

Diversity: The Catalyst for Almadina's Success *(the title comes full circle at end of article)*

If you ask the teachers at Almadina Language Charter Academy what they like best about their jobs, they'll probably say, "The potlucks". With over thirty countries represented between staff and students, any gathering involving food is a celebration of diversity in itself and not an event to be missed. However, most teachers will also indicate that they feel they are providing English Language Learners (ELLs) with equal access to quality educational opportunities. Fundamental to Canadian values is social equality. In the realm of public education, democracy can only be perpetuated by ensuring that all students have the same prospects to learn so that they may go on to make meaningful contributions to the larger society. Almadina provides ELL students with those equal opportunities.

Almadina is the only public charter school in Canada dedicated to serving the needs of students who are learning English as a second or third language. Their charter, to deliver the Alberta Education ECS to Grade Nine program of studies with an emphasis on language acquisition, was first granted in 1996. The schools have culturally diverse student populations from newcomers to Canadian-born. Almadina is a member of the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools, its teachers hold valid Alberta teaching certificates, and are associate members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

The emphasis on language acquisition applies not only to English, but also other international languages, where numbers warrant. Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, French and Urdu are just some of the language programs that have been offered. Another feature of the schools is the Values & Virtues program, which ensures a safe and caring school environment and diversity in shared values. Currently, Almadina is engaged in implementing school readiness and literacy strategies for ELL learners through the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS), funded by Alberta Education.

For both the schools, vast cultural, educational, cognitive and linguistic diversity is the norm rather than the exception. So, how do the teachers address this vast array of needs? As their charter mandates, Almadina delivers curriculum with a dual language-content focus. The success of its ELL programs owes largely to school-wide advocacy. All teachers embrace their roles as both subject area experts and as ELL instructors. Teachers proactively design and implement language supports into their respective content areas and commit to diversifying their practices. When planning lessons, teachers think about what language demands are inherent in the activities.

Typically, instructors "look through language to the content", rather than as a function of the content¹. However, all teachers at Almadina are mindful that all content is delivered through language. Teachers create a language inventory alongside their lesson plans that "unpack" the language requirements and skills students will need to carry out the activities. To assist in this process, teachers build their units based on a program developed by Dr. Hetty Roessingh called Learning by Design. Navigating through the program, teachers are asked to

define the content-specific forms and functions the vocabulary will take in their respective units.

Additionally, teachers explicitly teach cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective learning strategies and, by giving them a prominent place in the classroom, empower the students. As students internalize these learning strategies and begin to use them innately and independently, they find the confidence and tools to overcome learning difficulties on their own. Dependence on the teacher decreases as student responsibility increases.

For the last four years in a row, Almadina has been recognized with the Garfield Weston Award for Excellence in Education for most improved in academics. In overall academic results, Almadina has been consistently improving since its inception. Almadina has also twice received the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Grant, allowing for theatre companies to work within the schools to create high-end theatre productions. During these one week residencies with actors and set designers, students learned as much about the work that happens behind the scenes as they did about performance and expressing their understanding artistically. Many of the students had never attended a play or had any prior experience of the theatre.

The AISI projects have allowed children's authors and illustrators to offer professional development to teachers in addition to helping the children with their art and writing. Musicians have visited the schools to teach students about the origins and various styles of drumming. An actor from Loose Moose theatre taught one Grade 9 class the fundamentals of theatre improvisation. All of these opportunities encourage kids to express themselves in diverse and more spontaneous ways.

Provincial Achievement Test results, in both the Elementary and Junior High levels at Almadina have consistently had a higher showing than provincial results, particularly in Grade Three Mathematics and Language Arts and Grade Nine Mathematics, Language Arts and Science. The school has also achieved the provincial equivalent in Grade Six Science for Excellence, proving that its ELL techniques can succeed in a standardized environment. A recent evaluation by the Alberta Government recognized Almadina's many accomplishments and the overall success of its learning community. For Almadina, diversity is not an obstacle to success, but rather, a catalyst for it.

Kate, a Grade Eight student from Russia, had the following comments:

I like Almadina because everyone gets treated equally and there is no bullying. Even though this is only my second year here, I love it. I get what I truly deserve. If I were to tell my friends about this school I would tell them that no matter where you are from, what your social status is, or what your skin colour is, you are welcome here. My first day at Almadina was great. Everyone was nice to me and I didn't feel any different from the rest.

Ali, a grade 9 student, had some wonderful things to share about Almadina:
I love to go to school and I am very gratified that I belong to Almadina. Almadina is unbelievable. The teachers of Almadina are very supportive and they provide us with all the help we need. They contribute what we need, what is necessary and what is required for our future. This is my last year in Almadina and I think that I am going to be very successful in high school based on all the help I have been provided over the years. Almadina is multicultural and accepts people from different cultures. I'd like to let you all know that even though Almadina is a small school it has accomplished many things.

Yasmine is a former student of Almadina, who is now a student teacher at the middle school campus:

Almadina is like a big family. I remember coming to school looking forward to seeing my friends and socializing. Coming to school allowed me to feel free, but still secure. Although Almadina has changed considerably since I was a child, I have noticed this is still the case today. The reputation of the school has been built up for the better. It is equal to the public system and offers more for students who speak other languages. I do love to see that more students are not afraid to wear their cultural dress. Students like to have caring teachers and there are many caring teachers here. Students like to know that there is someone available who cares for them.

Footnote:

¹Gibbons, Pauline. "Learning Language, Learning Through Language, and Learning About Language: Developing an Integrated Curriculum" Chapter 7, Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning. Heinmann, 2002.

For more information, please visit the website at www.esl-almadina.com.
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