Promoting inclusion and tolerance through a children's TV show?

A STUDY WITH REFUGEE CHILDREN ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MULITMEDIA EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM *1001 NIGHTS*

Shalom Fisch

A reception study, among others in Tunisia, explored the question of whether the multimedia educational program *1001 Nights* fosters positive values, life skills and inclusion among children.

International educational authorities such as UNESCO (1995, 2016) have long recognized the "urgent imperative" of educating children to be inclusive of people of other genders, religions, nationalities, and ethnicities. As crucial as this is for children everywhere, it is particularly needed among children living in conflict, to help build the resilience necessary to withstand forces that promote discrimination, exclusion and violent extremism.
*1001 Nights* (developed by Aly Jetha and produced by Big Bad Boo Studios) is

designed to contribute to these efforts. Originally launched as a commercial entertainment television series, *1001 Nights* has grown into a multilingual, multimedia educational program that combines fun animated stories with hands-on classroom activities to foster citizenship education and the life skills children need to grow into positive, productive members of society. Each year, its television episodes reach over 100,000,000 people worldwide, and (through partnerships with UNICEF, relief organizations such as Save the Children, and ministries of education) *1001 Nights* classroom materials are used with over 300,000 children – including over 200,000 Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugee children, and over 100,000 children in classrooms across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and

North Africa. In 2018, *1001 Nights* won the WISE Award that honors 6 of the most innovative education programs in the world each year.
The *1001 Nights* television series adapts classic folktales with a modern twist as Shahrzad (Ill. 1) 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 primarily target 8- to 12-year-olds, but also have been effective with a broader range of ages.
For example, one lesson about inclusion of other cultures and the danger of making assumptions begins with
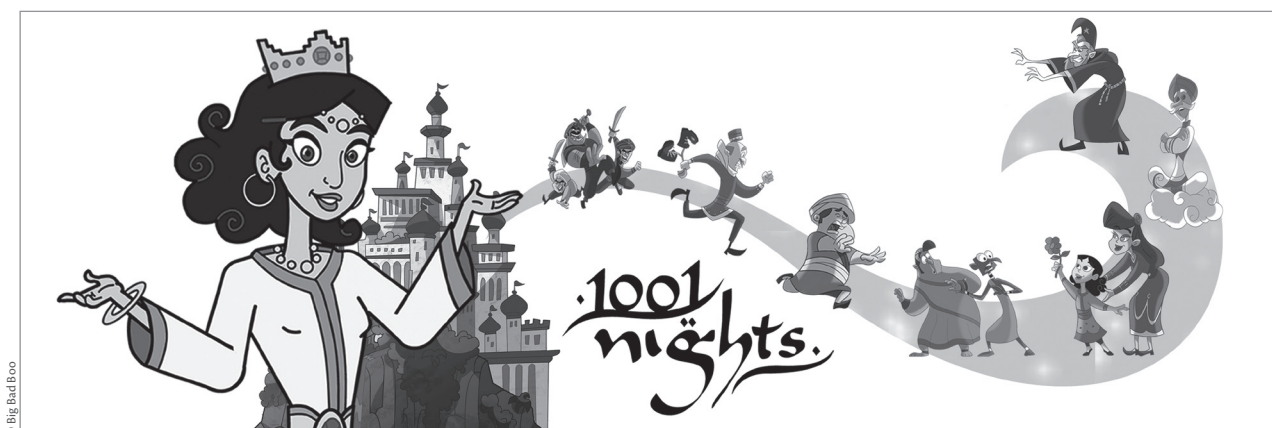
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Ill.1: The multimedia educational program *1001 Nights* aims at educating children to be inclusive of others and fostering citizenship education and life skills

