

## Growing Up in the Middle East

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### INTRODUCTION

In this curriculum unit, sixth grade students will explore literature that focuses on the lives of young adults who live in the Middle East. The unit will begin with a series of overarching questions that serve to guide student thinking toward the goal of answering them at the end of the unit. Reflective questions for the unit are: How have historical events fashioned current political policies? How is an individual affected by political policies? What qualities must an individual have in order to overcome adversity caused by a political or social situation? What connections can you make between your life and the themes of this unit? In order to provide a context for the reading, geography and culture/historical background modules will be included. The Middle East has a long, rich, and complicated history, however, and it is impossible to include extensive details for each of the countries represented in the literature. In order to provide context, then, we will focus on events that have most directly formed the political and social situations in which the characters find themselves.

For example, Iran is one of the focus countries for this unit, but students know very little about events which have shaped the confrontational relationship documented in the news. In order to provide political background, students will read an article Peter Edidin wrote for *Upfront*, the *New York Times/Scholastic* magazine for students. His article, “1979 Iranian Revolution,” provides a timeline and commentary beginning in 1941, including major events and American involvement in those events. While the article is, admittedly, a summary of deeply complicated events and emotions, students will have at least a basic understanding of how events transpired to create the antagonistic relationship we have with the current Iranian leader. In addition to understanding the historical context of a story, it is also important that students have a sense of how young people in the Middle East view themselves within the context of conflicting settings and the tension between traditional and modern belief systems. *Upfront* again provides students with an understanding of the social situation by providing points of view from young men and women in Saudi Arabia. Michael Slackman documents the activities in Riyadh of two young Saudi men, Enad and Nader, who are torn between Western influences and the traditional fundamentalist system under which they have been raised. A most precious possession, the cell phone, allows them to access Western culture through the Internet in addition to making clandestine phone calls that allow them to spend air time with their fiancés, a taboo that could create problems between the families (20). In her companion article about young Saudi women, Katherine Zoepf documents the strict segregation of the sexes, including rules against talking to young men on the phone, arranged marriages, separate education, and the cloistering of young women before marriage. Zoepf ends the article with a quote from one of the young women that epitomizes the conflict between their lives and what they have discovered about Western culture. “ ‘When Darcy comes to Elizabeth and says ‘I love you’-- that’s exactly the kind of love I want’ ”(11). The fact that American girls can easily identify with this romantic Austen sentiment provides a connection that might not be achieved simply by examining impersonal articles about life in Saudi.

In addition to the appreciation of literature and connecting characters with real political situations, this unit also provides students an opportunity to explore a novel and its issues in a group setting, Literature Circles. The circle will provide the basis for examining the text, for researching questions that arise during the reading and discussions, and for synthesizing information into a presentation for the class. Participation in the literature circle will encourage reflection and critical thinking throughout the process: reading, discussion, and collaboration for a final project. Students, not the teacher, will assume the responsibility for recognizing and dealing with the big issues literature presents. Kathy G. Short and Gloria Kauffman point out that “Older children have become so conditioned to teachers providing answers that they often assume that any time the teacher talks, the interpretive work is finished” (Roser and Martinez 146). Literature circles restore students’ ownership of their own learning, with teacher supervision, of course. While students will be part of a collaborative learning group, students will also be individually responsible for a significant amount of independent reading and accountable for preparing to discuss the issues in the book during discussions. Each circle will receive a packet of materials along with expectations and instructions. The unit will span approximately four weeks and will follow the Middle East Unit that is a part of the World Cultures curriculum for sixth grade.

Discussions are an integral part of this unit. Until fairly recently, books about the Middle East were not commonly available for middle school students; they had little chance to understand the perspective that people, particularly children, hold in that region of the world. I hope that the literature will offer a new perspective to all of my students, including those whose families are from that region. Maryann Eeds and Ralph L. Peterson believe that dialogue among readers about meaningful literature can affect perspective (Roser and Martinez 10-23).

