

***1001 Nights: Using Media to Foster Socioemotional Development  
Among Refugee Children and Other Children at Risk***

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## Abstract

War and geopolitical conflict not only pose grave risks to physical safety, but also deprive millions of children of education and endanger their socioemotional development. In response, the *1001 Nights* program combines videos with classroom and take-home activities to foster vital life skills and citizenship education. The focal point of the program is an internationally acclaimed animated television series which has aired in over 70 countries and 20 languages to a global audience of over 100 million people on television. The *1001 Nights Program* uses the animated episodes to ground discussion and activities, and is currently being used by over 300,00 children per year (including 150,000 Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugee children) by UNICEF, ministries of education, and international relief organizations throughout the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and Europe. This paper reviews pedagogy and research regarding *1001 Nights* – its citizenship education curriculum (skills and values such as empathy, responsibility, and respect, enabling children to engage with others and become responsible, active citizens), educational approach (grounded in storytelling, critical thinking, and cross-platform learning), impact research with Iraqi, Afghan, and Syrian refugee children (demonstrating effects in areas such as conflict resolution, respecting others, gender equality, and respecting the rule of law), and examples of the crucial need to align materials with cultural context, so that content is conveyed effectively without misunderstanding.

Many nations' Departments or Ministries of Education have recognized that effective early education encompasses, not only academic knowledge, but also the development of positive values and socioemotional skills such as honesty, kindness, fairness, respecting others, appreciating diversity, nonviolent conflict resolution, and the roles of citizens and government in contributing to their community (e.g., Government of Pakistan Ministry of Education, 2007; U.K. Department for Education, 2015). These skills and dispositions provide the foundation for future success, both in school and throughout life.

However, while they are critical for all children, education and socioemotional development face particular challenges for children who live in regions of crisis and conflict. For example, consider the wake of the ongoing Syrian conflict, which has left nearly 6,000,000 children in need and displaced 2,400,000 children displaced from their homes and/or country (UNICEF, 2017). Prior to the conflict, 94% of Syrian children attended primary and lower secondary education, and the country's literacy rate was among the highest in the region. Yet, by June, 2016, 2.1 million children and adolescents had no access to education (UNHCR, 2016). At the same time, the trauma of war and conflict poses formidable challenges for social and emotional development. In one refugee camp, 45% of Syrian refugee children displayed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) -- ten times the prevalence among children around the world -- and 44% reported symptoms of depression (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

All children require both academic and socioemotional education (in and outside school), and the need for such educational efforts -- and engaging, age-appropriate educational materials to support them -- is even greater for children in crisis. This need has in part motivated the creation and implementation of *1001 Nights*. In this paper, we will discuss *1001 Nights'*

educational curriculum and approach, data assessing its impact, and key issues in designing and implementing media-based educational materials for refugee children and others in crisis.

### **The Project**

Originally launched as a commercial entertainment television series, *1001 Nights* has grown into a multilingual, multimedia educational project that combines fun animated stories with a structured program of hands-on classroom activities to foster citizenship education -- the life skills children need to grow into positive, productive members of the society around them.

The *1001 Nights* television series adapts classic folktales with a modern twist as Shahrzad tells her family mythological stories with morals that help them deal with their own interpersonal issues. Accompanying curriculum materials use the animated stories as a springboard for discussions, games, and hands-on activities that carry learning further, both in and out of school. The materials are targeted primarily at 8- to 12-year-olds (third through fifth grade), but are appropriate for a broader range of ages as well.

For example, one *1001 Nights* lesson about fairness and rules begins with a teacher-led discussion in which children talk about their conceptions of “fair” and “unfair,” grounded in the age-appropriate context of dividing treats fairly or unfairly. Next, children watch the *1001 Nights* episode “What’s Yours Is Mine,” in which a greedy emperor devises a series of unjust laws to cheat a poor fisherman out of a valuable pearl. However, the pearl was given to the fisherman by a mermaid to repay him for his kindness, and she helps him meet the petulant emperor’s impossible demands and restores justice. After viewing the animated episode, the teacher leads a follow-up discussion about the story and the issues it raises, such as the fairness of constantly changing rules, or the need for laws to apply to everyone equally. Next, children

explore fairness in a hands-on way, by playing a game under two alternate sets of rules -- one that is fair, and one that favors one player over another. Finally, the lesson is carried home via a structured family activity in which parents and children discuss some of their own family's rules and consequences for following them or misbehaving. In this way, the lesson provides multiple opportunities to explore the concepts of fairness, rules, and the rule of law in a variety of age-appropriate ways that bridge home, school, and media in a unified educational experience.

