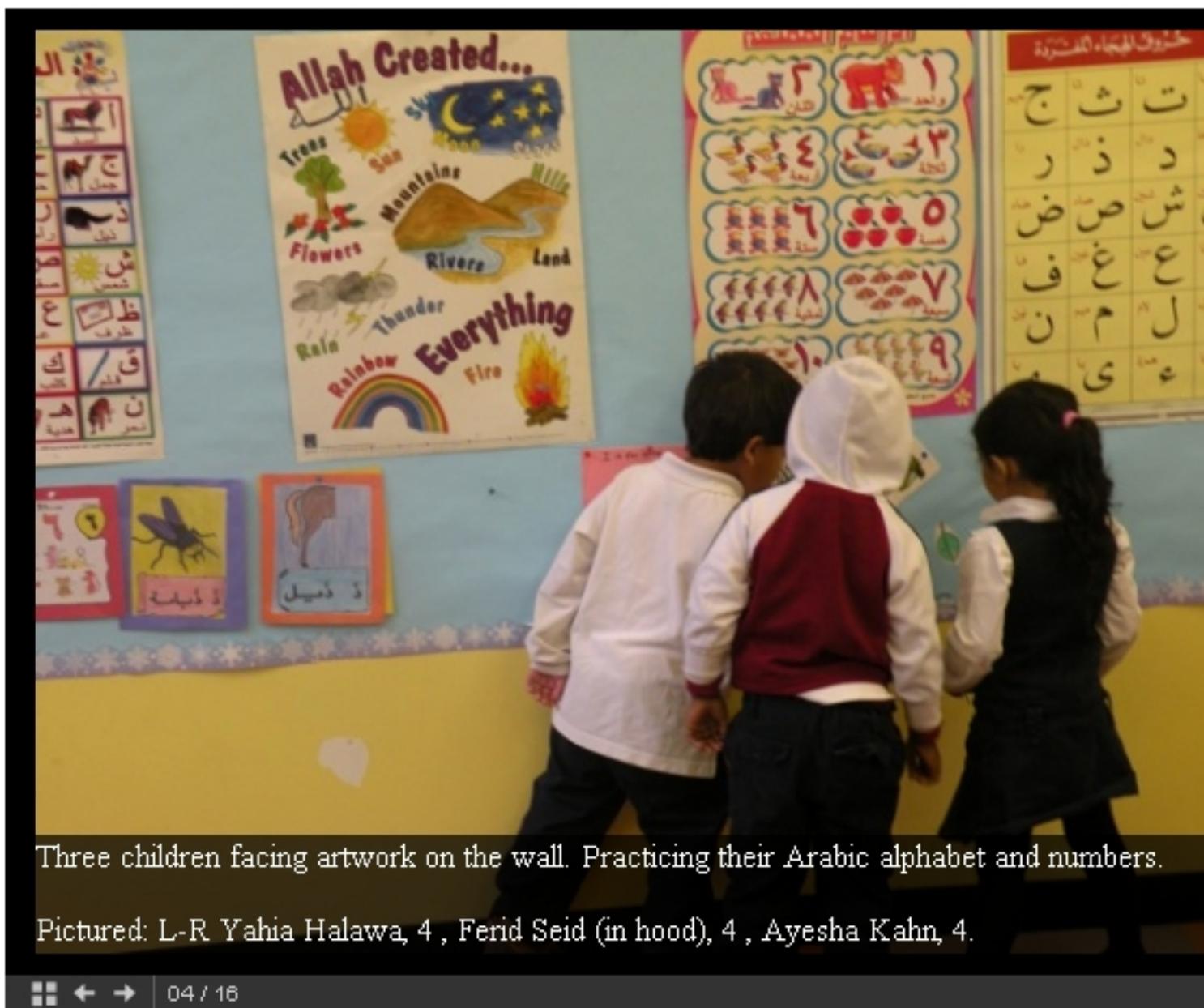


By Carimanda Baynard | Published by [DC Intersections](#) on January 1, 2010



Three children facing artwork on the wall. Practicing their Arabic alphabet and numbers.

Pictured: L-R Yahia Halawa, 4 , Ferid Seid (in hood), 4 , Ayesha Kahn, 4.

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Laughter rings throughout the classroom. The patter of little feet precedes the eager greetings between friends. Vibrantly colored curtains hang from the windows.

The Al-Huda Preschool is like any other to the untrained eye. Located within Dar-us-Salaam, a Muslim community organization that includes a K-11 school, in College Park, Md., the

preschool is the point of entry for many families.