When readers are able to raise to lived-through experience of reading a book to a conscious level and reflect deeply to create a unity from the events, symbols, mood, place, and character, it is also possible that perspectives may be changed.... Awareness of multiple levels of story meaning can cause us, as readers, to question ideas that are taken for granted or critique prevailing social practices (Roser and Martinez 11).

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives for this unit are based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) Power Objectives for 6<sup>th</sup> grade English/Language Arts. The objectives listed in the lessons are the major objectives for each lesson; other objectives will be included in particular lessons and/or choices the students make as to products.

### **Reading**

Students will connect the selections, both fiction and non-fiction, with historical and social contexts, current events in world affairs, and their own lives. They will also be expected to read each selection closely, paying attention to unfamiliar vocabulary and/or terms from other cultures.

### **Writing**

Students will maintain dialectical journals in order to raise questions and pose responses/reactions to the texts they have chosen to read. They will use these dialectical journal entries to plan and organize reflections on what they read. The reflections will then be used to initiate and participate in small group and class discussions.

### **Speaking**

After reading a tale from the *Arabian Nights*, students will script and present that tale to the class. After the presentations, students will generate generalizations about the tales including themes, characters, and style.

## Research

Students will research the political and social situations behind the characters they are studying in each culture. They will maintain note cards of documented information that they can use in their final unit essay that answers the focusing questions for the unit.

## RATIONALE

My students are classified as Gifted and Talented; they must apply to our school and accumulate points to qualify (creativity, Stanford and TAKS scores, teacher recommendations, and so forth). While all of the students have qualified for the program, the fact remains that I have a wide range of reading abilities and scores on standardized tests. I have English Language Learners (ELL) and students with learning disabilities. Therefore, I have designed this unit to meet the needs of higher-level students while building the skills of lower achieving students. Furthermore, many students, regardless of their talent, lack the motivation to participate enthusiastically because they do not feel connected to the content; additionally, the presentation, assessment, and activities planned for students often do not address their individual interests, learning styles, and/or skill levels. While it is essential to provide for a common learning experience, differentiation will be provided through selection of stories, novels, and products. When students are given choices, they tend to feel ownership for the tasks they must perform. Therefore, while constructing this unit I provided a variety of learning opportunities for all students.

Another factor in constructing this unit is the college-ready philosophy of our district. The goal of the district is to prepare students for life after high school, and in our district, that means preparing students for the Advanced Placement Exams and, of course, college. One vehicle for doing that is the Pre-AP program that has been mandated in our middle schools. Laying the Foundations (LTF) has contracted to train teachers to prepare students for AP tests; in fact, middle school students take Pre-AP exams late in the spring of each year. The LTF training is high level and skill based. The philosophy is to address the skills students need first, and then determine the texts, assignments, and activities (including assessments) that are necessary to develop the skills. Including different genres, emphasizing close reading of the text, and incorporating critical thinking responses (both written and oral) while including basic skills supports the LTF goals.

Finally, students at my school represent over 40 countries; many are first generation Americans, and we have an ever-increasing population from the Middle East. It is important for all of my students to understand and appreciate the viewpoints of cultures other than their own, and it is important for children from the Middle East to see literature from and about their cultures included in the school curriculum.

## UNIT BACKGROUND

Many students have heard tales from *1001 Arabian Nights* or have viewed the Disney renditions of *Aladdin* and *Sinbad, the Sailor*. However, most of my students have never read stories from the collection. Aside from missing wonderfully entertaining tales, they are also missing the chance to examine the cultural aspects of the tales.

