

Language Maintenance and Heritage Language Education: The Case of a Weekend Arabic School in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceived value of an Arabic weekend school in the process of heritage language maintenance and development among Arab immigrant children in New Zealand. Through an analysis of data gathered through semi-structured interviews with parents, children and teachers, as well as observation at this school, the study aims to gain insights into the participants' perceptions of the school and its function within the Arabic-speaking community. The overall picture that emerged from the data regarding the Arabic community language school was that it represented 'a key line of defense' for Arabic heritage language development and maintenance that needed to be developed into a proper school which provided frequent and quality Arabic learning and teaching. Major themes articulated by the participants regarding the school and its perceived value will be discussed.

Key words: Arabic, Heritage Language, Immigrant, Language Maintenance, Weekend School

INTRODUCTION

Immigration across national and cultural boundaries can have an enormous impact on groups and individuals. For whatever reasons immigration takes place, the consequences of the migrating process on the immigrant family involved can take many forms, much of it related to the immigrant family's experience of dislocation and the different levels of adaptation (acculturation) it has to make in the host country (Berry, 1990; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Undoubtedly, immigration is one of the major sources of language contact and therefore it represents a useful lens for focusing attention on deep and abiding dilemmas of language ideology, dilemmas about the nature of immigrant families' linguistic behaviours, the sort of bonds that connect immigrant families with their heritage language, as well as the relationship between language and identity (ethnic, religious, national). Previous research on immigrant minority languages indicates that the transmission and maintenance of the immigrant minority language often become one of the major challenges faced by immigrant families in the host country. Thomason (2001) describes the typical outcome of language contact in many places around the world as follows: 'Intense pressure from a dominant group most often leads to bilingualism among subordinate groups who speak other languages, and this asymmetrical bilingualism very often results, sooner or later, in language shift' (p. 9).

New Zealand is a linguistically and culturally diverse country with immigrants from different parts of the world. Spoken as a first language by 10746 in 2013 (Statistics New

Zealand, 2013), Arabic is one of New Zealand heritage/community languages which has been in contact with English, the dominant and most widely used language in the country. Like many other immigrant children, the dilemma facing Arab immigrant children in New Zealand may be viewed as less a problem of learning English than of heritage language maintenance and development (Alsahafi, 2017; Fillmore, 1991). As pointed out by Chick, Carreira, and Kagan (2017), heritage language maintenance is best achieved through regular exposure to the language in both informal (e.g. home domain) and formal (e.g. education) environments. The current study aims to illuminate the contribution of a weekend Arabic school to Arabic heritage language education among New Zealand Arab immigrant children. In particular, the study examines child, teacher and parent perceptions of the role of the Arabic school within the Arabic speaking community. The next section provides a discussion of heritage language education.

Heritage Language Education

Heritage language education is still a relatively new field of study (Chick et al., 2017). Community/heritage language schools represent one of the main strands in immigrant heritage language maintenance and education (Brinton, Kagan, & Bauckus, 2008; Edwards, 1995; Kagan, Carreira, & Chick, 2017). Establishing community-led supplementary schools represents a common practice among many immigrant minority communities aiming to maintain and transmit

their heritage languages and cultures to their children in the host country (Arthur, 2003; Clyne, 2003; Li Wei, 1994). A variety of terms used in the literature to refer to such community-based heritage language schools including ethnic mother tongue schools, community language schools, weekend (Saturday or Sunday) schools, heritage language schools, and supplementary or complementary schools. The overarching aims of such schools include the teaching and maintenance of the ethnic minority language, literacy and cultural heritage, facilitations of religious practices, promotion of family cohesion, and ethnic identity development and enhancement (Edwards, 1995; Norst, 1982; Otcu, 2010; Tamošiūnaitė, 2013).

