

**The Pedagogy of *1001 Nights*:
Need, Curriculum, Educational Approach, and Impact**

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In the six years since its international launch as a commercial entertainment television series, *1001 Nights* has grown into a multilingual, multimedia educational project that reaches more than 100,000,000 viewers per year, including over 150,000 Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugee children, and over 200,000 children in classrooms throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. *1001 Nights* combines fun, exciting, animated stories with a structured program of hands-on classroom activities to help foster citizenship education and the vital life skills that children need as they grow into positive, productive members of the society around them.

The *1001 Nights* television series adapts classic tales with a modern twist to engage 8- to 12-year-old children in its educational messages and motivate them to want to learn more. The accompanying curriculum materials (designed primarily at a third- through fifth-grade level) build upon this motivation by using the animated stories as a springboard for discussions, games, and hands-on activities that carry learning further, in both formal and informal teaching environments.

This paper describes the substantive pedagogy that underlies *1001 Nights* (its curriculum and educational approach), and research that has evaluated its educational benefits among the children who need it most.

The Need

As outlined in the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, all children have the right to a quality education, and to develop their personalities, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential (U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). Many nations' Departments or Ministries of Education have recognized that early education lays the foundation for children's future development, as well as their success both in and out of school. Moreover, they have also recognized that effective early education encompasses, not only academic knowledge, but also, and equally important, the development of positive values and socioemotional skills. For example, in the U.K.'s *National Curriculum*, citizenship education includes not only academic knowledge and skills, but also subjects such as fairness, setting goals, making choices, following rules, belonging and contributing to groups or communities, and identifying and respecting similarities and differences among people (U.K. Department for Education, 2015). Similarly, Pakistan's *National Curriculum for General Knowledge* is designed, not only to foster academic knowledge and skills in areas such as science and literacy, but also to help children "develop positive dispositions and attitudes, respect others and engage with them to work through differences of opinion; and function well as members of the society and as responsible citizens of the country by demonstrating concern for others..." (Government of Pakistan Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10). To this end, Pakistan's curriculum encompasses both academic skills, such as inquiry and critical thinking, and prosocial values and dispositions such as honesty, kindness, fairness, respecting others, appreciating diversity, nonviolent conflict resolution, and the roles of citizens and government in contributing to their community.

Yet, despite widespread consensus on the critical need for academic and socioemotional education, literally millions of children are not receiving the support they require. Even as

recently as 2012, 121 million children worldwide (12% of the population) were not enrolled in school at all (UNESCO, 2015a), with enrollment particularly low in the Middle East, North Africa, and countries affected by conflict (El-Kogali & Krafft, 2015; UNESCO, 2015b). Nowhere has this been more evident than in the wake of the ongoing Syrian conflict, where literally millions of children have been left without formal education, and the enduring trauma of war threatens their socioemotional development as well. (See the text box on the next page.)

Indeed, even among children who currently attend school, there is no guarantee that their school's educational materials promote values such as inclusion, diversity, or peaceful conflict resolution. To the contrary, content analyses of hundreds of textbooks in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, and elsewhere have found that many of these textbooks contain material that encourages prejudice toward women or other ethnic groups, and/or glorifies violence (Islam & Asadullah, 2016; Nayyar & Salim, 2003; Paivandi, 2008). Ironically, this has been true even in some countries (such as Pakistan) whose Ministries of Education have called for inclusion, diversity, and conflict resolution to be incorporated into their national curricula. Clearly, then, achieving the Ministries' educational goals requires (among other things) the introduction of educational materials that support and embody such values.

Together, these findings highlight the vast need to provide children with both academic and socio-emotional education in schools, communities, refugee camps, and elsewhere -- and an equally pressing need for engaging, age-appropriate educational materials that can support teachers, parents, and informal educators in these efforts. This dire need has motivated the creation and implementation of *1001 Nights*.

**Development in Crisis:
Academic and Socioemotional Needs of Syrian Refugee Children**

It is no secret that the Syrian refugee crisis has reached catastrophic proportions. As of April 2017, it is estimated the crisis has left nearly 6,000,000 children in need, with 2,400,000 children displaced from their homes and/or country (UNICEF, 2017). Apart from the vast humanitarian challenges that the crisis poses for children's physical safety, health, and well-being, it presents equally formidable obstacles to children's education and socioemotional development. Prior to the conflict, 94% of Syrian children attended primary and lower secondary education in 2009, 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. In neighboring countries, nearly 900,000 Syrian school-age refugee children and adolescents were not in school (UNHCR, 2016). Indeed, the Syrian conflict has lasted six years so far – throughout (or even beyond) many of these young children's school years. As a result, many have never been to school at all.