According to the school's 2009-2010 demographic data, the Al-Huda Preschool has 40 female and 30 nine male students. Their families are from Pakistan, Ethiopia, Arab countries, Bangladesh and other countries. Nineteen are African American, and 12 were reported as being of mixed ancestry.

Al-Huda Preschool teaches children 18 months through 4 years old early developmental skills in math, reading and writing to prepare students for kindergarten. Religious education and elementary Arabic are also important parts of the curriculum. A friendly voice greets visitors and parents upon entrance: "Hello Sister," she says.

The voice belongs to Sister Mirvat Mohammed, Al-Huda Preschool's director. Sister Saadia Machnout-Ansari and Sister Shemsiya, who teach the 4-year-olds, stand in the adjoining room are two women with similar welcoming demeanors. The children cleaned up their toys and wiped down their play area, and followed Sister Saadia to a bright, multi-colored checkered carpet for circle time.

Sister Saadia's calm demeanor with the children stems from years of teaching experience. Born and raised in Morocco, she studied French and Arabic. Working at Dar-us-Salaam, which includes Al-Huda Preschool, for approximately 17 years, she truly enjoys working with preschool children.

For these preschoolers, the develop of basic educational skills like the foundations of reading and math, coincide with instruction on Islamic values, the Qu'ran, Arabic language and Islamic songs.

"This is an opportunity to mold young minds and plant the seed," Sister Saadia said.

Part of molding young minds is teaching students about Muslim holidays and traditions. Al-Huda Preschool This past fall, Hajj became a focus of the curriculum.

Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca that constitutes the fifth pillar of Islam. Hajj is viewed as a moral obligation that must be carried out at least once by every able-bodied Muslim. The pilgrimage, undertaken each year by more than a million Muslims from all over the world, is seen as an embodiment of the unity of the faith across nations.

Sister Saadia began the lesson for the day, teaching the children about Hajj. She retrieved a book from the bookshelf, with a bright red cover and the word HAJJ on the cover. The students leaned forward with anticipation, their bright eyes latching on to her every word. Sister Saadia read from the book, prompting the students recite various religious sayings. Each saying, she said, emphasizes the importance of complete submission and loyalty to Allah.

Sister Saadia instructed a student to retrieve a model of a square black structure from the corner of the room. The Ka'bah, the holiest place in Islam, is a large cube-like building inside the Masjid al-Haram, or Sacred Mosque, in Mecca.

The student returned with the replica Ka'bah, a box decorated in several coats of black paint and a thick gold strip of fabric encircling the upper top half.

"The students decorated the box themselves," said Sister Saadia, as the student placed the box in the center of bright carpet.

"Stand up and form a line beside the Ka'bah," Sister Saadia said to the children.

The students clamored to be at the front of the line. "Excuse me," they said to each other. "No, I'm first."

"One behind the other," Sister Saadia said. "There is no rush; everyone will get a turn to go around."

During the Hajj, followers must circle the Ka'bah, considered to be the most sacred site in Islam, several times.

A mother of five herself – with children ranging from three to seventeen – Sister Saadia stood quietly as the children settled down and formed a line around the model Ka'bah.

Her older children started in Al-Huda school, but later moved to public school high schools because Al-Huda did not have an established high school at the time. The first two years of high school were challenging for her older daughters

"They endured teasing and ridicule at the hands of their classmates at first," says Sister Saadia. "But things have since calmed down and they have adjusted nicely."

Her younger children currently attend Al-Huda and will continue until eleventh grade. She praised the school and proudly shares that at the age of 11, her oldest daughter finished memorizing the Qur'an.

Born and raised in the faith, Sister Saadia has found Islam to be a stabilizing force in her life. She sees herself as an example of Muslim womanhood to her daughters and students – something that represents position of strength, she said, contrary to negative stereotypes. Sister Saadia dispels the notion that women are oppressed and have no rights in the faith.

"There is no truth to this stereotype," she says. "Women have all the rights. I like the rules and the lifestyle."

As the children began to wind down from the Hajj simulation, they turned to Sister Shemsiya for further instructions. Meanwhile, Sister Saadia explained the daily curriculum.

"We follow an English and Arabic curriculum," she said.

She explained school's practice of immersing children in both American and Muslim cultures, while emphasizing the importance of Islamic manners and beliefs. Many of the children will be

moving on to kindergarten, and preschool teachers must start preparing them gradually for the transition.

Gazing fondly at the children, she said, "Other classrooms (grade levels) in the school have asked me to teach but I love these children. I give them as much as I can and hope it stays with them forever."