Heritage language schools represent one of the institutional factors supporting language and literacy learning among immigrant children in immigrant multilingual contexts. Based on amount of instructional exposure per week, Fishman and Nahirny (1966, pp. 93-94) distinguish three major structural types of heritage language schools:

1. All day schools: This type of ethnically affiliated schools offers complete educational programs that fulfil the requirements of compulsory education laws enacted by state and local educational authorities. Students enrolled at such schools do not attend mainstream schooling. Therefore, this type of community language schools represents the only non-supplementary form of ethnic education. Besides covering various aspects of the mainstream curriculum, all day ethnic schools provide instruction on the ethnic group's ethnolinguistic and religious heritage. All day schools are often under the sponsorship of religious auspices (e.g. Catholic parishes).
2. Weekday afternoon schools: Unlike all day schools, weekday afternoon schools represent a supplementary type of ethnic schooling (operating outside normal school hours). Students of weekday schools attend mainstream public schools during the regular school day. Weekday afternoon schools offer fewer hours of ethnic language instruction per week than all day schools. Like the all day schools, this type of community language schools usually operates under some form of religious sponsorship.
3. Weekend schools: Like the weekday afternoon schools, weekend schools provide a supplementary form of heritage language education. Students enrolled in weekend schools attend public school during weekdays. Weekend schools meet on either Saturday or Sunday and are not open during the week. Therefore, they are usually referred to as Saturday or Sunday schools. Due their limited weekly meeting hours, weekend schools provide the least amount of ethnic instruction of the three structural types of ethnically affiliated schools.

As shown above, in most cases, community-based heritage language schools (school type 2 and 3 above) provide supplementary heritage language instruction that operates independently of formally organized mainstream education. As a result, such schools tend to follow a bottom-up, community-based approach to heritage language education that

does not lead to a formal certification (Hatoss, 2008; Lui, 2006). The need for heritage language schools often evolves from the lack of (true, non-transitional) mainstream bilingual education that contributes positively to heritage language maintenance as well as from the often-played negative role of monolingual mainstream education towards heritage language maintenance and education (Fishman, 1980). Establishing community-based heritage language schools, therefore, represents one form of language planning in local contexts (Hatoss, 2008; Hornberger, 2001).

In New Zealand, heritage language schools and classes have run in many immigrant minority languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Amharic, Fijian and Korean. The responsibility of teaching and maintaining these and other community languages has been sidelined to immigrant communities. Despite being a common cultural practice in immigrant communities, heritage community language schools and their independent contribution to heritage language maintenance aims received little scholarly attention. The following section provides a description of the Arabic weekend school, including its rationale and purpose.

Creating an Alternative Space for Learning

The Arabic weekend school was established in 1998 by a group of Arabic-speaking community activists when they recognized the urgent need to help their children maintain their language, religion and culture. The school therefore is community-based and run by a group of volunteers, mainly parents who formed a trust to operate the school. This trust now provides education as part of its community service programs. As the school principal, who was also a founding member of the trust, explained, 'The trust was founded in 1998 to meet the needs of the school and to take care of its administration and academic objectives.' The school operates on a very low budget and receives no financial support from local authorities.

Due to the diglossic nature of the Arabic language as demonstrated in the co-existence of standard and non-standard varieties of Arabic (Alsaifi, 2016; Ferguson, 1959; Kaye, 2002), the families of the participants spoke Arabic colloquial varieties associated with their original home countries, e.g. Jordanian Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, Syrian Arabic, Tunisian Arabic. The transmission of these non-standard varieties of Arabic needed to be complemented by the teaching of the standard variety in order to ensure that children developed both oral and literacy skills in the home language. However, children in these families had limited exposure to the written standard. In this regard, the school was described by the participants as the only means available for providing primary formal Arabic instruction for their children. As it now operates, the school functions as an alternative space where Arabic-speaking children meet on a weekly basis, for four and a half hours every Sunday. It focuses on both Arabic and religious teaching and functions to maintain and develop children's Arabic literacy skills and religious values and practices. Standard Arabic provides the medium that connects these two focus areas, as Standard Arabic is the variety used for teaching Arabic literacy and religion.

THE STUDY

Participants

The majority of students at this Arabic weekend school are second generation children of Arab immigrant parents. A very small percentage of the school's students are of Muslim non-Arab backgrounds (e.g. Indonesian, Pakistani) who learn Standard Arabic as a religious variety. A group of 10 father-child dyads living in Auckland participated in this study. Ten children enrolled at the Arabic weekend school and the father of each child were selected using purposive sampling. It is to be noted that the study examines primarily the immigrant father's role in children's heritage language maintenance due to lack of research in this area.