### **Pedagogy**

This sample lesson highlights two aspects of the pedagogy of *1001 Nights*: its curriculum (i.e. *what* it is designed to help children learn) and its educational approach (i.e. *how* educational content is implemented and conveyed to children).

### **Curriculum**

To grow into healthy, productive members of their communities and society at large, all children require *citizenship education* to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to understand and contribute to the world around them. Citizenship education enables children to engage with others, fosters an understanding of community and society, and provides opportunities for responsible and active citizenship (e.g., Education Commission of the States, 2010; Meyer-Bisch, 1995). This need is exponentially greater for children who have been displaced from their homes, or exposed to extreme violence. When children have witnessed their societies ravaged by war, death, or even the torture of family members, how can they learn the functions of a healthy community or positive values and skills for everyday life?

*1001 Nights* is designed to foster children's emerging citizenship education and life skills, with a curriculum that spans a broad array of subject areas, including: nonviolent conflict

resolution, the rule of law, individual rights, inclusion and equality (across race, class, gender, and religion), honesty, integrity, empathy, kindness and helping others, the value of literacy and education, and many more.

## **Educational Approach**

*1001 Nights* delivers its curriculum via an educational approach that is grounded in storytelling, critical thinking, and a cross-platform learning approach that leverages educational television as a springboard for in-person discussion and hands-on activities.

***Storytelling.*** Storytelling is one of the oldest and most established tools for education, with a history that spans millennia, and modern cognitive and educational research demonstrates that it is just as relevant to education today. Storytelling provides an effective means of holding students' attention while they learn important concepts, attitudes and skills (UNESCO, 2010). Even students with low motivation and weak academic skills are more likely to listen, read, write, and work hard in the context of storytelling (U.S. Department of Education, 1987).

Like its literary namesake, *1001 Nights* is deeply rooted in a culture of storytelling. Within the television series, every episode is framed by Shahrzad telling a story whose underlying message helps the other characters overcome problems and challenges in their lives (conveying these messages to viewers as well). In this way, storytelling functions on two levels: The main story conveys content via modeling and observational learning (e.g., Bandura, 2009), while the framing sequence provides opportunities to state key messages more explicitly, repeat and reinforce the main story's educational content, and apply the content in another context, thus encouraging viewers to apply it in their own lives as well. Many of the accompanying classroom

activities are also based in role playing, narrative, and storytelling, to draw children into the situations addressed in the lessons, and encourage them to share their own personal stories.

Through contemporary stories inspired by folktales from the original *1001 Nights*, the *1001 Nights* materials provide a context that is appealing and relatable for children, as well as familiar and culturally relevant for children, teachers, and parents alike.

**Critical thinking.** For decades, educators have cited the importance of critical thinking as providing a foundation for advanced skills of all kinds (e.g., Commission on the Humanities, 1980; Ennis, 2015). Often, people conceive of “critical thinking” narrowly, within the domain of scientific inquiry and problem solving. However, the skills and dispositions of critical thinking are equally applicable across curriculum areas, and to social and interpersonal situations as well. Indeed, UNESCO’s (1995) *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance* cites education as the most effective means to prevent intolerance, by “countering influences that lead to fear and exclusion of others [by helping] young people to develop capacities for independent judgment, critical thinking and ethical reasoning.”

Critical thinking is key to *1001 Nights*’ classroom lesson plans. Through discussion and collaborative activities, these lessons encourage children to think deeply, question their assumptions, generate ideas and alternatives, and consider other points of view as they delve into issues such as fairness, appreciating other cultures, differentiating between “needs” and “wants,” or giving others the benefit of the doubt.

**Gender equality.** Gender discrimination is a key human rights issue throughout the world, particularly in much of the Middle East and North Africa (e.g., Ebersole, Hunter, Lyons, & Wilke, 2014; OECD, 2017; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2010). *1001 Nights* models and promotes gender equality via several means. Strong, competent

female characters serve as positive role models throughout the television episodes, including Shahrzad, who tells all of the stories in *1001 Nights*. In addition, several lessons directly counter traditional gender stereotypes, through stories about both male and female characters who overcome resistance from the people around them to pursue nontraditional activities (e.g., a girl who wants to become a warrior or a boy who wants to be a puppeteer). Accompanying activities and classroom discussions encourage both and girls to be accepting of nontraditional traits or modes of behavior, and consider engaging in nontraditional activities themselves.

