

# Islamic Montessori



ISLAMIC  
MONTESSORI  
nurturing the child's natural interest

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## FOSTERING LOVE FOR THE QUR'AN THE MONTESSORI WAY

In this article, Ustazah Layla outlines the what makes a holistic Qur'an program and how the Montessori philosophy could be utilized

## THE HOLISTIC BENEFITS OF SIGN LANGUAGE

Nadia Husain shares her research on the holistic benefits from learning sign language!

## HELPING AND EMPOWERING REFUGEE WOMEN TO BECOME MONTESSORI TEACHERS

Empowered women, empower women. Read Maha's stories on her heartfelt journey of helping refugee women to become Montessori teachers.





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*The humanitarian system needs to empower people to help themselves, to have access to education, and to finally have jobs. Four years ago, I realized the needs of those innocent people and started the process of educating and creating jobs for them.*

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## 04 WORK IS LOVE MADE VISIBLE



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### FOSTERING LOVE FOR THE QUR'AN THE MONTESSORI WAY

Millennial parents are becoming more aware of the social and emotional needs of their children, and thus, the importance of creating a nurturing Qur'an program. The secular subjects in traditional schools are not the only ones that have divested from natural and holistic methods of education; in recent years, Qur'an literacy and memorization programs have also strayed into methods that are not necessarily healthy or beneficial for the whole child.



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### A STORY OF HELPING AND EMPOWERING REFUGEE WOMEN

Now, it is a very challenging time for the UNHCR as they try to provide protection and solutions for those innocent people who have been displaced from their homes. Although the refugees are housed and fed in camps, they do not have the right to work and often have limited freedom of movement. They have been trying to develop policies for assisting refugees outside camps, but the humanitarian system has not been successful so far. They are effective at giving legal advice and emergency relief; however, they are unable to create jobs, obtain investments from businesses, or empower affected communities.

# from the editor

Assalamu Alaikum,

Welcome to our second edition of the Islamic Montessori Magazine and our first edition of 2021.

Thank you for all your support for our first edition of the magazine, over 5000 copies were downloaded in just a few months. I'm so glad to see so many Montessorians all over the world are resonating and benefitting from the magazine, I hope this is a step forward towards building a truly global community of Muslim Montessorian.

In our first issue for 2021 we looked at practicing Montessori at home. We explored ways in which Montessori methodology and Islamic teachings work seamlessly together. In this issue we will discuss the holistic benefits of Sign Language, and we learn about how Montessori training has benefited Syrian refugees living in Turkey and Jordan as they rebuild their lives away from home.

I've thoroughly enjoyed putting together this edition - with so many interesting insights and unique perspectives to learn from, I do hope you'll find it inspiring & beneficial.

As always we'd love to hear your feedback and if you're a Muslim Montessori educator and would like to contribute towards our next edition please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Best wishes,

Nusaibah

*Nusaibah*  
Nusaibah Macadam  
EDITOR

# “WORK IS LOVE MADE VISIBLE” KHALIL GUBRAN

by Amira El-Aghel  
Photos by Rumi Montessori

**“We must prepare a better future for man by utilising the marvellous potential of the child.”**

**(Montessori, 2019: pg81)**

Montessori believed in an education system that would prepare children for adult life by becoming Knowledgeable, socially aware individuals who understand their environments and are willing and able to defend human rights, the ecology of our planet and universal peace. (Montessori,1992)

A verse that we repeat in prayer 5 times a day every day,

اهدنا الصراط المستقيم

"Guide us to the straight righteous path."

The goal of any traveller is to reach a destination, the closer they get to their goal the more progress they will have made; they will have failed if they do not reach their destination.

Allah reveals in the Quran that he is the final destination and all we must do is focus on staying on the righteous path. There are no comparisons with others on this path each has their own journey with their own experiences.

Just as each child is unique in their developmental journey, his ultimate destination is the unfolding of his potential to construct the man who will serve Allah and serve humanity.

“The child is endowed with unknown powers, which can guide us to a radiant future. If what we really want is a new world, then education must take as its aim the development of these hidden possibilities.” (Montessori, 2007)

Montessori (2012) believed that children are active learners constantly learning and absorbing from the human and physical environments around them. The child develops by means of the experiences he has, and it is through the interactions with his environment, and his continuous activity that the child achieves independence becoming free by means of constant effort, enabling him to becoming a competent learner, who can be resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured.

The child will take on a task not necessarily to reach an outcome but to enjoy the process, he will repeat activities with determination and perseverance until his inner self is satisfied. Not only does he master skills, but he grows in confidence and sees himself strong and capable of sustained effort. We need to create these opportunities for the children in environments that facilitate, support, and extend children’s thinking skills and reinforce the natural inclination to have a go and take risks. Emotional and intellectual independence, confidence and willingness to have a go are all dispositions to life and learning for the child and all contribute to building resilience to aid his transformation into the man of tomorrow who will persevere on the journey of life and not deviate from the path to Allah.