Participation Information Sheets and Consent Forms were issued to the Arabic school principal, teachers, parents of the students and students themselves. The study's participant families immigrated to New Zealand from different North African and Middle Eastern Arab states including Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Tunisia and Morocco. The length of residence of these families ranged between 4 and 13 years with an average of nearly 9 years of residency in New Zealand. Details of the study's participants are provided in Table 1. In addition, I invited the teachers at the Arabic school to take part in the study in order to provide a holistic view of the process under investigation. Six Arabic heritage language teachers were interviewed during school recess times regarding the nature of their involvement in the Arabic school as well as their perceptions of the school and its role within the Arabic speaking community (see Table 2).

Table 1. Details of participant families

Participants	Country of origin	Age of child	Time in NZ
Sarah's family*	Jordan	9	4 yrs
Ali's family	Syria	9	12 yrs
Umar's family	Iraq	12	11 yrs
Fatima's family	Morocco	13	13 yrs
Adnan's family	Tunisia	14	12 yrs
Nora's family	Tunisia	12	9 yrs
Hassan's family	Jordan	8	4 yrs
Wael's family	Syria	11	7 yrs
Lama's family	Iraq	10	10 yrs
Hend's family	Jordan	13	6 yrs

*All participants' names are pseudonyms

Table 2. Details of teacher participants

Teacher pseudonym	Country of origin	Years at the Arabic school
T1	Palestine	9
T2	Jordan	3
T3	Tunisia	8
T4	Palestine	2
T5	Tunisia	9
T6	Syria	5

Data Collection and Analysis

Two main methods were used to gather data: observation and semi-structured interviews. Father interviews were conducted in a variety of settings such as participants' homes, coffee shops, and the Arabic school. I gave the parent participants the option of speaking either Arabic or English. Seven of them chose Arabic and three chose English. It is to be noted, however, that some instances of mainly topically motivated code switching were observed during the course of the interview. Each interview lasted between 75 and 100 minutes. Children were interviewed during recess time at the Arabic weekend school. All children, but one, chose English as their preferred language for the interview. In interviewing children, I employed a narrative approach in order to encourage them to give voice to their own views and language related experiences (Chase, 1995). On the average, each child interview lasted around 30 minutes. In addition, informal observation at the community and school levels was conducted during the data collection process to provide a point of reference for interpreting the participants' viewpoints in the interview.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection. Following procedures of qualitative data analysis (see for example Miles & Huberman, 1994) transcripts from my audio-recorded interviews and observation notes were analyzed in order to code and categorize the main themes evident in the data. In this article, all Arabic interview quotes were translated into English by the researcher.

FINDINGS

This section begins with a description of patterns of language use in the Arabic weekend school and then parent, child and teacher perceptions of the Arabic school with regard to the maintenance of the Arabic language and cultural heritage will be examined.

Patterns of Language Use

I take them to the Arabic school. And I noticed that the children use English there when they are among themselves. So, the problem occurs whether you put pressure on the child at home or take him to the Arabic school, same result. (Nora's father)

Parents like Nora's father, who occasionally visited or came to pick up their children from the Arabic school, seemed to be aware of the children's tendency to use English as the preferred language for interacting with each other during school recess time. The opening remarks from Nora's father regarding the children's preference for English among themselves was echoed by some of the other participants in this study. Likewise, the children's comments on their patterns of language use at their Arabic school revealed that they used both Arabic and English, depending on whether they were speaking to their teachers or friends and on whether their friends spoke a similar Arabic dialect. The following two excerpts from the children's interviews depict typical patterns of their language use at the school, both inside and outside the classroom:

- Sarah: We sometimes speak English. But when the teacher or the principal asks us to speak Arabic, we use Arabic.
- Interviewer: What about inside the classroom?
- Sarah: Arabic, because the teacher wouldn't allow us to speak English. She will say, 'Speak Arabic and I'll listen to you.'
- Ali: When we play, I use English because I told them, 'play pass,' 'pass the ball.' I keep saying to them 'play well.'
- Interviewer: Do you know the Arabic words for 'play pass' and 'play well'?
- Ali: English is easier.