a teacher-led discussion centered on a personal story about a rumor that wasn't true. Next, children watch the *1001 Nights* episode *The Forbidden City of Shenzen*, in which villagers from Lihu fear the citizens of Shenzen because they've heard about Shenzen's barbaric practices, such as eating worms and sticking people with needles, while Shenzen has heard of atrocious behavior in Lihu. Two young friends – one from Lihu and the other from Shehnzen - overcome their prejudices and bring their communities together by showing that Shenzen isn't really barbaric at all; the "worms" are noodles, the needles are for acupuncture, and Shenzen's misconceptions about Lihu are equally unfounded. After the episode, the teacher leads a discussion about the issues raised, such as how to respond to unfounded assumptions about an individual or an entire group. Next, children explore these concepts hands-on, through a game in which they anonymously write down several preferences (e.g., their favorite food), find a compatible list from someone else, and then discover (sometimes to their surprise) which child wrote that list, to appreciate how much they have in common. Finally, the lesson is carried home via a family worksheet in which one king is offended because the neighboring king never comes to visit, while the other king is offended because he has never been invited. Parents and children are asked to brainstorm ways they might help the kings overcome their misunderstanding and get along. Thus, the lesson provides multiple opportunities to explore the concepts of prejudicial assumptions, mutual acceptance, and benefit of the doubt in varied, age-appropriate ways that bridge home, school, and media.

This sample lesson highlights 2 aspects of the pedagogy of *1001 Nights*: its curriculum (i.e. what is designed to help children learn) and its educational approach (i.e. how the educational content is implemented).

CURRICULUM

To grow into healthy, productive members of society, all children require citizenship education to enable them to engage with others, understand their community and society, and become responsible and active citizens (e.g., Education Commission of the States, 2010). *1001 Nights* fosters children's emerging citizenship education, including skills and dispositions that are essential to pluralism and discouraging violent extremism, such as inclusion and equality (across ethnicity, class, gender, and religion), nonviolent dispute resolution, empathy, kindness and helping others, and many more.

EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

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

Storytelling

Storytelling has been used as an educational tool for millennia, and educational research demonstrates that it is just as relevant 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. Every episode of the television series is framed by Shahrzad telling a story whose underlying message helps the other characters (and viewers) overcome challenges in their own lives. In this way, storytelling functions on 2

levels: The main story conveys content by modeling positive behavior with strong, appealing role models, 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 to contexts outside the program as well. Many of the accompanying classroom activities are also grounded in role playing, narrative, and storytelling, to draw children into 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 viewed critical thinking as a foundation for academic skills of all kinds (e.g., Ennis, 2015). UNESCO (1995) also 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 central to *1001 Nights*' classroom lessons. Through discussion and collaborative activities, children are encouraged 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, 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 et al., 2014; OECD, 2017). *1001 Nights* models and promotes gender equality via several means. Strong, competent female characters serve as positive role models throughout the television episodes, including the central character and narrator Shahrzad. In addition, several lessons directly counter traditional gender stereotypes, through stories about male and female characters who overcome resistance from the people around them to pursue nontraditional activities (e.g., a girl wants to become a warrior, a boy wants to be a puppeteer). Similarly, male characters who respect women and oppose gender stereotypes are also used to promote notions of "positive masculinity". Accompanying activities and classroom discussions encourage children to be accepting of nontraditional traits or behavior, and consider engaging in nontraditional activities themselves.

Educational television and cross-platform learning

Decades of empirical research have proven that well-crafted educational television produces significant learning among children, and that this impact can last for years (e.g., Fisch, 2004). Indeed, evaluations of international co-productions of *Sesame Street* have documented their effects in helping to bridge divides in countries with long-standing political or ethnic conflicts (Cole & Bernstein, 2016).

In addition, 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 yield greater learning than one medium alone (Fisch, 2013). In *1001 Nights*, television episodes are springboards for in-person discussion and activities, capitalizing on the strengths of each medium: the reach and motivating power of television, plus teachers' ability to adapt in-person instruction to their students' individual needs. Chil-

dren learn lessons from the televised stories, then apply their new skills or knowledge during discussions and hands-on activities.