“The child’s instinct confirms the fact that work is an inherent tendency in human nature; it is the characteristic instinct of the human race.” (Montessori,2017: pg168)

Surah Al-Isra, Verse 84:

قُلْ كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَىٰ شَاكِلَتِهِ فَرَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ سَبِيلًا



Say, "Each works according to his manner, but your Lord is most knowing of who is best guided in way."

"Everyone must work according to their 'Shakila'" Shakila means the unique makeup of each human being, who has a unique biological, physical, genetic, psychological make up. Minds, likes, dislikes, interests, strengths, and weaknesses are different. Each person has a unique journey on the road with their own starting points, experiences, and speed. And because each human has been given unique strengths and the potential they can only succeed if they identify the gifts they were given and utilise them in serving humanity through their continuous work.

We find that the word work in the Quran is frequently paired with the word faith. As in Surat Akahf:

﴿وَأَمَّا مَنْ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُ جَزَاءٌ  
الْحُسْنَىٰ وَسَنَقُولُ لَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِنَا يُسْرًا﴾

"But as for one who believes and does righteousness, he will have a reward of Paradise, and we will speak to him from our command with ease."

It is not enough to have faith, but rather it is the good deeds that this faith brings forth that is of value and is rewarded.

Montessori was an advocate of following the child, she believed that every child had his pattern, style of learning and interests, each developing at their own pace, and that all children needed to manipulate objects to gain experiences by touching and handling, which inspires them to become independent, responsible and self-motivated adults. (Montessori,2012)

We need to provide an environment that reflects the individual interests of the children, and our observations should guide us to know each child's unique qualities and characteristics, so that we can ensure their engagement in stimulating and challenging activities giving each child the opportunity to spontaneous work that develops his unique potential.

"The hands are the instrument of man's intelligence" (Montessori,2007. pg:23)

Surat Al-Hujurat:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ  
وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ  
عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ﴾

“O mankind, indeed, we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.”

Humanity was not made to be identical and humans complete each other, as do the children in a Montessori setting the 'vertical grouping' (Isaacs, 2018) allows for interactions between children of different ages learning and playing along-side each other, this underpins developing social relationships and emotional wellbeing they are able to display sympathy, empathy and concern for each other, and take joint responsibility for their environment. They see how they complete each other as a community developing side by side on their learning journey preparing them for their future roles and responsibilities in life. Their concern becomes how do I serve Allah and His creation using the gifts they were given, because the only road to Allah is to benefit others and the Universe and through finding their purpose in life, they will attain fulfilment and true happiness. They aspire to work according to the journey uniquely crafted for them, according to their unique talents, strengths, and abilities they learn to value every experience and use it to serve others.

Children are curious by nature as they gain an understanding of the world their culture and the culture of others around them, they get to celebrate their uniqueness and embrace diversity to learn from each other and create a community in which they all belong.

We cannot ignore the influence we have on the environment and our children; we need to remember that we are key advocates of change, and need to be role models with humble dispositions, trusting them in making the appropriate choices for their learning. We must view the world through the eyes of the child allowing them to be agents of change and inspiration, we have a duty to enable children to reach their full potential through education in order for them to be successful in this world and the next.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amira El-aghel is a Montessori teacher with 16 years experience working in early years. She currently holds the position of deputy manager at an outstanding mainstream playgroup in London, where she has taken on introducing the Montessori philosophy and curriculum to their practice. She is passionate about Montessori education being accessible to all. She is also on the board of trustees for the Montessori St Nicholas Charity.



Picture from  
Rumi Montessori



Picture from  
Esraa Haidar

# BRINGING MONTESSORI TO THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

by Esraa Haidar  
Photos by Esraa Haidar

When I was first introduced to Montessori I would rush to buy any wooden toy I could get my hands on. I would look at pictures on the internet and try to replicate what I was seeing, foolishly thinking that by doing so I was creating a Montessori environment for my children. The setup and the activities were there but my children seemed to have no desire to do anything with them. I was puzzled and at the same time intrigued. What was I missing?

Fast forward a few years later and I am now an AMI trained adult and I have begun to understand why my previous attempts had failed. Dr. Montessori's philosophy is one that looks not only at the child but at the adult and the environment as well. These components may seem obvious and simple but putting them into practice requires patience, trust and reflection.

## Preparing Ourselves

To apply the Montessori principles at home we must start with ourselves, the adults. For me, it

started with asking myself why I wanted to create such an environment for my children. By thinking about my "why" I began to have more clarity and a deeper appreciation of what it means to apply Montessori principles at home. I wanted our home to offer my children opportunities for more independence and self-fulfillment. I wanted them to know that they are as important as any of the other members of our family and that their contributions and ideas were valued. I wanted to foster within them a genuine love for learning and a deeper connection with Allah (swt) and I did not want that to be a temporary thing but rather a lifestyle.

Dig deep into this question of "why" and write down your ideas and thoughts, how do you envision your home culture to be like, what is that you value and want for your children both academically and spiritually? What are some of the things you would like to see happening differently in your home and how do you hope that this new approach will help with that?

The preparation of the adult also requires that we educate ourselves about the Montessori philosophy. This you can do by reading Dr. Montessori's books and other authors who explain her approach. Seeking knowledge also means that we avoid the influx of information that surrounds us on social media and blogs because that information will overwhelm you. Be selective in how and where you get your information and whether you are an experienced Montessorian or someone who is completely new, there is always something new to learn.