The majority of children pointed out that they mostly used English with one another because it was the language they felt more comfortable speaking. As Fatima put it, 'to a very close mate of mine I prefer to use English because it is more easy to explain things.' However, Arabic was also sometimes used particularly among children who spoke similar dialects. For example, Nora, from Tunisia, said that she sometimes used Tunisian dialect with her Moroccan friend at the Arabic school because of the perceived similarity between their North African Arabic dialects: 'Because our dialogues are like pretty the same, unlike them [her Iraqi and Syrian friends]. They have like different words from what we use.' For a similar reason, Adnan stated that speaking his Tunisian dialect with his Northern African Arab classmates at the school represented enjoyable weekly interactions because 'it makes me feel back home.' He further added:

When I speak to them, I just remember back the words. I know I get mixed up like as if I were living back there. But you still need to talk to them so when you get back to Tunisia, it takes a while to start talking the same language. It's good talking to them. I like talking to them actually.

Thus, the existence of different Arabic dialects emerged as a potential factor encouraging the use of English, the shared code, among Arab immigrant children. In the following excerpt, one of the children, Fatima, shared her Arabic school experience: 'different accents, different kinds of using Arabic, different accents of Arabic, so you sometimes get mixed up.'

In my conversations with the Arabic teachers, explicit references were made to the impact of Arabic dialects on patterns of language use and preference among the children. The teachers reported that it was Fusha/Standard Arabic, and not any other particular colloquial dialect, which was used in school textbooks on Arabic and Islamic studies. Standard Arabic was also used as the medium of instruction and classroom activities (e.g. reading, writing). As T6, a teacher of Qur'an and Islamic studies, explained:

During classroom instruction, there is no impact [of colloquial dialects] because the Qur'an unites them and classroom discussions take place in Fusha Arabic, which bring them together. But, there is an impact on children's conversations with one another. They find it more convenient to use English instead of multiple dialects. And this negatively impacts them since they wouldn't practise what they've learned in class.

Although the teachers indicated that Fusha/Standard Arabic was used as the language of instruction as well as of school textbooks, they stated that the existence of a wide range of spoken Arabic dialects hampered the process of Arabic learning among children. T1, for example, noted, 'There is a clear impact on the learning process due to the gap existed between the dialects and Fusha Arabic, the language through which learning takes place.'

It is to be noted, though, that the existence of different Arabic dialects among Arabic school children should not be held solely responsible for reported English preference among these children since siblings' preference for English was also observed among them. In addition, Arabic school children's preference for English among themselves, despite the ability of many of them to converse in Arabic, might be attributed to the fact that they 'lack peer group register and specialist registers' (Clyne & Fernandez, 2008, p. 175) in the Arabic language since they used their Arabic mostly with their parents and elder members of the community.

My school observations confirmed the children's reported preference for the use of English with one another. Generally, I found that although children were not resistant to speaking Arabic, they were quick to revert to using English among themselves. This was clearly demonstrated by their chat during and after recess times as they settled back into their seats in the classroom.

In sum, from the above discussion, it has become clear that the Arabic weekend school had a complex triglossic context of language use since it involved three languages or language varieties. First, Fusha/Standard Arabic was used as the medium of instruction during Arabic. Second, English was reported as the preferred language used among children. Third, Colloquial Arabic was also reported to be used among some of the school children who spoke similar colloquial dialects. Code-switching between these three varieties was observed among children at the school in order to accommodate various school activities inside and outside the classroom. In what follows, I explore father, child and teacher perceptions of the role of the Arabic heritage language school within the Arabic speaking community.

Father Perceptions

Three salient themes emerged from the interview responses by the fathers regarding the role of the Arabic school: valuing of the school, children's liking for school, and the need for proper Arabic schooling.

Valuing of the Arabic School

Generally, fathers praised the role of the school as the only institution that provided a structured Arabic learning program for their children. At the same time, they stressed the importance of family efforts to support the weekend school. For example, Hassan's father described the school as 'a key line of defense' for language maintenance: 'the Sunday school represents a key line of defense when it comes to preserving the Arabic language and therefore we need to support it.' Sarah's father agreed and added that the school

provided a systematic way for his children to further develop their Arabic language skills:

The good thing about the Arabic Sunday school is that it provides formal Arabic instruction that we cannot provide at home. You know, the children go there and learn Arabic in a particular place at a particular time in a more formal manner. This differs from teaching Arabic at home where it is sometimes difficult to control the children.