When a child has once read of Prince Agib, of Gulnare or Periezde, Sinbad or Codadad, ...the magic will have been instilled into the blood, for the Oriental flavor in the Arab tales is like nothing so much as magic. True enough they are a vast storehouse of information concerning the manners and the customs, the spirit and the life of the Moslem East..., but beyond and above the knowledge of history and geography thus gained, there comes something finer and subtler as well as something more vital.  
(Wiggins and Smith ii)

While these folktales may not have been part of the original set of stories, they are probably Arabic folktales and serve to provoke student interest in the unit. While Sir Richard Francis Burton's English translation of the stories is considered one of the best, the reading level and the inclusion of material inappropriate for sixth graders exclude it from this unit; if the unit is modified for high school, this collection could be used. I have chosen three sources for the story, all listed in the bibliography. The stories in this collection, of course, must be previewed prior to assigning to students, for some of the tales are inappropriate for middle school. In any case we will review the structure of the collection – the story of Sultan Shahryar executing his wife for being unfaithful and his declaration against all women until Scheherazade captivates his attention with her nightly tales.

Many of my students have, of course, seen the Disney movie *Aladdin*. I want to show a few clips from the film to activate their interest, but I also want those clips to foster a discussion as to why the Disney version may be considered stereotypical in a negative way toward Arab and Muslim populations. White and Winn outline several areas of concern in the film. "...as an Arab-American critic of the film pointed out, although Jasmine and Aladdin are positive Arab characters, they speak American English as opposed to the heavily-accented English of the evil characters." White and Winn contend that *Aladdin*, along with other Disney films, commonly portray "good" characters as American and "evil" characters as other nationalities. They also assert that had Disney portrayed African-American or Jewish characters in a similar way, the films "never would have been released." One article from the University of Miami documents the fact that in *Aladdin*, lyrics to "Arabian Nights" [opening song] are offensive to the Arab culture. Lines "Where they cut off your ear/If they don't like your face/It's barbaric, but hey, it's home" met with protest. "The American-Arab Discrimination Committee protested and after six months, Disney altered lines four and five...However, the sixth line [last line quoted] remained as 'It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.'" The authors also contend that the film furthers the magic carpet myth and depicts the narrator as "an unsightly, filthy Arab." While I don't plan to spend an inordinate amount of time on this topic, I do want students to understand that material from other cultures may be misrepresented in the translation to American film or literature.

To move students from a Disney production to a more classical approach to this literature, I will begin by playing portions of Rimsky-Korsakov's symphony *Scheherazade* followed by a brief introduction to the storytelling tradition and Scheherazade's story in particular. To enhance the students' appreciation of the fine arts, we will also look at Persian miniatures, small and brightly colored illustrations used to illustrate poems and stories. Students will view a Power Point presentation (teacher constructed) that contains representative samples of this art form. We will cover literary terms that the tales exemplify: frame story, theme, foreshadowing, and fate/destiny, lessons/morals. In groups of four or five, students will choose one tale to read and retell to the class. I would like to simulate the original telling of the stories, where Scheherazade begins the story and then the most important characters take over. Students will also produce a cover for the tale using the Persian miniature artistic technique.

After we complete the Arabian Nights presentation, we will look at a world map, and I will ask students to find Persia, the site of Scheherazade's adventure. Some of my more astute students will realize that Persia is now Iran, but many will not. I want students to begin thinking about this area of the world, why country names might have changed, and exactly which countries make up the Middle East. This exercise will lead us into the geography module.

## **Geography**

One might wonder why geography should be included in a literature unit. Since the literature in this unit focuses specifically on the Middle East, students should be able to connect to the world in which their characters live. According to a study cited by Andrew Buncombe,

Americans (aged 18-24) have “shoddy geography skills” and are unable to locate Iraq even though their country invaded it and American servicemen have occupied the area for years. He further notes that “Despite the chaos caused by Hurricane Katrina, which killed hundreds of people and cost billions of dollars when it struck the Gulf Coast last August, one-third of those questioned were not able to find Louisiana on a map of the US.” John Fahey, president of National Geographic Society, asserts “Geographic illiteracy impacts our economic well-being, our relationships with other nations and the environment...Geography is what helps us make sense of our world by showing the connections between people and places” (Buncombe).