Once you begin implementing changes, setting up spaces and engaging in activities be sure to reflect on your experiences and be sure to remain flexible and open for change. Nothing is set in stone and what works for others may not work for your family, be ok with that and embrace all that comes along the way.

### Preparing our Environments

Does preparing your environment mean that you will have to go out and purchase new furniture? Will you be changing every room in every house? The answer to both those questions is no. Instead, approach setting up your home by following these tips:

1. Tour your home as if you were a child. Get on your knees and see the world from your child's point of view. Does he have the ability to function in an independent way that is appropriate for his age or are there things that are just too high or inaccessible to him? Can he make himself a snack, help out with certain tasks at home or is he dependent on you in everything? Are there certain daily activities that I do for my child that I know he is capable of doing by himself? And most importantly do I have an orderly environment and does my child know where things belong, not only in his room but in the house overall? Make note of these observations as you tour every room of your house.

2. Start by making small changes. After you evaluate your space, I suggest you start one room at a time. Do not think that this will end in one day but rather think of it as an ongoing process. Take one room and see what changes you can start making today, you may need to rearrange a few things, declutter a little or place a stool somewhere. Then introduce these changes to your child and observe how they react. Make note of any major things you need to purchase like a small table or shelf but do not let that stop you from starting with what you have. With a piece of paper in hand, think of yourself as being commissioned by your child to rearrange each room that he uses so that it gives him more opportunities to act independently. To truly apply the Montessori principles at home we must seek to create an environment that is simple, beautiful and supports the development of the child.

3. Ask yourself what interests your child. In choosing activities for your children, the key principle is that it must stem from their interests. We want to give children meaningful, purposeful and real activities. Do not limit your understanding of Montessori activities to them being items that you purchase. Include them in the daily activities that they see you do. An afternoon spent baking or walking in nature and learning the name of trees is one way you can infuse Montessori into your daily routine. Give your children choices and change some activities every once in a while. Observe how they are engaging with the changes you have made and work accordingly based on that.

**“Tour your home as if you were a child. Get on your knees and see the world from your child's point of view.”**



4. Introduce, demonstrate and repeat. We can not expect that by attempting to apply Montessori principles in our home that things will change overnight. In the Montessori classroom, we always introduce a new lesson to the child and then demonstrate how that material is used. The same applies in the home environment except this time we introduce whatever it is we have changed. Whether it's how to carry a tray or how to put away the dishes we always use this phrase " Let me show you how we do that". Repetition is especially important for younger children, so do not be frustrated when things don't seem to be going as you had expected.

## The Child

No one knows your child like you do, a connection is already there and unlike the classroom setting it will not take you time to get to know one another. As you become more familiar with the Montessori philosophy and as you experiment in setting up your home and in setting up engaging and meaningful activities you will come to see your child through a different lens. When I began adopting this approach I developed a deeper understanding for my children and how they were developing, I became more aware and attentive of the things that I was unintentionally doing that were standing in the way of them becoming whom they were meant to be. I began to observe my children and pay attention to their interests and questions. In a way, they became my teachers because they revealed to me what needed to be done for them to truly flourish. "The child is capable of teaching himself" is a phrase you will read a lot in Dr. Montessori's book but to truly believe it and experience it is something else.

## What Really Matters

Adopting the Montessori approach at home is less about having Montessori materials and more about applying the principles that this philosophy advocates for in our daily lives. There is no perfect way to do it and transforming our homes to become Montessori homes starts with us transforming ourselves. To truly respect our children we must respect their developmental needs and do all that we can to ensure that our homes are a place where our children can be themselves, a place where they can be heard and can learn, read, bake, laugh and grow. Your home is yours and it should serve you and your family and not the guests we rarely see. Whether you live in a large house or not does not matter, whether you are in the city or not does not matter either. What matters is that we realize that there is a better way to educate children and prepare them for the life that lies ahead of them, and it is on us to start that change. Make those changes, rearrange your home, read those books, go on those adventures, slow down and savour the precious moments you have with your little ones. Watch them grow in front of your eyes and my hope is that when you rest at night you do so knowing that you did everything you can to serve the child that Allah (swt) has entrusted you with.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Esraa is a mom of 2 and lover of all things Montessori and nature. When she is not learning with her children in their home environment she is exploring new ways of making Montessori Education accessible to all. Esraa is AMI trained in the Montessori Method for children ages 3-6 and is also the founder of Mawadda Kids Center- a summer play space based in Lebanon.

You can connect with Esraa on Instagram @esraahaidar



Picture from  
Esraa Haidar

**“Do not erase the designs the child makes in the soft wax of his inner life”**

**MARIA MONTESSORI**





# THE HOLISTIC BENEFITS OF SIGN LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ISLAMIC MONTESSORI CLASSROOM

by Nadia Husain  
Photos by Nadia Husain

Sign language can be defined as communication made through specific hand movements, facial expressions and body positions. (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2015). While commonly viewed as a language used exclusively for those with a type of hearing loss, the benefits of signing among hearing children was first explored in the 18th century (Condillac, 1775). Since then, a wealth of research has been conducted to explore the holistic benefits of sign language in a variety of areas, such as vocabulary, reading, emotion regulation as well as its role in bridging multilingualism.