Besides providing structured Arabic and religious instruction, Fatima's father viewed the school as a cultural safe haven for his children: 'At the school they see an Arabic and Muslim community which encourages them to preserve their language and religion and also they learn to have respect for their parents and get other advice.' Fatima's father regarded the school as a crucial support which enabled his children to get immersed in an Arabic-religious environment conducive to the preservation of their ethnic cultural values.

It is to be noted that developing the school into an after-hours or an all-day school emerged clearly as a shared hope and a common vision for the future of the school by all the parents in this study. The majority of parents expressed the view that the school was 'good but not enough', and therefore informal literacy-based activities in the home environment were reported by some of them as vital to support the role of the school.

Children's liking for the Arabic school

Parents were asked about how their children felt about the school. Six of them reported that their children seemed to enjoy going to the school for a variety of reasons. Fatima's father, for example, stated that his children liked to go to the Arabic school because they tended to regard it as a place to play on a weekend day. Fatima's father's description of the school seemed to be in accord with that of Nora's father's above, who described the school as a play school rather than as a proper school. Thus, clearly the role of the Arabic school as a socializing site offering ample recess and unstructured playtime for the children was strongly articulated by the parents as a major reason enhancing children's interest in the Arabic school. As I observed at the school, children were allowed frequent and long periods of recess time during which they had the chance to meet friends, chat and run around the playground.

On the other hand, four of the parents (Ali's father, Adnan's father, Wael's father, Hend's father) stated that their children would choose not to attend the school if they were to be offered the choice. These parents articulated two major reasons for their children's apparent lack of interest or willingness to attend the Arabic school: the school required children to take on extra learning during their weekend, and the children were becoming acculturated to the mainstream school system, which differed from that used in the Arabic school, particularly in terms of teaching styles. For example, Ali's father explained, 'I don't see them enjoying it and I don't know why. They don't want to go. Maybe because they go to their English school five days a week so they want a holiday.' Hend's father was more explicit in articulating the reason behind his children's (particularly his 15-year

old son) rebellious behavior when it came to attending the Arabic school:

They have no interest in the Arabic school. They go unwillingly. Sometimes we force them; sometimes we try to encourage them. If we put a question mark and ask, why? ... Teaching styles should be different from those used in our home countries. Our children have become used to the teaching methods and they absorbed the ideas in their English school.

As noted by this parent, the classroom atmosphere at the Arabic school was generally characterized by its rigid discipline and traditional formality. This, in turn, might sometimes lead to a mismatch between the preferred styles of these children and their Arabic school teachers, particularly older children, who had become acculturated to their learner-centered mainstream school system. The next section explores the parents' hopes and aspirations for the future of their children's Arabic schooling.

Need for proper Arabic schooling

Father participants repeatedly stressed that formal Arabic instruction was a crucial contributor to their children's language development and maintenance. All of the parents expressed the view that the children's language maintenance initiated in the home and community needed to be supported by formal Arabic learning. This was especially true for Arabic literacy development which requires engaging children in learning through educational contexts that provide regular exposure to Standard Arabic. In this regard, the scope for learning Arabic at the school was described as being limited due to its meeting only on Sundays. As previously noted, the weekend school is the least effective of the three types of heritage language schools. Thus, all parents in this study indicated that starting an all-day school, where Arabic, religion and other mainstream school subjects were taught, or a weekday afternoon Arabic school, was crucial to children's language maintenance and consequently to the future of Arabic as a community language in the New Zealand context.

When asked what was needed to establish an all-day Arabic school as well as other Arabic institutions such as clubs and Arabic media to support the process of Arabic development and maintenance, the parents singled out three important needs: financial support, commitment and effort from members of the Arabic-speaking community, and good management. The next section provides a discussion of the children's perceptions of their Arabic school experience.

Child Perceptions

Two themes emerged from the children's interview responses: (a) their attendance and liking of their Arabic school, and (b) the perceived differences between their English mainstream and Arabic weekend school experiences.