The primary literature of this unit demands that students have some knowledge of geography because geography has been a major factor in the development of the region, and, of course, the source of conflict in the region. Geography, both physical boundaries and natural resources, have created rich and poor nations. Geography, the proximity of Morocco to France, made Morocco a target of French colonization. Most of the situations and conflicts in the novels can, in some way, be traced to the geography of the countries in which they take place.

The Middle East is, understandably, difficult to define as a region. News shows highlight countries like Israel, Iraq, and Iran as Middle East. In fact, prior to this seminar, I had not spent much time considering how the region *should be* defined. Which countries should really be included in the Middle East region? Based on what I learned in the seminar, I have chosen to include more than the obvious choices; North African nations, for example, will be included in the region.

Algeria	Libya	Egypt	Saudi Arabia	Yemen
Syria	Jordan	Turkey	Israel	Iraq
Iran	Oman	Afghanistan	Pakistan	

While we will not spend an inordinate amount of time on geography, students will become familiar with these countries and how other nations, primarily European, have impacted their history and current political situations by using Internet games designed for children. The games include political divisions, but they also include major physical features in the region including, as well, man-made features. Those sites are included in the bibliography. Geography will, of course, also play into the culture/historical module of the unit.

**Culture/History: Relationship to the Novels of Choice**

While the countries in the region may enjoy common features, the differences must also be recognized. We will realize those differences by examining the cultures of the novels we are going to read. The film *Cultures: Similarities and Differences* will introduce students to the common aspects of any culture. The film asserts that all cultures have six shared elements: groups, ways to acquire food, ways to express emotions, ways to pass information, government, and religion/philosophy. The seventh element, “things,” is a catchall for information that does not easily fit into the six categories. Historical information crosses all the elements and governs the evolution of a culture; in fact, all of the elements are interdependent. History, for example, directly influences the religion(s) of a nation, and religion determines the groups within a culture (Iraq and Israel are two excellent examples from this region). Geography determines how people get their food (hunting, fishing, gathering, farming, for example), and how people get and prepare their food can also define groups. Other aspects of a nation, including economics and relationships with other nations, also cross categorical lines. After students have made their novel selections, they will look at the culture and setting of that book, organizing the information using the six elements from the film.

Again, we cannot begin to examine the detailed and lengthy history of these countries. We will, instead, focus on more recent events and movements that have created the settings in which

our characters live. For example, two of my book choices have Palestinian children as characters—children who are living under Israeli military occupation. How can a reader understand the story if he is unaware of the events that occurred post World War II to create Israel, the setting of the story? On the other hand, I must limit the time we spend on historical context in a literature unit. I hope to overcome the enormity of the task in two ways. First, students will complete the Middle East unit in their World Cultures class before we begin our unit. A portion of that unit includes a basic examination of the three major religions of the area: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Second, students will at least have a cursory look at the history, particularly ancient history, of the region. Those factors will provide at least a minimal framework for the stories students will study in this unit.

Additionally, areas included in the novel selections will have specific terms and events that students will research prior to and during their reading. Again using Israel as an example, students will note terms, people, and places that require research for clarification (Zionism, for example). I have also found children's books to pair with the novels; these books offer insight into some aspect of each novel in a brief and richly illustrated text. For example, *Tasting the Sky* by Ibtisam Barakat follows a Palestinian refugee child separated from her family at the beginning of the Six Days War and her adjustment to the dire situation in which she finds herself. Students who choose this book will also read *Silent Music* by James Rumford, a children's book about Ali, a boy who finds solace from war by studying the forming of Arabic letters, inspired by Yakut, an ancient calligrapher who also lived through the violence of war. In addition to the story, students will investigate Arabic calligraphy, which should be of special interest to my Asian students, many of whom study Chinese writing at Chinese school on weekends. Above all, I want students to recognize and appreciate the strength of children who face situations some of us can only imagine. Aside from connecting with the characters, the stories reveal historical events and how they affect the individual.

