

Bringing Language to Life through Collaboration and Project-based Learning:

The Benefits of Hebrew Immersion at Hebrew Day School

By Dina Shtull and Carey Sherman

The Hebrew Day School (HDS) is unique among Ann Arbor's elementary schools for providing a second language immersion program. As the name implies, this method of teaching 'immerses' students in the second language for half of the school day. Hebrew language is fully integrated with the overall academic curriculum, and taught through multiple means – drama, music, the arts, technology. All aspects of language development are explored including reading, writing, comprehension, listening, and speaking. Students learn both modern and Biblical Hebrew and gain tools for navigating a story book, a Hebrew website, as well as an ancient text. Teacher collaboration across disciplines and project-based learning are an important part of the school's approach to teaching the language.

A recent example of this subject integration was evident in the classrooms during the first weeks of school. Aron Kaufman, the second grade Hebrew teacher, collaborated with Carol Gannon, the technology teacher, on a project that the students could direct themselves. They decided to intertwine the learning of Hebrew language with music and technology. "At HDS we want our students to create their own educational products," explained Kaufman. During the holiday of Sukkot, the second graders not only ate and said blessings in the Sukkah, they also wrote their own Hebrew music raps about the holiday. As part of their lessons in technology, the students learned how to use a computer program for creating unique blends of musical sounds. They learned how to identify music patterns and how to loop the music. They then wrote the words to their original Sukkah Hebrew raps.

Kaufman began by learning the computer music program so that he could teach it to the children. He attended sessions at the Apple Center which are offered to teachers for professional development. He then wrote his own rap and performed it for the students, modeling the task of the assignment. Fifth graders were engaged to help teach the second graders. "The teaching of younger children is part of their development as leaders and mentors at the school," said Carol Gannon who also teaches the fifth graders. "Teaching others is an effective way of reinforcing their own understanding, and learning how to be patient and creative," added Gannon.

In the school's computer lab, the children listened to different raps. They mixed hip hop music and chose the tempo for their own song. They then added their own lyrics. When the raps were all done, the students recorded their songs. "We liked picking out the music," said Yael Atzmon who wrote her rap together with Niv Fisher-Pinsker. "I liked this activity because we got to put our Hebrew songs on real CDs," says second grader Zachary Newpol. "I loved recording," said Samuel Bechar. It was very quiet and there weren't any distractions."

Aron Kaufman described his overall goal of the Hebrew rap project: "I wanted the kids to experience the joy of the holiday at the deepest level with singing and connecting to the concepts and the language. Granted, we first had to gain some rhythm awareness by practicing marches in response to different tempos; but once the students were aligned with the rhythm, they sang out their Sukkah raps with great pride. Our Sukkah raps in Hebrew are a bold statement of what we are doing here at HDS, a precious oasis of

Jewish learning,” Kaufman added.

Educational and linguistic experts have long promoted the cognitive and cultural benefits of learning a second language in the early elementary years. Foreign language study enhances a child's cognitive development and has been shown to positively impact on achievement and test scores in other disciplines, including reading and math (Stewart, 2005). Children develop a sensitivity to language (Bialystok, 2005, Stewart, 2005) which helps them see their first language in a comparative perspective and helps them analyze and refine their own language use (Cazabon, Lambert, & Heise-Baigorria, 2002). Students in dual language programs also develop very positive attitudes about students of other language and cultural backgrounds, and positive attitudes toward themselves as learners (see www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs).

“We are very aware that learning a second language is academically essential for our 21st century students,” said Gannon. “Hebrew is important as Israel is second only to North America in the number of companies listed on the NASDAQ and there is a demand for Hebrew speakers in high-tech, international relations, and marketing,” she pointed out. “When we use Hebrew websites and view Hebrew from the internet on our SMART Board, we are helping the children tune in to the importance of knowing Hebrew not only to connect to their honored heritage, but also as a tool for global communication.”

Tours and school open houses for prospective parents are scheduled for Tuesday, November 9th at 9 am and Monday, December 13th at 7 pm. Private tours can also be arranged by calling 971-4633.

References

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