Arabic school liking

Children's perceptions and liking of their Arabic weekend school provides another avenue for examining the role of

the school in language development and maintenance. The majority of the children reported that they liked going to the Arabic school for a variety of reasons, including meeting friends, having nothing else to do on Sunday, having a lot of time for play during school, learning Arabic and religion, and the relatively short school day. For example, drawing on his own experience, Wael supported the idea of having an Arabic school and made the following observation to support his argument: 'I think the idea of having Arabic school is good because there are lots of Arabic people who are forgetting Arabic. So, it is good to have Arabic school.' He further explained that he liked the Arabic school because 'they make lots of fun activities like they made us the barbecue last week. We play in the gym.' My lunchtime observations at the school confirmed this. Wael actively participated in lunch break soccer matches.

Another child, Fatima, a 13-year-old girl, provided three reasons for her attendance and liking for the Arabic school: 'One, I learn my language. Two, at the end of the year, I always come first. Three, there's nothing to do on Sunday, so I come here and meet my friends.' Fatima's comment highlighted two of the commonly reported functions of the Arabic school as an important site for Arabic learning as well as for Arab children's ethnic socializing.

However, Nora, among a few others, had mixed feelings about the school. On the one hand, she thought that the Arabic school is 'really good because I meet my friends and remember the language.' On the other hand, she did not seem to be happy about the teaching styles used at the Arabic school. In this connection, she made a comparison between her learning experience at her English and Arabic schools, explaining that 'In the English school they teach us in a fun way but here it's like just straight up you know like use pens and write write write. In the English school, they have games to teach, like games to help you improve your English.' It seems that Nora expected a learning environment at the Arabic school similar to that in mainstream schools. However, as the Arabic school principal told me, it was difficult for the school to be competitive with well-resourced mainstream schools since it operated on a very low budget.

Perceived differences between the Arabic school and mainstream school

Compared with their mainstream schools, the children reported that their Arabic weekend school was different. For example, Adnan explained that:

Different ways of teaching, different classes, different teachers. I've been going to the Arabic school for eight years now and it is way different from the English school. The Arabic school has that little bit of traditions as well. You know you have to behave and things and it's always like that. And it's religious as well and that's one prominent thing.

For Adnan, the Arabic school represented a different learning environment from his multicultural mainstream school. He described the Arabic school as a learning space with a different system from what he experienced at the mainstream English school. Such perceived differences encompassed var-

ious aspects of schooling such as teaching styles, classes and teachers. From the perspective of Adnan, the school emerged not only as a place to learn the Arabic language, but it also helped to instill in the child traditional Arab-Islamic values. In addition, Sarah, who had attended the school regularly for four years, noted another perceived difference in terms of school organization. She, among others, spoke of the structure of the school as being less organized compared with mainstream schools. Similarly, Ali pointed out that, 'The English school is a public school and there are more students there. We learn all the subjects but here only Arabic and religion.'

Furthermore, as I observed, it can be sometimes difficult to establish and maintain a professional distance between children and their teachers and consequently some children did not seem to take their Arabic homework seriously. This might be attributed to a number of reasons. First, most of the heritage language teachers were parents of currently enrolled children. In many cases, the children knew their teachers, since they were parents of their friends and classmates. Second, students commonly used such Arabic kinship terms as *ammo* (uncle) and *khalto* (aunt) when addressing their teachers. Third, there were no clear guidelines related to classroom management and discipline practices for teachers to follow.

Teacher Perceptions

Six Arabic teachers at the school were informally interviewed during school recess time about their voluntary involvement at the school and their perceptions of the school and its role within the community. Three major themes emerged from the teachers' perceptions of the school: (a) rationale for joining, (b) importance and benefits, and (c) perceived challenges and hopes.

Rationale for joining

The teachers articulated a number of reasons that led to their joining the Arabic school. They all pointed out that the main reason for teaching at the school was to help maintain their own and other Arab children's Arabic language, religion and identity. For example, one of the teachers, T1, described her involvement in the school as:

An attempt to rescue our sons and daughters from losing their mother tongue and replacing it with English and also to instil the love of the Arabic language and the Qur'an in our children in order to enhance our cultural heritage and Islamic identity.

Likewise, T3 pointed out that she had 'teaching experience and therefore volunteered to assist the school to maintain Arabic among our children.' T4 stressed the importance of Arabic for retaining Arab children's identity and stated that she taught at the school in order 'to help our children learn the Arabic language, without which they will lose their identity in this country.'