Similarly, students who choose the Deborah Ellis selection, *The Breadwinner*, will meet Parvana, a refugee in Afghanistan who must live under the rule of the Taliban. Again, students must grasp recent history of the area to understand why the Russians invaded the nation and how the Taliban eventually seized power, changing Parvana's life drastically. Forced to dress and act as a boy, this eleven-year-old girl becomes the sole support of her family when the Taliban arrests her father. Students in this group will have the option of following Parvana in two sequels by Ellis. Students who choose this book will also read the children's book *Four Feet, Two Sandals* by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed. The story offers a brief, but thoughtful, glimpse at life in a refugee camp where two girls must share a pair of sandals. Aside from raising students' awareness about conditions in refugee camps, the theme is heartfelt and depicts the ability of children to sustain their humanity even under the most dire circumstances.

Another selection, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, offers students the chance to study literature via the graphic novel. The story focuses on Satrapi's own life in Iran, experiencing the overthrow of the Shah, the Islamic Revolution, and, finally, the war with Iraq. Satrapi recounts her experiences with sadness, but her drawings lend a sense of irony to her interpretation of events. For example, at one point Satrapi places herself in the middle of a black page, floating in space, noting succinctly at the top of the page, "And so I was lost, without any bearings... what could be worse than that" followed by a single line at the bottom "It was the beginning of war" (Satrapi 71). Although initially hesitant to offer a graphic novel in this unit, the strong storyline, the strong character, and the depiction of modern events were compelling. Additionally, Satrapi includes many events, people and terms that students must probe during their reading. Students who read *Persepolis* will also read *Lugalbanda: The Boy Who Got Caught Up In A War* by Kathy Henderson. This Sumerian tale, purported to be one of the oldest stories in the world, follows Uruk, a young boy, on a military mission to destroy one culture and

bring the spoils of war home. On the journey to war, Uruk becomes deathly ill and is left to his own devices by his seven brothers, King Enmerkar, and the rest of the soldiers. He notices the Anzu bird and is enthralled with his size and ability to fly; when the bird leaves the nest, Uruk decides he must show respect to the chick by gifting him with sweets. Anzu bird returns and, overtaken with gratitude for Uruk, offers him the fulfillment of any wish he desires. As a result, Uruk recovers his health and rejoins his brothers and the king only to discover his countrymen are losing the war. However, Anzu bird makes Uruk a strong and fast runner, and he volunteers to return home for the blessings of the goddess Inana in his country's quest for victory. Ridiculed by his brothers as too weak to make the journey and accomplish the task, Uruk reaches home and Inana bestows upon him the shield of victory to carry to King Enmerkar. Uruk returns to battle, the King and his men win, but do not destroy Aratta, a condition of Inana's assistance. All return home victorious, but without ravaging their enemies because of Uruk's wisdom and quest for peace. It's rather amazing that a story that originated in the Sumerian culture speaks to conflict between countries so close, much like Iran and Iraq.

Naomi Shibab Nye's autobiographical novel, *Habibi*, offers a somewhat different slant on our theme in that Liyana Abboud, an Arab-American teenager, must leave the comforts of St. Louis to emigrate to her father's homeland, Palestine, in order to connect with her father's family and heritage. I want students who read this novel to reflect on how they would feel if forced to leave their relatively comfortable lives to explore another country where they are not familiar with language, customs, or political conditions. Students who choose this novel will also look at Nye's poetry about the Arab-American condition as well as books that contain reflections of children who live in refugee camps in the Middle East.

A novel that focuses on boys is *A Little Piece of Ground* by Elizabeth Laird. The title is really a metaphor for the Palestinian quest for their own land; the boys in the novel seek any small piece of land that they can use as a soccer field, for in the deplorable conditions in which they live, soccer is their only passion and outlet. According to a National Public Radio broadcast, some reviewers have found the book to be a "racist, inflammatory and totally one-sided piece of propaganda" and an "unfair depiction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" ("Profile" National Public Radio broadcast September 30, 2003). In the same broadcast, Laird asserts that she wrote the novel after visiting Ramallah. "I was profoundly shocked by what I found, by the real dreadfulness of people's everyday life, the increasing poverty, the harassment, the curfews. ...it would be a proper subject...to see how children are managing under these circumstances." Book critic Linda Silver (Jewish Book World) contends that the one-sidedness of the story, along with the fact that many children will not have the political context, make it unsuitable to present to children ("Profiles"). However, this book offers an excellent opportunity for students to seek and examine conflicting points of view. They will view portions of the film *Promises* in order to analyze how one's background and family (point of view) influences one's interpretation of public and political events.