## Academic Success

Some of the most prolific contributions in North America within the area of sign language use among hearing children were the series of studies conducted by Marilyn Daniels (1994a; 1994b, 1996a; 1996b; 1997; 2004 ). These studies examined the effects of ASL instruction on early childhood students in classrooms with no prior exposure to sign language. It was consistently found that ASL intervention resulted in significantly higher English vocabulary acquisition and reading levels among treatment groups compared to similar classrooms without the intervention.

## Emotion Regulation

Aside from academic improvements, anecdotal and questionnaire content provided by Daniels (2001) point to the positive effects of sign language on the emotions and behavior of students that were encountered throughout her studies. Excerpts from student reflections and parent feedback reveal that sign language was beneficial to use in moments in sadness, anger, sickness and embarrassment. Daniels (2001) explains that the visual and hands-on properties of sign language allowed these children to understand and embody the essence of the feeling or action.

With regards to classroom management, teachers reported that their classrooms became quieter and that students responded more readily to signs than spoken instructions, which would usually need to be repeated multiple times before acknowledged by students (Daniels, 2001). Teachers also reported less conflict in the classroom and less cases of physically violent behavior as students would often resort to using sign language to express their emotions and resolve their issues (Daniels, 2001).

### **A Bridge to Multilingualism**

Upon deeper investigation into the causes behind these intriguing results, research reveals a link between speech and gestures from a neurological perspective. When gestures are combined with speech, the part of the brain associated with comprehending speech, known as Broca's area, can more efficiently process the content of the incoming communication (Dick et al., 2009). It was suggested by Gullberg (2010) that language learners tend to rely more heavily on gestures while learning a second language (L2) than native speakers. Since sign language is a type of visual language that utilizes methods such as gestures and pantomime to aid in communication (Toth, 2009), it only seems logical to investigate its benefits for multilingualism.

Further evidence leaning towards this possibility can be drawn from research indicating that different languages use separate memory stores (Kolers, 1963; Goggin & Wickens, 1971). Studies conducted by Hoemann (1978) and Hoemann & Koenig (1990) further established that American Sign Language (ASL) also falls under this rule by having a separate memory store. Having this additional language resource as suggested by Daniels (2001) allows learners to more efficiently retrieve information that aids in reading, spelling or vocabulary acquisition. The implications for bilingual children who learn sign language are that they would have three

memory stores from which they can retrieve information; their native language, second language and sign language.

### **Putting Theory into Practice**

With regards to actual studies conducted on the benefits of sign language with multilingual children, Tableman (2003) found that ESL students who were previously performing below average either met or exceeded their grade reading level with the addition of ASL. Furthermore, the study by Mejia-Menendez (2016) found that ASL intervention resulted in the acquisition of twice as many vocabulary words than the control group of a number of students in a bilingual Spanish-English classroom.

With regards to multilingual Montessori schools that are currently utilizing sign language to improve the quality of education that students receive, there is one that stood out in particular. In the United States, there is an Indigenous Montessori known as STAR School, a public charter founded in 2001 near Arizona. According to founder Dr. Mark Sorensen, Montessori pedagogy is utilized due to its flexibility in accommodating a multilingual and multicultural environment (Sorensen & Price, 2017). In addition, children are taught in three languages; ASL, English and Navajo. Similar to the evidence presented above, it is believed that the use of ASL is playing a significant role in enhancing cognitive skills and multilingual communication. By tracking the progress of Pre/K Navajo students at the STAR School for 3 years, it was found that nearly all students, who were previously more than a year behind in math, reached or excelled beyond national grade-level standards along with showing notable improvements in language and social skills (Sorensen & Price, 2017).

A specific implication for Islamic Montessori educators is that in order to help students gain a deeper understanding of the Quran and other religious texts, sign language may act as a catalyst in further enhancing Arabic language learning as a complement to traditional strategies. For instance, when spelling words with the moveable alphabet, one may consider also teaching the ASL manual alphabet to fingerspell words to act as a kinesthetic memory aid.

The benefits of integrating sign language in the classroom are clearly evident, and it is up to us whether we reap the benefits of implementing a holistic and multimodal approach to learning multiple languages. While it may appear intimidating to teach an unfamiliar mode of communication, sign language can be learned slowly according to your students' needs and to whatever extent is possible. When it comes to language learning, more is definitely merrier, and thus, any integration is surely better than none at all.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nadia Husain is an elementary teacher and mom of 1 from Toronto, Canada. She implements Montessori pedagogy at home with her toddler and is also pursuing an M.Ed in Second Language Education along with Montessori certification (3-6) from NAMC. She is present on social media and her Instagram handle is @the.absorbent.mom



## BOOK



## CRACKER

**“...it is up to us whether we reap the benefits of implementing a holistic and multimodal approach to learning multiple languages.”**



Picture from  
Layla Graham

# FOSTERING LOVE FOR THE QUR'AN THE MONTESSORI WAY: PART 1

by Layla Graham

Photos by Layla Graham and Rumi Montessori

I was always a Qur'an educator. Since I was about fourteen years old, I've been helping children and adults learn how to read, write, and memorize the Qur'an. I knew from a young age that no matter where my studies took me, I would always want to remain someone the community can turn to for their Qur'anic education. But never in my wildest dreams did I think my Montessori training would totally transform how I approached teaching the Holy Book.