Importance and benefits

The teachers articulated clearly the perceived benefits of the school to themselves, children attending the school and

the Arabic-speaking community at large. All the teachers indicated that they considered their teaching at the school rewarding, and that they contributed to their community voluntarily. T4 stated that teaching at the school made her feel good about herself knowing that ‘the authority responsible for the school has placed its confidence in us. At the same time, teaching at this school enriches our knowledge of our language as we teach it to our children.’ In addition, T1 and T6 pointed out that their participation in the school increased their sense of belonging to their Arab Muslim community. T1 said, for example:

Teaching at the Arabic school increases my feeling of belonging to our Muslim community and Arab culture and enhances my feeling of giving because we feel that we can have a role to play in the revival of the Arabic language and the promotion of our Islamic heritage.

As I observed in the school and the community, parents clearly exhibited considerable gratitude and respect for Arabic school teachers. Besides these perceived benefits to themselves as active participants at the school, these teachers also indicated that the school provided Arab children with the opportunity to learn and maintain their Arabic language and religion in the host country and consequently to preserve the children’s ethnic-religious identity. For example, T5 stated that ‘the children come to the school to learn their religion and the Arabic language and to keep in touch with other children with the same language background so that they can maintain their own roots.’

Finally, the teachers regarded the school as a community-based education initiative that reinforced solidarity and cohesion within the community by creating a rich ethnic-religious environment for both the children and their parents. As T6 said, ‘the school creates a rich Arabic and Islamic atmosphere for the children and their parents so that they feel a sense of interdependence and belonging to their community and consequently not to become lost in the Western society.’

In sum, the voices of these teachers highlighted various perceived benefits of the Arabic school for themselves as teachers, for the community at large, and for the children attending the school more specifically. This was evidenced through some of the events, interactions and activities I observed at the school. Clearly, the Arabic school provided more than Arabic and religion teaching. It helped create a sense of empowerment and belonging to Arab-Muslim culture among the school’s participants and visitors alike. It represented an authentic place where Arab children furthered their sense of their community and ethnic-religious roots. In addition, the school provided a great opportunity for members of the community to connect with each other to celebrate their cultural and religious occasions such as Ramadan, *Eid*, children and youth summer camps, etc. Invitations and notices were usually sent home with children to inform and invite their families and friends to take part in such events.

Perceived challenges and hopes

The teachers articulated a number of perceived challenges and constraints facing their school. Most of these were linked to lack of resources and financial support provided to

the school. For example, all teachers cited the unavailability of a permanent ‘special’ place for their school as a major constraint on its effective functioning. T4, for example, said that she could not do as she wished with regard to her classroom arrangement: ‘We don’t have a special place for us. It is true that we rent space from this school but we don’t have the total right to arrange the classrooms as we wish, which hampers the educational process.’ The community’s inability to establish and ensure a permanent place for its weekend school had been the major cause for the school shifting from one place to another.

Another perceived constraint is related to the absence of an effective curriculum tailored to the specific needs of Arabic-speaking immigrant children. The school relied on textbooks produced in the Arab world. As T6 noted, ‘The absence of a more effective curriculum tailored to the community where our children live hampers their learning.’ Related to this is the lack of supplementary teaching aids, as noted by T3: ‘As you know, it is important to use supplementary teaching and learning materials besides the textbooks in order to attract children’s attention but we indeed lack teaching aids such as visual materials, posters, etc.’ As a result, teachers tended to over-rely on their textbooks as the only source for their lessons and teaching.

Furthermore, some of the teachers spoke of the children’s lack of motivation as well as the inconsistent nature of parental follow-up as being among the constraints that hampered the role of the school. As reported by T6, ‘some of our students and their parents don’t give the school the necessary importance needed for students’ Arabic language lessons.’ Finally, one teacher, T5, pointed out that a shortage of qualified teachers and the unavailability of teacher training were two of the current challenges facing the school.

