

UDL in Algeria: Engaging Parents and Teachers to Build an Inclusive School Culture

Director of Pedagogy
Grand Atlas School.
Cheraga, Algiers, Algeria
Leah.bitat@worldlearning.org

Leah Bitat

Abstract

In this paper, we share the process of developing a school culture that supports UDL principles and practice in Algeria, on the North African Coast. The Grand Atlas Primary school promotes parent engagement in school activities and continuous professional development for teachers to build community support and teacher enthusiasm in a national education system where rote learning from low-interest texts is the norm.

Keywords

Multilingual settings, Arabic language, family partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

The Grand Atlas Primary School is an inclusive K-5 school in Algeria, the largest country in Africa, on the northern, Mediterranean coast. The Grand Atlas School has adopted Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to ensure student success for a diverse student body required to study the Arabic-language-based national curriculum. Despite enthusiasm for a fresh, student-centered approach, the personal educational experiences of parents and teachers remain rooted in classrooms where memorization and rote recitation of lessons copied by hand are the norm. To build a strong new culture of inclusive, student-centered practices the Grand Atlas School has integrated teacher and parent engagement activities across the continuum of school activities. Results following the first trimester of activities show a dramatically positive increase of trust and engagement from teachers and parents that allows for continued development of differentiated teaching to better meet student needs.

BACKGROUND

Algeria is a country with a rich history and cultural diversity, little known outside its borders. The indigenous Berber population arrived before the Romans and maintain their distinct Amazigh language. Yemeni Arabs settled in the region in the 13th century and brought the Muslim religion and Arabic language. France colonized the nation in 1830, and their 130 years of occupation prior to national liberation in 1962 left strong French influences in the local dialect – a patois of Arabic and French.

The highly centralized education system struggles to meet the needs of this rapidly growing, ethnically and linguisti-

cally diverse population. A campaign of Arabization of the curriculum has pitched political groups against each other in the development of the national curriculum. Pedagogy has dramatically declined in the present day as the country recovers from a bloody civil war that killed 150,000 in the 1990s. Only 3 teacher training institutes remain to prepare educators to serve the country of 43 million inhabitants. Algeria's literacy rate has risen from 11% at independence to 85% today, yet graduates are unable to communicate at a professional level in any language and lack critical thinking and collaborative work skills.

Algeria has adopted laws that require schools to accept students of all abilities, yet most schools continue to refuse entry to students with disabilities. These students are oriented toward specialized centers for children with disabilities, few of which exist outside of urban centers on the northern coast.

Following 4 years as a consultant teacher trainer in Algeria, the author embarked on the Grand Atlas School project with a local team of educators to establish a laboratory of best practices in inclusive education design. The school opened its doors in September 2014. The school has two central goals: 1) all students will look forward to attending school each day and 2) all students will master critical grade-level vocabulary in Arabic, English and French.

As teachers and administrators around the world often find it conceptually difficult to accept that inclusive teaching methods can succeed in their local educational system, the Grand Atlas development team made recruitment of local teachers and adoption of the national curriculum a priority to showcase replicable successes, scalable in the larger Algerian community.

BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

This presentation will share the steps undertaken to instill a culture of collaboration and innovation from the outset of the school development process.

The presentation will discuss the following aspects of the school development process:

- The use of social media in community outreach for teachers and parents
- Teacher selection, training, and ongoing professional development processes
- Engaging parents in the learning process

- High- and low-tech tools used across the curriculum
- Celebrating community successes and collaborating to face obstacles to success.

The presentation will share details of the development, preparation and execution of a summative school-wide learning project that engaged families in the preparation and presentation of student research.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The Grand Atlas School's inclusive approach has attracted a highly diverse student body. While the majority of families are Algerian they are of a demographic that speaks French with bits of Algerian dialect in the home, and their children have struggled to master the standard Arabic taught in the national curriculum. These parents, along with international Anglophone, Francophone and Turkophone families report strongly positive growth in their children's mastery of Arabic and enthusiasm for learning English and French as well.

Strong communication with parents and enthusiasm for learning among the students has served to strengthen the inclusive culture of the Grand Atlas School. Ninety-five percent (95%) of parents report a dramatically positive change in their children's attitudes toward school.

The use of social media networks for staff recruitment allowed for the targeting of Algerian teachers interested in discussions of innovation in education. Similarly, social media and the student-led school blog allows parents to celebrate student successes with the larger community.

Teachers identify the team building approach created in our continuous professional development (CPD) as the most valuable support in their first year of applying UDL methods to the Algerian curriculum. Most importantly, weekly CPD sessions have instilled a culture that celebrates the sharing of successes and group collaboration to confront obstacles.

The presentation will also discuss challenges encountered in the building of school culture. Early and extreme crises of confidence in staff led to an emergency restructuring of the teaching team in the week prior to school opening. Administrative and support staff have struggled at times to embrace the progressive teaching and communication style and have needed positive behavior intervention plans to strengthen their own interpersonal practices.

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