

## **When “Acceptable” is Not Acceptable: Private Schools and Arabic Language Education**

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Private schools in Dubai are inspected by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) on an annual basis. All inspection reports are posted transparently on the KHDA website. The rating scale has several levels including: outstanding, excellent, very good, acceptable, weak and very weak. Searching KHDA’s website for schools with outstanding rating, I found out that 17 schools out of 182 schools inspected in 2018-2019 were rated “outstanding”. Of the 17 outstanding schools, three schools were rated “good” in Arabic for native learners, one school was rated “weak”, and all the other schools received an “Acceptable” rating. “Acceptable” seems to be what most schools receive on their Arabic programs.

These results are in line with many parents’ perceptions of Arabic language education in private schools, who think that Arabic teaching in private schools is not up to the level they expect and want.

Based on years of studying and researching Arabic language education in the region, here are 7 impediments in the area of Arabic language teaching & learning in private schools:

### **1- Time Allocated to Arabic Language**

Most private schools treat Arabic as a “special subject”, meaning it is not the language of instruction and the time allocated to it usually does not exceed 45 minutes. No one is going to acquire the needed proficiency in Arabic language when they receive 45 minutes a day of instruction half of which is lost on classroom management.

### **2- Rigor**

The second challenge to Arabic language in private schools is that not enough rigor is given to teaching Arabic due to the lack of teacher expertise and suitable curricula. Teachers need in-depth preparation & training on what, and how to teach native and non-native learners and how to carefully design learning and linguistic experiences that build on students’ learning year after year. Parents often say that their children study Arabic in schools for years, yet they don’t learn much and remain unable to fluently speak, read, or comprehend Arabic.

### **3- Uninformed Leadership**

A third challenge to learning Arabic is that private schools are mostly led by expert western leadership who do not speak Arabic and who do not have sufficient, if any, background

knowledge about Arabic, and how best to approach teaching it. This leaves them at a loss regarding what to do and who to turn to for best practices in teaching Arabic. They leave the running of the Arabic department to the coordinator who does not have enough support, training or resources.

#### **4- Arabic across the School**

A fourth challenge is that very few private schools, for example, encourage and integrate learning Arabic music, or the use of Arabic in newsletters, talent shows, theater, announcements, or artwork displayed. This limits the presence of Arabic language to the classroom only and often times sends the message to teachers, parents, and students that Arabic is not an important and “cool” language.

#### **5- Teacher Quality**

A fifth challenge in teaching Arabic in the UAE has to do with the quality of Arabic teachers. Outstanding private schools in the UAE, and across the Arab world strive to hire the best calibre of teachers from around the world. They have an annually scheduled “hiring season”, where they scout great teachers in job fairs that are dedicated to matching the best candidates to schools. There are no job fairs available to Arabic language teachers, and thus private schools find themselves limited a smaller pool of candidates who happen to reside in the UAE and who do not necessarily possess the quality of preparation and training needed to teach well. Many private schools end up with a two-tier quality of teachers: well prepared and trained teachers for English medium subjects, and ill-prepared and untrained teachers for Arabic language, which in turn has unfortunate consequences on students’ learning and on how Arabic is perceived. It has to be said though that most Arabic language teachers are the product, or most likely the victims, of low-quality education systems, and teacher education programs that fall short of adequately preparing them in content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and higher order thinking skills.

#### **6- Curriculum Quality**

A sixth challenge has to do with the quality of Arabic language curricula and resources used in both private and public schools. Most curricula available in schools are textbook-based, grammar-based, and not well aligned with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills nor with the other subjects in school. Arabic children’s literature and immersing children in Modern Standard Arabic (Faseeha) are not usually utilized as effective and essential tools in the classroom.

#### **7- Professional Development**

The seventh challenge has to do with Arabic language professional development in private schools. Arabic language teachers share with many other teachers in the Arab world the same plight of being ill-trained. This is an alarming issue that can have intellectual & linguistic security repercussions. Although private schools strive to train their teachers well, and

provide them with annual and continuous professional development opportunities, however, when it comes to training their Arabic language teachers they find themselves either training them in English language on issues that either do not relate to Arabic language education, or are at a level quite above what the teachers need, or not training them at all. Schools need to invest in smarter Arabic language strategic training plans.

It has to be noted that KHDA although not a training body, has given a much-needed support to schools in the Arabic language domain. One initiative started by KHDA to support Arabic language in private schools is the “Living Arabic” initiative, which has brought in an impressive dose of collaboration and sharing of ideas and resources amongst interested schools.

However, such an initiative needs to be coupled with quality and quick fixes to all 7 impediments to quality Arabic education listed above. Schools need to have strategic plans for Arabic language education that are weaved into the whole school community and not just treated as a special “45” minute subject that is imposed on them by the government. Being proficient in Arabic language should be seen as a golden skill that can open up doors to employment, creativity and business. That’s why “Acceptable” rating in Arabic, is not acceptable any more.