It's important to point out that my journey towards memorizing the Qur'an was not a linear one, and

took a very long time. I pray for and am grateful to all my Qur'an teachers, but now that I teach children myself, it is quite clear which ones made the biggest impact on my *hifdh* journey. However, there was one part of my past *hifdh* experiences that I hadn't taken into account before becoming a Montessori guide: *the environment*.

When I really got to the bottom of what some teachers had more impact on me than others, it boiled down how much better prepared the environment was for memorizing and studying the Qur'an. My Montessori training helped me become more

observant of my past experiences as well as my present ones, and this is what the best Qur'an education environments all had in common:

- Multi-aged classrooms
- A teacher who was still a student herself
- Individualized progression through the Qur'an
- Peer-to-peer instruction and correction
- Large blocks of time to work individually or in groups with other students
- Students were responsible for maintaining the classroom

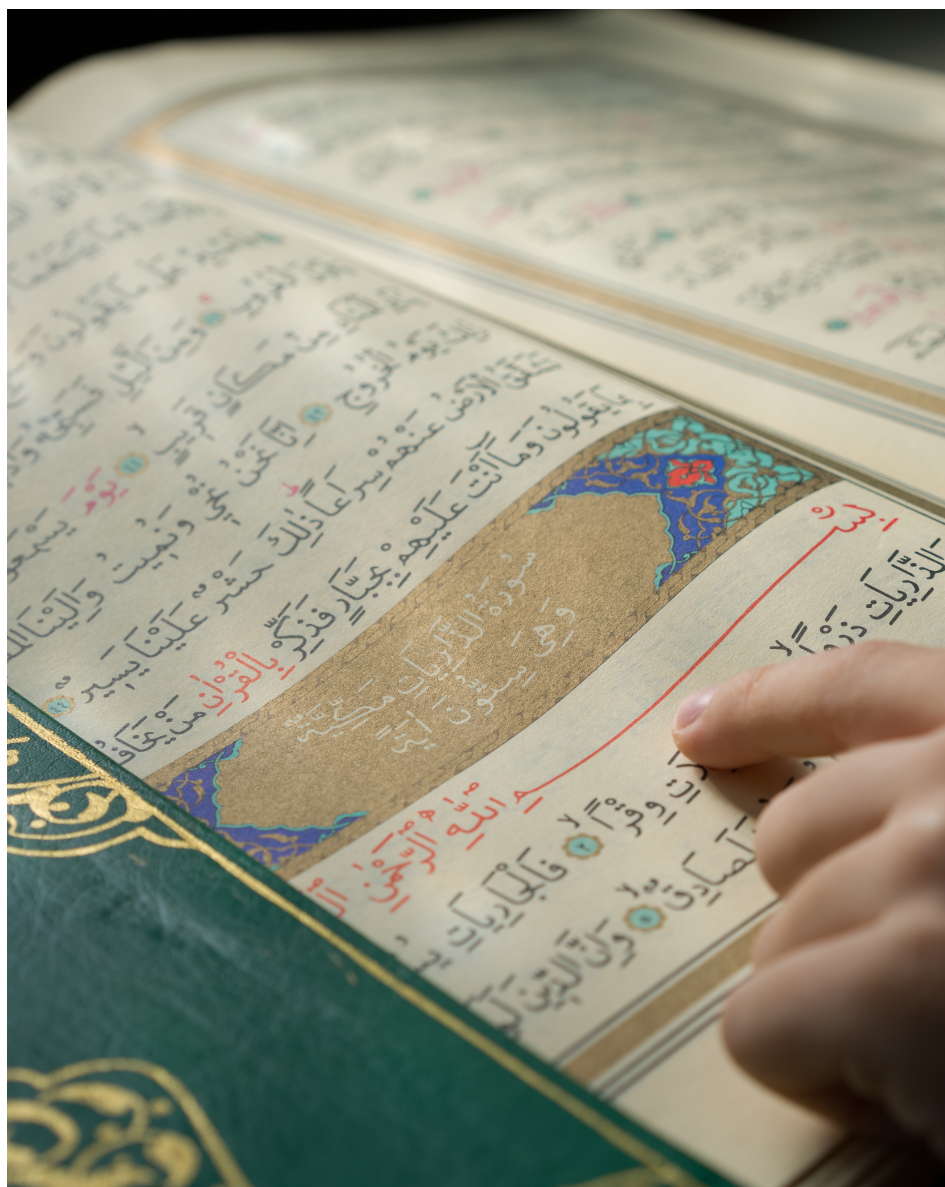
- Teacher worked with students one-on-one for only a few minutes at a time
- Students were responsible for keeping a detailed record of their own progress

Look familiar? One of the best Qur'an environments I had the privilege of attending was in Yemen. The school had a shoestring budget, and almost everything inside the school was donated by good-doers, and yet those in leadership had the intuition and cleverness to understand what was needed to facilitate excellent hifdh practices. A student would walk into the school and all their senses would be welcomed with Al-Qur'an.