Even when host countries make formal education available to refugee children, many families still cannot take advantage of the opportunity because of cost, language barriers, distance, and/or lack of transportation. The issue is even greater among girls, since Syrian refugee girls are far less likely to attend school than boys (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

In addition to being at-risk with regard to formal education, formidable challenges exist for these children's social and emotional development as well. Belsky (2008) posits that the violent trauma of war can lead to outcomes such as depression, insecure attachment, and aggression in children. Indeed, empirical research studies have supported these claims. For example, prolonged exposure to political violence in other conflicts has been found to be associated with increased aggression among children (Dubow, 2012). A study of Syrian refugee children in one camp in southeast Turkey found that 45% 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). Thus, while all children, around the world, need support to fully realize their potential for growth in school and the community, it is even more critical among the refugee children who need it the most.

Pedagogy of *1001 Nights*

To understand the pedagogy of *1001 Nights*, it is necessary to consider both its curriculum (i.e. *what* it is designed to help children learn) and its educational approach (i.e. *how* the curriculum is implemented and conveyed to children through the videos and in-person lesson plans that comprise *1001 Nights*).

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.

For children who have been displaced from their homes, or whose societies have been ravaged by war, developing these sorts of knowledge and life skills poses particular challenges. How can children learn the functions of a community or the skills necessary to navigate everyday life when their community has been disrupted and their “everyday life” is anything but ordinary?

To contribute to this critical need -- among both Syrian refugee children and a broader, international audience of children -- *1001 Nights* is designed to foster children’s emerging citizenship education and life skills through a combination of animated videos, teacher-led discussion, and hands-on activities. The *1001 Nights* lesson plans are targeted primarily at children in grades 3 through 5, but are appropriate for a broader range of ages as well. The curriculum spans a broad array of subject areas, including topics and values such as:

- Honesty
- Empathy
- Individual rights
- The rule of law
- Kindness and helping others
- Making responsible choices
- Critical thinking
- The value of literacy and education
- Equality
- Respecting the ideas, beliefs, and opinions of others
- And many more

As an illustration, consider one *1001 Nights* lesson about fairness and the importance of rules. The lesson 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, a magical mermaid repays the fisherman’s kindness by helping him

meet the emperor's impossible demands and restores justice. After viewing, the teacher then 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 the concept of 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 clarify positive consequences for following the rules and negative consequences for misbehaving.

In this way, the lesson provides multiple opportunities for children to explore the concepts of fairness, rules, and the rule of law in a variety of age-appropriate ways. Children consider fairness in the context of both interpersonal fairness among their peers and in the context of society at large. They consider rules, both in the context of the family rules that govern their behavior at home, as well as the broader rule of law. The *1001 Nights* activities bridge home, school, and media, to bring all three together into a unified educational experience.

This is typical of the multidimensional educational approach through which *1001 Nights* implements its curriculum in all of its lessons, as discussed in the next section of this white paper.

Educational Approach

Rather than subjecting children to didactic lectures, *1001 Nights* delivers its curriculum through an educational approach that is grounded in storytelling, critical thinking, and interactive discussion and engagement. In addition, *1001 Nights* leverages the educative power of educational television as a springboard for in-person discussion and hands-on activities mediated by live teachers. Together, the result is a multi-platform experience that is grounded in established educational theory, practice, and research.

Let's consider each aspect of this educational approach in turn.

Storytelling. Storytelling is one of the oldest and most established tools for education, with a history that spans millennia. Yet, modern cognitive and educational research demonstrates that the power of storytelling is just as relevant to education today as it was in ancient times. UNESCO's (2010) teacher education program, *Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future*, notes that storytelling provides an effective means of holding students' attention while they learn important concepts, attitudes and skills. Research shows that 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). Indeed, cognitive psychologists Schank and Abelson (1995) have gone so far as to posit that *all* human memory is represented through narrative; although most theorists do not necessarily take such an extreme position, there is a clear consensus that storytelling can serve as a powerful and effective educational tool.

Like its literary namesake, *1001 Nights* is deeply rooted in a culture of storytelling. Within the television series, every episode is framed in the context of Shahrzad telling a story whose underlying message helps the other characters overcome problems and challenges in their lives (and helps viewers learn important citizenship and life lessons 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 to encourage children to share their own stories as well.

By framing its lessons in contemporary stories that are inspired by folktales drawn 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 promoting children’s critical thinking, ever since the Rockefeller Commission first recommended that the U.S. Department of Education define critical thinking as one of the basic skills that provides the foundation for advanced skills of all kinds (Commission on the Humanities, 1980). Some of the many skills and dispositions that comprise critical thinking include identifying problems, analyzing situations and arguments, being open-minded, using evidence, evaluating the credibility of sources, and questioning one’s own assumptions (e.g., Ennis, 2015). Today, critical thinking has become an integral component of the national curricula implemented by Ministries or Departments of Education in many countries around the world.

