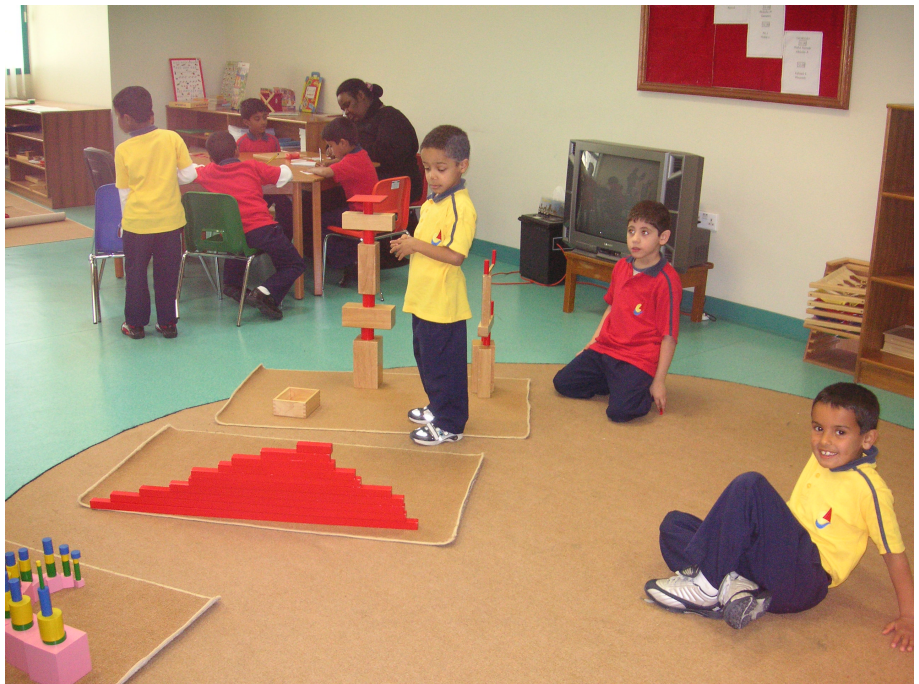


A Triumph for Montessori

For the past year, John & Marianne Clarkson have been working with a new Independent School in Qatar which comes under the direction of the Supreme Education Council, helping to set up the school's Montessori programme for children aged 6 plus.

"The Montessori teachers needn't have worried. We knew that the results would be good!" The school operator, Mrs Sara Al Kuwari, commented quietly. "I insisted that the children took the state examinations, and they were fine." The Montessori teachers had been concerned about their classes taking mainstream exams, but the school as a whole had done very well with 85% of the children achieving the Government standard or higher in Maths and English in Grades 1 and 2

The entrance to Muraikh school



The boys showed great imagination with the materials'

(6 - 8 year olds). However, this result had risen to 100% achieving or exceeding the standard in the Montessori classes! This was in the first year of the school, which is not in the most prosperous part of the city. Academic results, however, are not everything. What was even more impressive was the concentration, mo-

tivation and generally high standards of behaviour in the Montessori classes.

A year previously John and I had arrived in Doha at Muraikh Independent Primary School for boys, which had secured funding from the Supreme Education Council in Qatar to provide Montessori training for their staff, as part of a forward thinking government project entitled "Education for a New Era". The programme enables schools to be more autonomous and varied, allowing more parental choice, whilst retaining responsibility for students' success. This involves setting up a series of independent, state-funded, schools and also a standardised annual assessment process. Through 'Education for a New Era' Qatar is building a modern and world-class educational system.

We had arrived to find temperatures of 40° C but this was not a



problem as we soon found ourselves in a large air-conditioned modern school building, previously a girls' secondary school. The lecture hall was tiered, and in front of us were 70 staff, including those involved in administration, the majority of whom were dressed in the traditional black habayas and veils. No one at that point was Montessori trained, and many needed translation into Arabic as they had a limited knowledge of English. I'm sure the translators found it a challenge trying to translate for me. Having been used to speaking in long sentences to mainly native English speakers, I frequently forgot to pause at the end of each sentence for translation!

The children arrive at the school at age 6, mostly with no kindergarten or pre-school experience.



Teachers practising with the Who?, What?, Where? And When? boxes.

various backgrounds (Kenya, Barbados, Canada and India) and various training organisations (MCI, St Nicholas, Canadian Montessori Teacher

Education Institute and AMI) but they all worked together enthusiastically. None of the Montessori teachers were fluent in Arabic and a native Arabic speaking co-teacher was employed in each class of about 21 children, to take Ara-

bic and religious education and history. Delivering an intensive Montessori course at such a distance was not without its problems.

Looking at the classrooms it was difficult to visualise how they could be turned into Montessori classrooms in time for the pupils to arrive in a week's time.

We therefore began by giving the staff a grounding in the 3-6 Montessori curriculum to start off with. The school introduced Montessori in 4 classes initially, in grades 1 and 2, and employed trained Montessori teachers for these classes. They came from

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The deliveries of Montessori equipment had been held up in customs, so when they still had not arrived at the school a few days before our departure from England, we filled large suitcases with as much practical life and sensorial equipment as

One of the classrooms on our arrival (left) and a few weeks later ready for the start of term (right).



we could carry. Fortunately most of the Montessori materials needed for the first phase of training and for initial use in the classrooms, had arrived by the second week.

Looking at the classrooms it was difficult to visualise how they could be turned into Montessori classrooms in time for the pupils to arrive in a week's time. So, in addition to the staff training (and parent information briefings), we had to design the furniture for local carpenters to make. It sounds chaotic, but in fact the school administrators took everything in hand and when we left there was one fully equipped and furnished Montessori classroom. Using this as a model, 3 more rooms were set up amazingly quickly, ready for the start of term in a couple of weeks.

We returned to Doha in October, and the classrooms had been transformed. We spent time observing the classes (both Montessori and mainstream) and advising the teachers. There was already a remarkable difference in the peacefulness and air of purposeful learning in the Montessori classes. In fact that was the very first thing the school administrator said to us as we walked in the door on our first day back. We returned again in February (and again at Easter and in June) to continue the training for the 6-9 age group. The course has internet back-up, and the school had provided every teacher with a laptop. There were a few problems with getting internet access for eve-

ryone, but they were soon overcome. All the staff attended the course, and those in the mainstream classes used Montessori ideas and methods where they could. One of the problems the teachers had was keeping records in a way that Independent School Advisers, who oversee the schools, could understand. We spent a lot of time developing a comprehensive record card which readily mapped the Montessori materials to the state curriculum standards.

This is part of an ongoing project. So much has been achieved in a year, but there is still much to do. Having mixed age groups is very new to Qatar, and being developed gradually, with adjacent classes next year sharing a central atrium for resource based work, the Peace Table, etc. The Great Lessons need to be implemented, now the boys have a better grasp of English. We are hoping to return next February, imshallah (God willing), to assess the teachers' progress and facility with the materials. The Montessori approach has already shown remarkable results, and we are hoping for yet more triumphs in the coming months.

Further Montessori classes are opening next year, and more Montessori trained teachers are needed (particularly those with 6-9 Montessori qualifications.) For details please email admin@montessoricentre.com

Marianne & John Clarkson are the Principal and Registrar of the Kent & Sussex Montessori Centre, Chiddingstone, Kent.

Montessori International magazine, October-December issue, 2006