Increasing inclusion: evidence of impact

Research on the educational impact of *1001 Nights* has been conducted in several countries. Data from Iraqi, Pakistani, and Tunisian schoolchildren, and Syrian and Iraqi refugee children in Jordan and Lebanon, all point to *1001 Nights'* potential to foster citizenship education, positive values, and life skills among children.[1] For example, a recent evaluation was conducted in Tunisia with over 600 fourth through sixth graders (60% girls, 40% boys) from afterschool programs in 10 districts. Over four months (January to April 2018), teachers and students used one *1001 Nights* lesson per week – a total of 15 to 18 lessons. Before and after the 4-month period, children completed pretest and posttest behavioral questionnaires, which were supplemented by focus groups and questionnaires with teachers and parents at the end of the study. Children showed significant pretest-posttest improvement in several areas related to inclusion and resilience against violent extremism (Ill. 2).[2,3] After using *1001 Nights*, Tunisian children improved significantly in metrics measuring inclusion of other groups, recognizing that divergent opinions are not

necessarily right or wrong, gender equality, resolving conflicts peacefully, and not insulting others. We can further break down "inclusion of other groups" to see that it reflects significant improvements in children's saying they would not discriminate against a new kid because of his/her religion (Muslim or Christian), region (urban or rural), or ethnicity (Ill. 3).[4]

In a world where ethnic, religious and political sectarianism cause instability and violence, the impact of *1001 Nights* in these areas is extremely promising. Focus groups with teachers in various countries further supported these trends: Both in the classroom and on the playground, Jordanian teachers observed increased cohesion among refugee 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, 2 Tunisian teachers cried because of the changes they observed; their students used to have problems with violence and hostility (e.g., daily fights), but now acted more empatheti-
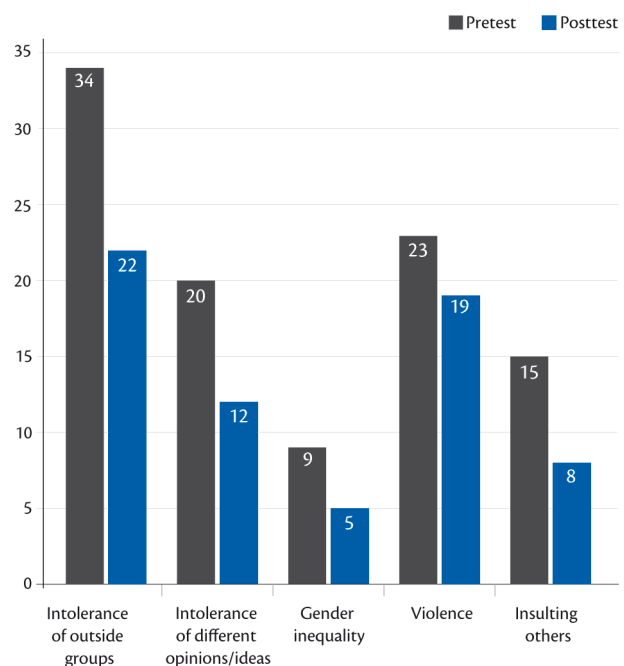
Ill. 2: Percentage of children giving negative responses in the pretest and posttest

cally and much less violently. They appeared happier, more hopeful, and kinder to each other and their teachers. Parents' questionnaire responses also supported these findings, with 48% saying their children solved disputes more peacefully and less violently, 62% noting their children were more empathetic, and 90% saying the program had a positive impact on their children's values.

ISSUES IN DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

To achieve their desired educational impact, any materials must be culturally relevant for their target audience and fit the practical constraints of the settings where they are used (e.g., Yotive & Fisch, 2001). These challenges are far greater when designing materials about inclusion for children in regions of conflict and crisis, as is evident in several examples from *1001 Nights*.

Cultural issues

To promote inclusion effectively, creators of educational materials must consider the cultural context in which children live. As noted earlier, in light of prevalent gender inequality throughout much of the Middle East (e.g., Ebersole et al., 2014), gender equality is modeled throughout *1001 Nights* via strong, competent female characters, and also addressed directly as the topic of several lessons. In designing these episodes and activities, great care was taken to convey important messages about gender equality 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 both children and adults.
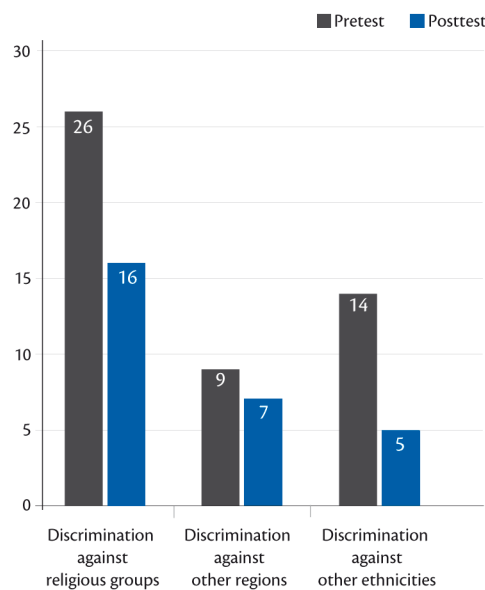
Ill. 3: Percentage of children giving negative responses to intolerance questions in the pretest and posttest