Often, people conceive of “critical thinking” narrowly, within the domain of scientific inquiry and problem solving. While critical thinking is certainly crucial to science education, however, the skills and dispositions of critical thinking are equally applicable across the curriculum, and to social and interpersonal situations outside the classroom as well. Indeed, critical thinking is a vital part of UNESCO’s (1995) *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance*, which recognizes education as the most effective means of preventing intolerance, by “countering influences that lead to fear and exclusion of others [via 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. In this way, the lessons provide opportunities for children to develop and practice essential skills and dispositions that are necessary for success throughout their lives, both in and out of school.

Educational television. Television and other electronic media are ubiquitous in children’s lives, as numerous international studies have shown that children spend vast amounts of time engaged with media (e.g., Larson, 2001; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). On one level, parents and educators may be concerned about children’s consumption of negative media content, such as violent television programs or video games. However, from the standpoint of educational media, children’s attraction to media presents a tremendous

opportunity to reach children with substantive educational content in a form that they find inherently appealing and engaging.

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 enduring impact can last for years. Effects of educational television have been documented in academic areas such as literacy, science, mathematics, and civics, as well as promoting socioemotional growth (e.g., sharing, nonviolent conflict resolution) and positive health behavior (e.g., Fisch, 2004; Kirkorian & Anderson, 2011). For example, more than 30 different, indigenous versions of *Sesame Street* have been produced around the world, ranging from *Sesamstrasse* in Germany to *Alam Simsim* in Egypt to *Sisimpur* in Bangladesh. A meta-analysis of research evaluating children's learning from *Sesame Street* in 15 countries not only found evidence of significant learning among children, but also found that *Sesame Street's* impact was equivalent to the impact of international classroom interventions for early childhood education (Mares & Pan, 2013).

Indeed, several of these evaluations were conducted with versions of *Sesame Street* designed to help bridge divides in countries that have endured long-standing political or ethnic conflicts. These studies suggest that, for such television series to be most impactful, their messaging must be age-appropriate, simple (though not simplistic), and culturally relevant. Particularly when created for an audience of disenfranchised children, their content and portrayals of characters should build pride in children's own group as well as a positive view of other groups, by focusing not only on differences between groups but also the commonalities that characterize our common humanity (Cole & Bernstein, 2016).

Thus, in terms of both academic learning in general and peace education in countries threatened by long-term conflicts, educational television can hold significant educational benefits for its young viewers. Well-crafted educational television can serve as an effective resource for parents and teachers to use in educating children.

Hands-on activities and cross-platform learning. Although (as discussed above) educational television has great reach among children and has been found to carry substantive educational benefits, it cannot substitute for in-person instruction by a skilled teacher. Television is a mass medium, so every child who watches an educational television program is exposed to the same treatment of the material. Television typically does not allow for instruction to be customized to the needs, level, or prior knowledge of each individual viewer.

For this reason, in *1001 Nights*, videos of television episodes are combined with in-person discussion and hands-on activities administered by a live teacher. In this way, the television episodes are used as a springboard for in-person engagement that allows a teacher to adapt each lesson to the needs of his or her particular students. Through this model, television and live instruction are combined in complementary ways that capitalize on the strengths of each medium to yield a greater whole. The *1001 Nights* television episodes are used to engage children, introduce educational concepts, model skills and strategies, and motivate children to want to learn more. Classroom discussions and activities build upon this foundation of

knowledge and motivation, to engage children more personally and deeply in the topic and carry learning further, beyond the screen.

Indeed, research on cross-platform learning (i.e. children's learning from combined use of several different media platforms) indicates that combining educational approaches across multiple media (e.g., television and hands-on activities) can promote greater learning than use of either medium alone. In part, these added benefits stem from what educators refer to as *transfer of learning* – the ability to transfer the knowledge or skills acquired in one context (or from engagement with one medium) and apply them in another (Fisch, 2013). In the case of *1001 Nights*, the combined use of video and classroom activities gives children the opportunity to learn lessons from watching the stories on television, and then apply their new skills or knowledge during discussions and hands-on activities.

In sum, the educational approach of *1001 Nights* unites the ancient power of storytelling with modern technology and approaches to education, to deliver its curriculum in ways that are both appealing and educationally effective for children.