***Educational television.*** There is little need to convince an ICA audience about television's power to educate children. Decades of empirical research have proven that sustained viewing of well-crafted educational television can produce significant learning among preschool and school-age children, and that its impact can last for years (e.g., Fisch, 2004a; Kirkorian & Anderson, 2011). Indeed, evaluations of prior television project, such as several international co-productions of *Sesame Street*, have documented their effects in helping to bridge divides in countries that have endured long-standing political or ethnic conflicts (Cole & Bernstein, 2016).

***Cross-platform learning.*** In addition to producing significant learning benefits of its own, research has shown that well-crafted educational television can also provide a basis for *cross-platform learning* – the combined use of several complementary media platforms (e.g., television and hands-on activities) to promote greater learning than that obtained through one medium alone (Fisch, 2013). In *1001 Nights*, videos of television episodes are used as a springboard for in-person discussion and activities, capitalizing on the strengths of each medium: the reach and motivating power of television, plus the capacity for teachers to adapt in-person instruction to the individual needs of their students. Children learn lessons from the televised stories, and then apply their new skills or knowledge during discussions and hands-on activities.



## **Evidence of Impact**

Research on the educational impact of *1001 Nights* has been – and continues to be – conducted in several countries. Together, the data point to *1001 Nights*' success in reaching and educating children. Some key findings include the following. (For more detail on this research and its findings, see Jenkins & Wilson, 2017).

**Reach.** Through television broadcasts, the 1001 Nights television series reaches over 100,000,000 million people per year worldwide. For example, within six months of its TV premiere in Iraq, 16% of the population had seen or heard of *1001 Nights*, making it Iraq's third most recognized television series for school-age children. Similarly, *UAE Tview Peoplemeter* data found viewership by 25% of 4-14-year-old children in the Gulf States – the single most popular program for this demographic at the time. In Belgium, too, *1001 Nights* was one of the three most popular children's programs on television– the only foreign program in the top three.

In addition, through partnerships with UNICEF, international relief organizations such as Save the Children, and ministries of education, the *1001 Nights* educational program is used with over 300,000 children per year -- including over 150,000 Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugee children, and over 150,000 children in classrooms across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

## **Educational Impact**

Data from Iraqi, Pakistani, and Tunisian schoolchildren, and Syrian refugee children in Jordan and Lebanon, all point to *1001 Nights*' potential to foster citizenship education, positive values, and life skills among children. An important caveat here is that, due to the challenging

logistics of working with this population in these settings, several studies were conducted without a control group, and in some cases, the transience of refugee populations necessitated a between-subjects design for the pretest and posttest, rather than within-subjects. Nevertheless, the consistency in data across countries and evaluations lends confidence to the findings.

For example, the most recent evaluation was conducted in Tunisia, with over 600 fourth through sixth graders (619 pretest; 665 posttest) from afterschool programs in 20 schools in ten districts. The mean age of the sample was 10.6 years (with 90% of the children between the ages of 10 and 12); 60% were girls, and 40% were boys. Over approximately four months, teachers used one *1001 Nights* lesson with their students per week – a total of 13 to 20 lessons. Each lesson was comprised of an 11-minute episode from the television program plus related in-class discussion and hands-on activities to support and expand upon its educational message. Before and after the treatment period, children completed pretest and posttest behavioral questionnaires, which were supplemented by focus groups with teachers and parents at the time of the posttest.

As Figure 1 indicates, the Tunisian data revealed significant pretest-posttest improvement in several areas within the *1001 Nights* curriculum. (Note that the bars in Figure 1 represent the percentage of children who gave *negative* responses, so a decrease from pretest to posttest represents a reduction in negative responses – that is, a positive improvement.<sup>1</sup>) After using the *1001 Nights* television series and classroom materials, Tunisian children showed significant improvement in metrics measuring tolerance of other groups ( $\chi^2_1 = 24.69, p < .001$ ), recognizing that divergent opinions are not necessarily right or wrong ( $\chi^2_1 = 15.92, p < .001$ ), not discriminating against people by gender ( $\chi^2_1 = 6.04, p = .01$ ), acting honestly ( $\chi^2_1 = 5.34, p =$

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<sup>1</sup> Because much of the target audience for *1001 Nights* is considered at risk for developing aggressive or other antisocial behavior, graphs were framed in terms of negative responses so that the pretest data serve as an approximate indicator of the level of risk prior to use.

.02), resolving conflicts peacefully ( $\chi^2_1 = 5.37, p = .02$ ), and not insulting others ( $\chi^2_1 = 12.69, p < .001$ ). We can further break down the finding for “tolerance of other groups” to see that it reflects significant improvements in children’s saying that they would not discriminate against a new kid in their class because of his/her religion (Muslim vs. Christian;  $\chi^2_1 = 19.61, p < .001$ ), region ( $\chi^2_1 = 4.95, p = .02$ ), or nationality ( $\chi^2_1 = 27.14, p < .001$ ). (See Figure 2.)