Cultural factors can also influence – or even subvert – children's comprehension of messages regarding nonviolence and tolerance. For example, in one episode about nonviolent conflict resolution, 3 princes want to wage war against a neighboring kingdom, 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 could be deemed courageous. Recognizing that this misunderstanding likely stemmed from the children's experience of years of war, and that some of their brothers, fathers, and uncles had gone to war as an act of courage and pride, the implementation was changed in 2 ways. First, given the children's exposure to war, conflict, and 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, a strategy was devised to influence attitudes more subtly and indirectly: helping children see that being a brave hero means standing up for one's beliefs,

which under some circumstances might require fighting, but under other circumstances, calls for being strong enough *not* to fight. 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 (as one teacher put it) "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."

Transient populations

Apart from cultural factors, effective materials to promote inclusion also must be designed to fit the practical constraints of the settings where they will be used. Ideally, children engage with the *1001 Nights* curriculum over several months, but that is not always possible among refugees. Although some refugee camps house families for extended periods with relative 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. Thus, each *1001 Nights* lesson is self-contained, providing a substantive educational experience by itself, with the potential for greater cumulative impact when children use 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 – the use of educational media. In Pakistan, for example, antigovernment street demonstrations forced the cancelation of two teacher training sessions, delaying the rollout of an implementation. Soon after, schools

throughout the country were forced to close for several months, some because 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. Here too, materials must be designed to be usable in various short-term and long-term ways, so they can be adapted to unexpected circumstances as needed.

Great care and sensitivity is required

CONCLUSION

To successfully promote inclusion and nonviolence, educational media must be well-designed and implemented effectively. This is no less true among children in conflict, but cultural factors, difficult living conditions, and histories of trauma mean that materials for these populations require even greater care and sensitivity.

Previously in *TelevIZIon*, Fisch (2005) discussed design features that contribute to the effectiveness of educational media, such as the need for appeal and age-appropriateness, for educational content to be clear and integral to the story, etc. To this list, we can add features that are particularly important when designing materials for children in conflict: The content and execution of the materials must be culturally relevant, 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 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 desired educational messages about inclusion and nonviolence.

Clearly, these are easier said than done. However, as experience and research with *1001 Nights* have shown, a thoughtful partnership among producers and educators can create powerful tools to help children develop into kinder, more inclusive citizens of a harmonious society. ∎

NOTES

1 Due to the challenging logistics of the population and 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 more detail on the research, see Jenkins & Wilson, 2017.

2 Because much of 1001 Nights' target audience is considered at risk for developing aggressive or other antisocial behavior, graphs were framed in terms of negative responses so that the pretest data provide an approximate indicator of the level of risk prior to use.

3 Note that the bars in Ill. 2 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.

4 After using 1001 Nights, Tunisian children improved significantly in metrics measuring acceptance of other groups ($p<.001$), recognizing that divergent opinions are not necessarily right or wrong ($p<.001$), gender equality ($p=.01$), resolving conflicts peacefully ($p=.02$), and not insulting others ($p<.001$). We can further break down "acceptance of other groups" to see that it reflects significant improvements in children's saying they would not discriminate against a new kid because of his/her religion (Muslim or Christian; $p<.001$), region (urban or rural; $p=.02$), or ethnicity ($p<.001$).

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THE AUTHOR

Shalom (Sholly) Fisch, Ph.D., is President of MediaKidz Research & Consulting and former Vice President of Program Research at Sesame Workshop.