Evidence of Impact

To date, the educational impact of *1001 Nights* has been evaluated through empirical research in several countries (**insert reference for Lydia's white paper Wilson & Jenkins, 2017). Together, the data point to *1001 Nights*' success in reaching and educating children, and to its usefulness and value as an educational resource for teachers and parents. Some key findings of the research include the following. (For more detail on this research and its findings, see the full report in **insert reference for Lydia's white paper Wilson & Jenkins, 2017).

Reach

In Iraq, within six months of airing on television, 16% of the population had seen or heard of *1001 Nights*, making it the country's third most recognized television series for school-age children. In Pakistan, too, *1001 Nights* was one of the most popular television series for family viewing, with 7% of Pakistanis (approximately 9,000,000 people) watching *1001 Nights* on television three times per week. Similarly, data from *UAE Tview Peoplemeter* found that 24.5% of 4- through 14-year-olds in the Gulf States watched *1001 Nights* three times per week while it aired, making it the single most watched program for Middle Eastern children.

Focus groups with Pakistani teachers who had used *1001 Nights* suggest that the appeal of *1001 Nights* can be leveraged within the classroom too. Teachers reported that *1001 Nights* was highly engaging for both students and teachers, and that it contributed to both children's motivation to come to class and self-discipline while in class. Indeed, some teachers reported that attendance increased among both students *and* teachers when they used *1001 Nights* materials in class.

Educational Impact

Beyond reaching and motivating children, data collected with Iraqi and Pakistani school children, and Syrian refugee children in Jordan and Lebanon, also point to *1001 Nights*' potential to foster citizenship education, positive values, and life skills among children. After using the *1001 Nights* television series and classroom materials, children in all of these countries and contexts consistently scored more positively in metrics measuring civic and life skills such as equity, nonviolent conflict resolution, respecting the rule of law, gender equality, honesty, respecting others' opinions and abilities, helping others, and giving others the benefit of the doubt.¹

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, the rule of law, gender equality, and nonviolent conflict resolution are particularly noteworthy. In Pakistan, for example, pretest data found that fourth-grade children were less tolerant of other groups than younger children were. However, this trend of growing intolerance was curbed after exposure to *1001 Nights*, in that fourth graders scored as positively as second graders in the posttest. Similar results were found for children's tolerance for diverse opinions and in their perceptions of the value of women, suggesting that *1001 Nights* may have the potential to help "inoculate" children against developing negative values and attitudes as they grow older.

Value for Teachers and Parents

Given the above results with children, it is not surprising that, in focus groups with parents or teachers, the adult participants felt very positively about *1001 Nights* and its value as an educational tool. In Pakistan, Jordan, and Iraq, all of the teachers who were interviewed believed that *1001 Nights* could teach important lessons to children. They supported its implementation in schools, with the vast majority wanting to incorporate *1001 Nights* lesson plans into their core curriculum over multiple years of learning.

In parent focus groups, parents of Iraqi, Pakistani and Syrian refugee children offered anecdotal accounts of positive behavioral changes they had observed in their children over the course of their involvement with *1001 Nights*. Individual parents described growth in areas such as not stealing, helping others, telling the truth, respecting elders, sharing, caring for younger siblings, completing homework, and taking interest in their studies. Refugee children discussed subjects such as kindness and good deeds with their friends, parents, cousins and younger siblings. As one Iraqi parent said, "[My son] benefited from the [curriculum] by learning about honesty, and not to steal, etc...He spoke about honesty, courage, and the spirit of cooperation."

¹ However, comparable trends were not found for a set of interview questions that assessed empathy, largely because of ceiling effects: Children scored so highly in the pretest (before the *1001 Nights* materials were introduced) that there was little room for improvement.

Conclusion

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, disenfranchised children around the world face grave challenges, not only to their physical health and well-being, but to their education and socioemotional development as well. There is vast need among these children (and the adults who care for them) for educational materials that are substantive, engaging, and age-appropriate.

From the standpoint of both educational theory and empirical data, *1001 Nights* is well-positioned to help meet this need. Its citizenship education materials are built upon a firm foundation of educational theory and practice. Its strong appeal draws children in to engage them in its lessons, and motivates them not only to participate in discussions and hands-on activities in the classroom, but to carry them home as well. The research conducted to date confirms the potential for *1001 Nights* to benefit children and contribute to their learning.

Naturally, none of this is to say that *1001 Nights* is intended to replace schools or teachers (nor should it). Rather, through its television episodes, classroom discussions, and hands-on activities, *1001 Nights* provides a rich resource for teachers and parents, and a powerful tool to help children develop into kinder citizens of a more harmonious and equal society.

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***Wilson, L., & Jenkins, R. (2017). Insert reference for Lydia's white paper