation's economy and defense. (The other critical languages are Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Russian.)

Even after that training, no public schools in the Seattle area are teaching Arabic.

"What's unique about the Islamic School is (other Koranic schools) teach Arabic for the purpose of reading the Koran, whereas the Islamic School is teaching Arabic as a language that the students can function in as well as read the Koran," said Betty Lau, a coordinator of the summer camp and a teacher of English as a second language at Seattle's Middle College High School.

Aishah Kalinoski, an English-language Montessori teacher at Cherry Hill Preschool, which is run by the Islamic School, said her 7-year-old daughter Hannah's love of Arabic has "just blossomed" in Shaath's immersion class. "I'm taking Arabic classes. She's sitting right next to me and explaining the rules of grammar, why it's got to be this way and not this way. That's impressive when I'm struggling with it. It's pretty advanced stuff."

Although the children are learning conversational Arabic, there is a deeper purpose. Principal Abdullah explained, "It is the desire and the objective of all Muslims to know the original language in which the Koran was written, for the purpose of better understanding what God was trying to say to us."

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