*Kiss the Dust* by Elizabeth Laird follows Tara and her family from the Zagros Mountains (Iran, Iraq, and Turkey) to political asylum in London. Tara's father, a Kurdish businessman, secretly plots with other Kurds for independence until Iraqi security forces threaten the family's safety. Forced to find refuge in the family's mountain retreat, the family enjoys only a short respite until they are forced to flee again, this time to a refugee camp in Iran. Students who choose this novel will also read reflections from teenagers living in Middle East refugee camps.

Finally, I want to include Greg Mortensen's account of his initiation and continuing involvement in the establishment of Pakistani schools in *Three Cups of Tea/Children's Edition*. The story of Mortensen's courage, initiative, and ability to enlist others in alleviating the plight of Pakistani children will serve as an inspiration to my students in the service unit that we have during the spring term. The book will also give students an American's view of the events that he

encounters, including the dangers he faces due to the political situation in which he finds himself. The characters in all of the other books are children who are born into a particular situation. Mr. Mortensen happens on a situation and is inspired to return, over and over again, to do what he can to make life better for a culture very unlike his own.

Before selecting one or more of these books, one must consider the population of the classroom. If one chooses to use a book like *A Little Piece of Ground*, the criticisms I cited above should be considered. Hopefully, however, this unit should provide the context for each of the novels; students must be able to understand how the point of view of each main character is formed by their position and experiences within the context of the problems in the Middle East. The volatile situation in the Middle East is part of each of these selections; literature from this area of the world that does not consider the political and social situations in the area would not, in any way, be honest reflections of the situation.

### **Literature Circles**

Independent reading is an important component in the Language Arts curriculum. My students participate in the Accelerated Reading (AR) program; they choose books from a list of over 2500 titles, read the books, write a response to each book, and take a computer test on their selection. However, this program does not include a structured opportunity for students to share and discuss the books they have read, to truly study the novel. It is true that favorite titles are shared among friends, but discussion is usually limited to “It’s a great book...you’ll love it.” I’m a strong advocate of independent reading and student choice, but I also believe it is very important to share the ideas that you encounter in books with others who have read the same book. Students approach a novel as a story: plot, setting, and characters. However, when we read a core novel together, they delve into the intricacies of the plot, the effect setting has on the characters, the motivations of the characters and the context of the novel. When we read *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck, we discuss the invasion by the Spanish Conquistadors, the infiltration of Europeans, and the effect that geography plays on Kino’s situation – even the modern repercussions of European occupation. We reflect on every aspect of the story, from Juana’s subservience to Kino to the doctor’s feeling of superiority because he is a European. Unfortunately, the relative *isolation* of AR does not promote, on a regular basis, the rich investigation that would enhance students’ understanding. Harvey Daniels contends, “We need to give kids plenty of time to practice applying these strategies, not in drills or worksheet, but in real conversations about real books” (Daniels 38). Literature circles affirm Daniels’ ideas by offering students the opportunity to choose their independent reading selections, to exchange ideas with their peers, and to share their selections and reflections with the rest of the class. The fact that the literature has a common base is also important. Kathy G. Short and Gloria Kauffman encourage literature circle selections that are interrelated or address the broad themes and issues that are being addressed in the classroom.

When we first began literature circles, we simply chose individual books that we saw as great pieces of literature and offered them for student selection. We soon realized that experiences with even a great book are enhanced if that book relates to other literature and to personal or class inquiries (Roser and Martinez 142).