The teachers were all qualified and excellent quraa' (reciters), but the bulk of our education was peer-to-peer. This made learning a lot less intimidating, especially in a culture where Qur'an teachers are revered. It was much easier to make mistakes and blunders with my classmates, even when they were older than me.

One of my biggest sources of pride was the daily recordkeeping of my progress. I would routinely flip through my folder to see how much I've done over the months. I was also instructed to strictly keep to only one mus'haf, as that would aid in developing photographic memory.

When it came time to present my previous day's Qur'an assignment to my teacher, she would take my battered copy of the Qur'an in her hands, and ask me to recite. In one



hand she held a pencil that she used to mark any mistakes or even hesitations that came up during recitation. When I did hesitate, she remained silent, giving me a chance to recall from my memory, and would only offer the word or harakah I was missing if I asked her to. If I made a mistake, she would wordlessly gesture, and I would pause my recitation to try and recognize what mistake had been made.

During my Montessori training, I remember thinking of my former Qur'an teachers and making so much du'a for them. So much of what was being taught by my Montessori mentor I recognized in my Qur'an teachers of the past. So much of what I currently do with my students is inspiration from my past teachers and from what I've learned of Dr. Montessori's research on child development.



Picture from  
Rumi Montessori

A great teacher is a vital part of a good quality Qur'an education. An enriching environment is just as essential, if not more so. Whether it's a hifdh school, an afterschool Qur'an program, a private at-home tutor, or a halaqah in the masjid, I believe it imperative for Qur'an teachers to take a good look at the environment and ask themselves if their pupils feel at home there. We want our students to associate the Qur'an with feelings of belonging and joy. My advice is to curate an environment that will do just that, and inshaAllah, our children will grow to love the Qur'an and seek to study it long after they've left our classrooms.

**“We want our students to associate the Qur'an with feelings of belonging and joy.”**

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Layla Graham is an instructor of Qur'an and Al-Qa'idah An-Nooraniyyah, as well as an Early Childhood Montessori Guide. She grew up in northern New Jersey and currently runs Al-Kitaab Al-Muneer, a Qur'an and Arabi afterschool program that utilizes the Montessori method to foster love of the Qur'an in young children. This year, she is set to launch a Montessori materials company, Prime Learning Resources, that will cater to the special needs of Qur'an and Arabic educators, as well as educators seeking a decolonized version of the cultural subjects. Layla is mother to two boys who are the inspiration behind her work.

#### GLOSSARY

- Hifdh: Memorization
- Quraa': reciters of the Qur'an
- Mus'haf: copy of the Qur'an
- Harakah: Arabic vowel point
- Du'a: supplication
- Halaqah: a learning circle
- InshaAllah: God-willing



**“When dealing with children, there is greater need for observing than of probing.”**

*Maria Montessori*



# A STORY OF HELPING AND EMPOWERING REFUGEE WOMEN TO BECOME MONTESSORI TEACHERS

BY MAHA TURNER

During my 23-year career as a Montessori teacher at Somersfield Academy, Bermuda, I witnessed the incredible positive developmental benefits this method of teaching pre-primary and primary age students has versus traditional methods of education. During

my tenure I obtained a Masters degree in Early Childhood Education / Montessori from Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. I have completed the Trainer of Trainers Course at Montessori Teacher Collage in Toronto and joined The Center for Guided Montessori Studies and became one of their Instructional Guides. I am currently completing my Ph. D in Early Childhood Development Montessori. In 2017 I left my position in Bermuda and moved to the UK to be with my children where they are pursuing their higher education as well as to be closer to my Syrian refugee charity projects in both Jordan and Turkey.

On a personal level, I became increasingly despondent as the

Syrian crisis escalated for a number of years with little or no intervention or assistance from the UN or outside governments. The stories of untold families who had lost one or both parents and the resulting impact on the shattered lives of refugee children herded into camps with no education structure was especially concerning. Ultimately, I decided that if not me, then who can offer some level of assistance so I began a Mission Montessori charity to raise funds to train widowed refugee wives to receive Montessori teacher training and setup schools for their own and other less fortunate children. This endeavor has been entirely on an unpaid basis for myself other than for travel and accommodation expenses when necessary. In 2016, I began training a cohort of Syrian refugee women who were mostly widows in Amann and added two other groups, one was in Istanbul and the other in Gaziantep, which is in south Turkey. The latter group were in a refugee camp which was challenging obtaining access and gaining permission to establish a designated training area.

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Picture from  
Maha Turner

I successfully managed to establish two Montessori nursery schools as part of the practical training for the Amman and Istanbul cohorts who within the last two years have subsequently been able to secure jobs and independence as teachers at various schools in those cities.