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Figs. 1 & 2 about here

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In a world where sectarianism and polarization along ethnic, religious and political lines cause instability and violence, the impact of *1001 Nights* in areas such as tolerance of diverse groups and ideas, gender equity, honesty, and nonviolent conflict resolution are particularly noteworthy. Focus groups with teachers of refugee children in Jordan further supported these trends: Both in the classroom and on the playground, teachers observed increased cohesion among children of different nationalities and reductions in inter-group hostility, especially in communities where Iraqis, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Syrians lived together (Jenkins & Wilson, 2017). Indeed, two of the teachers in Tunisia cried because of the changes they observed. They reported that, whereas their students used to have problems with violence and hostility (e.g., fights on a daily basis), they now acted more empathetically and much less violently. They appeared happier, more hopeful, and kinder to each other and their teachers.

Tunisian parents, too, reported positive behavioral and attitudinal changes in their children. By the time of the posttest, 76% of parents said that their children shared more with others, 48% said their children fought less, 48% said they were more likely to solve disputes peacefully, and 62% said they showed more empathy toward others. In addition, 90% said they

were more excited to go to school, and 88% said they were more excited about the future.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps as a result, 90% of parents felt that *1001 Nights* had a positive impact on their children, and 59% believed it had a positive effect on their entire family as well.

Again, these responses were consistent with those from parents of Iraqi, Pakistani and Syrian refugee children as well. As one Iraqi parent said, “[*My son*] benefited from [*1001 Nights*] by learning about honesty, and not to steal, etc...He spoke about honesty, courage, and the spirit of cooperation.”

### **Issues and Constraints in Design and Implementation**

To achieve their desired educational impact, any materials – domestic or international – must fit the practical constraints of the settings in which they will be used, and must be culturally relevant for their target audience (e.g., Cole, 2016; Yotive & Fisch, 2001). These challenges are far greater when producing and implementing educational materials for children in regions of conflict and crisis, as is evident in several examples from the implementation of *1001 Nights*.

***Transient populations.*** Ideally, the *1001 Nights* curriculum is conducted over a span of months with the same children. However, that is not always possible among refugee children. Although some refugee camps house families for extended periods with relative continuity and stability, other families live in more transient camps for shorter periods, so they simply are not present long enough to use the full range of materials. For example, when summative data were collected during an implementation with Syrian refugee children in Jordan, only about 1/3 of the children who participated in the pretest (71 of 199) were still present by the time of the posttest. For this reason, each *1001 Nights* lesson plan is designed to be self-contained, providing a

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, in Pakistan (where typical absenteeism among teachers is estimated between 10% - 15%), some teachers reported that attendance increased among both students *and* teachers when they used *1001 Nights* materials in class.

substantive educational experience for children by itself, with the potential for greater cumulative impact when children engage in multiple lessons over several weeks or months.

***Unanticipated events.*** Even when children live in the same place over time, societal unrest or violence can interrupt – or completely prevent – formal and informal education in general and the use of educational media more specifically. In a 2014-2015 implementation in Pakistan, for example, anti-government street demonstrations forced the cancelation of two teacher training sessions, delaying the rollout of the implementation. Soon after, schools throughout the country were forced to close for several months, some because of a lengthy period of severe weather, and others (more tragically) because of a Taliban attack on a school that left 132 children dead. Even when schools reopened several months later, the delays caused by the extended closures prevented some schools from participating in the implementation (although they had planned) to do so. Here too, materials must be designed to be usable in various ways, both short-term and long-term, so they can be adapted to unexpected circumstances as needed.

***Cultural issues.*** The above challenges stem from the practical realities of implementation. Another type of consideration is the culture of the communities in which the materials are used. For example, in light of prevalent gender inequality throughout much of the Middle East (e.g., Nabli & Chamlou, 2005), gender equity was designated as an important topic in the *1001 Nights* curriculum. Gender equity is addressed throughout *1001 Nights* via its strong, competent female characters, and it is addressed more directly in several TV episodes (e.g., concerning male and/or female characters who defy gender stereotypes) and the discussions and activities that accompany them. Yet, in designing these episodes and activities, great care was also taken to strike a balance between conveying important messages about gender equity

without inadvertently violating cultural norms about modesty in the process. This helped ensure that the materials would be implemented in (and accepted by) traditional schools and communities, and that content would be relatable to the children and adults who used them.