Besides expressing their concerns about the current situation of their school, these teachers also voiced their hopes and aspirations that the Arabic school would overcome many of its constraints in the future in order to enhance its role in the community. All of the teachers stated that they hoped to see their school functioning in permanent facilities rather than renting space from other schools. In addition, the teachers indicated that they hoped to see the Arabic weekend school developed into an all-day school where Arabic would be taught on a daily basis or at least as a weekday afternoon school. T6 said, for example:

There is an aspiration to develop the school into a full-time regular school throughout the week, which teaches the English curriculum in addition to the Arabic language and Islamic education. I hope this will be accomplished as soon as possible. But I think establishing such a school does not obviate the need for the Sunday school since some of our children might have to attend their English schools and they will remain in need of the Sunday school.

In the meantime, some teachers stated that they would like their current weekend school to have a more effective and stimulating curriculum, which was tailored to students’ needs and the immediate environment. T5 commented, ‘I hope to see successful improvements in the school

curriculum. There is a need to develop a curriculum which is in line with the child's world and daily-lived reality.'

Teachers' comments about teaching styles and teacher training are of special interest here. Arabic speaking immigrant children had become increasingly acculturated to the New Zealand mainstream school system which they attended on a daily basis. Therefore, when they started attending their weekly classes at the Arabic school, they usually noticed some differences between teaching styles in their mainstream schools and those used at their Arabic school. This, in turn, often resulted in a mismatch between children's expectations and the school's instructors' teaching styles and school system, which might negatively impact children's level of attention and motivation in the Arabic classroom.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined Arab immigrant children's and their parents' and teachers' perceptions of the role of an Arabic heritage language school with regard to Arabic heritage language maintenance and development. The findings show that the school emerged as a bottom-up, community-based educational response to dislocation and the perceived threat to ethnic language and culture among New Zealand Arab immigrant children. The deep desire for and commitment to language and religion maintenance triggered the establishment of the Arabic weekend school by a group of grassroots activists. Apart from its educational role, i.e. teaching of Arabic literacy and Islamic education, the Arabic school was found to play a central role within the community by functioning as an important mechanism for ethnic socialization for its children and their families.

The similarities and differences that emerged from the analysis of parent, child and teacher perceptions of the school bring into sharp focus two major themes that broadly constitute the perceived role of the Arabic weekend school within the Arabic-speaking community. One theme focuses on the important role of supplementary Arabic schooling for Arabic and religion development and maintenance. This theme is reflected in the strong support among parents, teachers, and some of the children for the Arabic school as an important maintenance strategy and as a site for co-ethnic networking and socialization.

The second major theme of participants' perceptions revolved around the felt need for the school to overcome some of its current constraints and challenges in order to enhance its role within the community. Among the reported constraints and challenges were lack of resources (financial, educational, qualified teachers), limited instructional hours and lack of motivation among some of the school children. In the meantime, there was another picture of optimism and hope that emerged from the voices of school parents and teachers. They all expressed their hopes to see the school developed into a weekday afternoon or all-day school, where Arabic and religion were taught alongside other mainstream school subjects. Also, the participants expressed their hopes to see future improvements occur in a number of directions, including establishing permanent facilities for the school, creating a more effective curriculum tailored to children's needs and lived reality, and providing teacher training.

While acknowledging the limited resources in the community to support the school, the current study contends that the school should encourage active community involvement and to organize private fundraising in order to acquire its own facilities, since funding from government agencies has not yet been secured. Furthermore, the Arabic school has long relied on textbooks produced in the Arab world, which are foreign to immigrant children's daily experiences. Therefore, a further essential step is to adopt a curriculum that reflects immigrant children's immediate environment and meets their needs. In this connection, the school can benefit from the experiences of other community Arabic schools in such countries as Australia and the United States.

Furthermore, the study points out the urgency for the professional development of Arabic teachers. The need for teacher training had been noted by the school's parents and teachers alike in order to familiarize foreign-trained Arabic teachers with those teaching methods and classroom practices employed in New Zealand mainstream schools, to which Arab children have become accustomed.

In sum, the voices of the study's participants reflected their experiences and active participation in their Arabic weekend school. To build a successful community-based program of heritage language learning, the school needs to be sensitive to its students', parents' and teachers' needs and aspirations. The future of the Arabic weekend school will be dependent on the commitment and ability of the community to explore possible pathways by which the needs of its school might be addressed.

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