Unfortunately, I was initially unable to establish a training school for the group in the south Turkey refugee camp. In 2019, the Turkish government closed the refugee camp in South Turkey, which gave me the opportunity to establish a nursery school for the ladies in the city of Nizip to begin their practical training. I rented an apartment in January 2020 for a one-year lease and bought all the required materials with the help of an American donor friend. The adult students will complete their training soon and receive their Montessori certificates. Due to the close proximity to the Syrian border, Nizip, in south Turkey, has many refugees and orphans. As there are no other Montessori schools in this location there is a desperate need to keep the practical training facility operating there. In order to do this the support of donors is vital to keep the Nizip school up and running. The facility can take up to 50 orphans between the ages of 3-6 years old.

In order to be culturally relevant and reinforce the Montessori and the Islamic teaching principles I have combined these philosophies as they are extremely compatible ideologies. This has been tremendously successful and very well received in emphasizing peace with man and



nurturing our precious environment.

The inspiration to help Syrian refugees came from my students at Somerfield Academy who were between the ages of four and six years old. The conflict in Syria has been in the news for more than six years, and many of the older children were aware of it and started to question why it was happening and who was helping the people displaced by the war. I tried to explain things to them in simple yet clear way and read the book "The Journey" by Francesca Sanna. I explained how Syrian people left their country and became refugees.

Unfortunately, not all countries were willing to take them. To demonstrate the countries that were assisting we took out the Montessori puzzle maps and made two piles, in the first pile we identified all the countries

on the different continents that accepted the Syrian refugees and in the second pile we identified countries that refused to accept them. The children immediately observed that not all countries were willing to assist them and made the comment, "Mrs. Turner, why don't you help them by starting a Montessori classroom and making sure you put in it a Peace Table just like ours?" I too had spent years watching news reports documenting the plight of the Syrian refugees who had fled their country, and this had now compelled me to ask myself what can I do to help and be a real-life example not only to my students whom I taught to be peacemakers but to the whole world. Dr. Montessori was a firm believer in Peace Education, and the importance of helping and accepting all our fellow humans.

Once I had made my decision the children were very excited about assisting and trying to raise money to help those less fortunate children who had lost everything.

To help raise funds the children set up a shoe polishing station for 50 cents per pair of shoes. Just this small effort managed to raise almost \$200 in a few days, which was phenomenal. The student parents made generous donations towards our endeavor of helping the Syrian refugees. I chose to start up a Montessori school within an Arabic speaking country because I am an Arabic speaking person. The school I worked for generously donated a lot of the Montessori materials for my future Montessori classroom in Amman, Jordan.

So, I left Bermuda at the beginning of July 2016 heading to Amman. My trip was full of many unusual events, and it felt like I was guided by a divine plan. Fortunately, I was offered free accommodations in Amman as the owner of a hotel there was the mother of my son's friend in London. It is amazing how interconnected the world is but you don't realize it until you try something new and different. I arrived in Amman with immense excitement; however, my initial plan to work with an international aid agency fell through, I was disappointed at first because I found myself in Amman with cash and a suitcase full of Montessori materials but unable to help anyone. I sat in my hotel room wondering what to do next. This uncertain situation lasted for a few days, and then I remembered that I never mentioned to my bank in Bermuda that I will be using my credit card in Amman, so I sent an email to my banker, who happened to be a friend, I also shared with him my dilemma and he suggested to contact his dad who lives in Amman and see if he can help me. I called his dad who introduced me to the Organization of Islamic Center, and within 24 hours, I met a few Syrian refugee women, some of whom were widows. They live in a group of apartment buildings on

the top of one of the mountains in Amman. In the basement of one of the buildings, there was a traditional nursery school for Syrian children. The nursery was filled with plastic toys that served no educational purpose. The children, all between the ages of 3 and 6, were literally out of control. The teachers were really trying but they did not have the tools or the knowledge to deal with those children. Some of the little ones had seen horrible things before leaving Syria. Older children can talk about their trauma, but not so much with younger children. However, I knew that the Montessori materials could help to transform lives and be used as therapeutic tools for those traumatized children.

Both the teachers and I spent a day transforming the classroom, throwing out things that were not needed. Of course, I found a good spot for our Peace Table. The teachers also introduced me to other women who wanted to be trained as Montessori educators, and finally, things began to fall into place!

I began with lectures about the Montessori philosophy and showed the teachers how to use Montessori materials and encourage the children to become independent learners. We introduced the children to the basic grace and courtesy lessons and within two or three days, we all witnessed the transformation in the children's behavior. Suddenly, the screams, the conflicts, the running began to moderate and we observed calm, engaged and content children that are able to concentrate for a long period of time. We had many funny comments from visitors who came in and said, "What did you do to them?" The Montessori philosophy and the materials gave peace and harmony to everyone and especially the younger children who had been traumatized by the horror of the Syrian war. Within a very short period of time, the transformation to a peaceful, cohesive existence had begun.

I placed beautiful and attractive objects on the



Picture from  
Maha Turner

Peace Table in their classroom and I guided them through the process of resolving conflicts using their words. They also learnt about talking softly, walking carefully in the classroom and using a respectful touch with each other. The children took everything they learnt in the classroom to their home environment. They were upset when they heard members of their family shouting or having arguments and they offered to take them to their classroom to sit at the peace table and resolve the issue peacefully.