Cultural factors can also influence – or even subvert -- children’s comprehension of materials. For example, in one *1001 Nights* episode about nonviolent conflict resolution, three princes want to go to war with a neighboring kingdom over a dispute, but their brother wants to settle the dispute peacefully (the better solution). While Syrian refugee children in a child-friendly space on the Syrian border laughed and enjoyed the episode, many struggled with the notion that a person who chose not to fight or go to war could be deemed courageous. Recognizing that this misunderstanding likely stemmed from the children’s experience of years of war, coupled the fact that their brothers, fathers and uncles had gone to war as an act of courage and pride, the implementation methodology was changed in two ways. First, given the degree of exposure the children had to war and conflict as well as its resulting trauma, each lesson was used for 3 one-hour sessions per week instead of one. Second, rather than trying to counter such attitudes head-on, we devised a strategy to attempt to influence attitudes more subtly and indirectly: helping them see that being a brave hero means standing up for one’s beliefs, which under some circumstances might require fighting, but under other circumstances, called for being strong enough *not* to fight. Summative research did not compare learning before and after the change, but it is noteworthy that focus groups with teachers in the refugee camp found that, although some children voiced the misunderstanding, others saw the nonviolent prince as a hero because (in the words of one teacher) *“they related the story to real life and what happened in Syria, how Bashar Al-Assad has caused his people to die for nothing, in contrast to the prince in the story who saved his people.”*

## Conclusion

To successfully nurture growth and learning, educational media for any children must be both well-designed and implemented effectively. This is no less true among children in crisis, but cultural factors, often-difficult living conditions, and histories of trauma mean that materials for these populations must be approached with even greater care and sensitivity.

Elsewhere, I have discussed design features that contribute to the effectiveness of educational media, such as the need for material to be appealing and age-appropriate, for educational content to be clear, explicit, and integral to the narrative, etc. (e.g., Fisch, 2004b, 2005). To this list, we can add features that are particularly important when designing materials for children in crisis: The content and execution of the materials must be culturally relevant to their intended audience, so that children can relate to and easily understand them, and so that adult gatekeepers will choose to use them. Materials must be adaptable to a broad range of uses, both short-term and extended, so that they can be used with both transient and more stable populations. They must allow for modification in response to changing circumstances or when societal factors interfere or even conflict with the desired educational messages.

Clearly, these are easier said than done. However, given the dire needs of these children, and the paucity of educational materials to serve them, the potential for impact is great. As experience and research with *1001 Nights* have shown, a thoughtful partnership among producers and educators can yield rich resources for teachers and parents, and powerful tools to help children develop into kinder citizens of a more harmonious and equal society.

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Figure 1. Tunisia study: Percentage of children giving negative responses in the pretest (purple bars) and posttest (yellow bars).

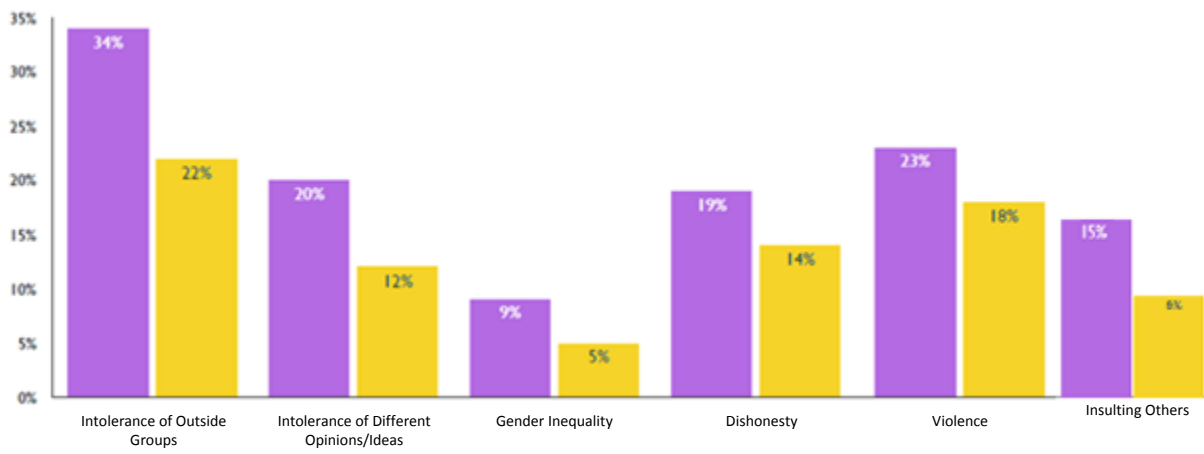


Figure 2. Tunisia study: Percentage of children giving negative responses to tolerance questions in the pretest (purple bars) and posttest (yellow bars).