We got reports that the children were waking up very early in the mornings and begging their parents to take them to school. This was reassuring to all the new teachers who now realized the power and potential of the Montessori philosophy. In the morning I worked with the teacher trainees alongside the children and the afternoons were spent with the trainees on both theory and practice. After I left Amman, I continued to train those students over the Internet using all the resources of the Center for Guided Montessori Studies. I am especially grateful to the founders of this training centre: Kitty Bavo, Mark and Tim Seldin, Lori Karmazin and Jonathan Wolff who provided me access to their on-line resources in order to help the Syrian students. However, the next challenge to overcome was translating all of the resources from English to Arabic as all of the teacher trainees are Arabic speaking and cannot read

or write English. I began the search for a translator that can work for a reasonable price and eventually located an expert in Germany.

Shortly after returning from Jordan, I received an email from Tim Seldin, the president of the Montessori Foundation, and Kitty Bravo, the director of the Center for Guided Montessori Studies. They informed me that Ishraqat organization in Turkey was seeking the Montessori training for some of the Syrian refugee women there. I jumped at the chance to empower more women to start rebuilding their lives. I was fully aware that it would not be an easy task but was confident that what I am doing gives those women hope and purpose. Their lives have been devastated by forces outside their control, and I felt the responsibility to give them a reason to keep going and be positive about the future. My students are highly qualified women and once had full lives with jobs and families. The war has taken that from them and they have been forced to flee to other countries, often with just what they could carry. Many of my students are widows, who have lost their husbands in the fighting and their stories are heartbreaking.

In October 2016, I visited my new group in Istanbul and started the Montessori philosophy lectures. I combined my group in Amman with this group and continued with our on-line chats and lectures.

I took another trip to Istanbul in December 2016 to continue with the lectures and the search started for a place to be used as a Montessori classroom for the adult students to do their internship. During that trip, I was asked to help more women, this time those women were living in even more desperate circumstances in a refugee camp called Karkamish, in southern Turkey, just across the border from Aleppo in Syria. The total number of my students is 41 between the ages of 24-50 years old. Since I started the training back in August 2016, a few of my adult students were sent with their families

to live in other countries around the world such as the United States, Germany, and the Middle East. I continue to work with them on-line and provide them with all the needed support to become successful Montessori teachers.

After many months of searching, Ishraqat organization with the help of the Turkish government found us a space in one of the public schools so we can start our Montessori classroom for the adult students in Istanbul to do their internship; however, we are awaiting permission to start a school inside Karkimesh camp, which is in southern Turkey on the border of Aleppo, Syria.

Unfortunately, I was unable to establish one for the group in south Turkey or the refugee camp. As a result, both Amman and Istanbul's groups graduated two years ago in 2018, leaving behind the last group. Those two groups obtained jobs in various schools in Amman and Istanbul, and they are currently making a good living.

In 2019, the Turkish government closed the refugee camp in southern Turkey, which allowed me to establish a nursery school for the ladies in the city of Nizip to start their practical training. I rented an apartment in January 2020 for a whole year and bought all the required materials with the help of an American friend. The adult students will complete their training soon and receive their certificates. Nizip, in southern Turkey, has many refugees and orphans; I would need support to keep the Nizip school up and running. We can take up to 50 orphans between the ages of 3-6 years old.

My dream is that we can ignite a Montessori movement across refugee communities. I believe the Montessori method helps both the adults and the children to start the process of coming to terms with their lives as they now are. These women want to support themselves and their families. They want their children to be able to gain the benefits of elite education.

I am in the process of fulfilling a dream of mine, which is starting a Montessori Education Center on-line so that the teachers that I trained, will train more women to become Montessori teachers, who in turn will help more young refugee children to flourish within the Montessori program. In this way, we will create the Montessori movement in the most needed areas in the world and give my graduates the chance to pass on the gift of learning that was given to them. There are many parts of the planet that needs Peace Education taught at the most critical age of human development and at this time in human history, this part of the world is in desperate need for peace and stability through education.

**“...at this time in human history, this part of the world is in desperate need for peace and stability through education.”**

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maha Darwish Turner was born in Cairo, Egypt. She has a great passion for history, so it was no surprise that she ultimately attended Helwan University in Cairo to study Egyptology. One of the unusual places that she visited was the islands of Bermuda in 1988 where she met the man who would become her husband the following year. She then had three children, now they are adults. When she moved to Bermuda, she had the opportunity to change her career. Her husband's sister was a Montessori teacher at the time and suggested she try the Montessori training. Her teaching career started in 1992 as an assistant

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### **Article: The Holistic Benefits of Sign Language: Implications for the Islamic Montessori Classroom (page 11 - 13)**

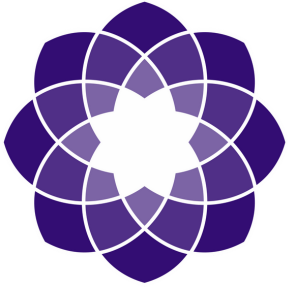
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