The majority of the literature we study in sixth grade addresses the themes of culture and how culture affects the individual. The reflective questions in the introduction to this unit can actually be used for most of the literature we read during the year.

Literature circles are also supported by both the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA). The National Standards for English/Language Arts “endorsed literature-based, collaborative classrooms where students take increasing responsibility for choosing, reading, and discussing books...stressed the need for



students to explore a wide range of books representing different cultures, periods, and regions...” (Daniels 7).

In order to use Literature Circles effectively, students must learn the process. Their experiences with literature typically involve reading a core book in class, whole class discussions (primarily teacher led), with background provided by the teacher. I want this unit to be student-centered, from allowing students to choose their books to researching the country the novel represents to determining how they will share their experience with the class as a whole. In order to teach the process as well as introduce Middle Eastern literature, I will begin by using *Figs and Fate* by Elsa Marston, an anthology of stories from the Arab world. The main character in each story faces challenges that many students face: having to deal with friends, family, and their particular social or political situation. The themes are universal, the characters are honorable, and each story introduces a political or social situation that will engage the students’ interest.

After briefly introducing each story using teacher-made mini-posters, I will ask students to divide themselves into five groups based on the story they would like to read; I will stipulate that they must be mixed-gender groups since sixth graders normally divide themselves by gender for any group activity. In order to practice the literature circle process, students will read the stories aloud in class (within their groups), creating response logs as they progress in the reading. When they complete the reading, each group will create a project they can use to share their reading with the class. The short story reading lesson is included at the end of this unit.

After reading and presenting the short stories, we will move to the major work of this unit. Again, I will introduce the book choices to the students and allow them to look at copies of each book, encouraging them to read the first few pages in order to experience the flavor of the story. I have selected the books for this unit to ensure their availability and appropriateness for my class. After students review the selections, they will indicate their first three preferences on index cards; I will use these to assemble the groups, trying to give as many students as possible their first choice while considering the make-up of each group as well as the level of difficulty of each book. Daniels raises the question of reading level as a consideration. He recommends that teachers discuss choices with individual students when they have a concern, particularly if a student’s choice is well above or below his reading level. While he advocates adhering to student choice, he also points out that students must choose a book that they can read since a significant part of this reading will be independent (Daniels 80).

Since this is our first foray into literature circles, I chose the dialectical journal as the vehicle for recording reflections about the reading. Each child will use a composition notebook to record questions, concerns and reflections that will be used to generate discussions within the groups. Student responses are key to the close reading and enjoyment of the text. Reflecting on Robert Probst’s description of reader response theory, Daniels discusses the trend of teachers to be overly concerned with analysis of literature when they should first concern themselves with response to reading. “The pathway to analysis, to more sophisticated and defensible interpretations of literature, must go through personal response, not around it” (Daniels 37).

### **Dialectical Journals**

My students maintain dialectical journals for our first core novel in August, but the specifications for the journal are fairly straightforward and limited since most students have not had the experience in elementary school. Basically, they record quotations and/or events that move them to consider the situation in which the characters find themselves. They also reflect on what they deem important. While reading the novel for this unit, each student will again maintain a dialectical journal, but the instructions will be more specific and extensive than they were in August. The requirements address areas the students need to discuss the novel in their literary circles and the focusing questions for the unit. The purpose of the journal is to intensify the

responses students have to the reading—to generate questions and topics for discussion in the literature circles. When students are expected to generate their own questions and discuss their reading, they must write (and think) before they talk.

Pre-writing is less stressful than sharing one's thoughts orally because it allows students time and space to think. When students are writing, they can pause, gather their thoughts, revise their responses, and try out risky ideas all within the privacy of the page and in an unhurried manner. Once discussion begins, privacy decreases, risks increase, and the pace picks up. In addition, pre-writing gives discussions a place to start, because students have already considered their responses to the book and have thought of something to say. Pre-writing also gives the teacher information since responses can be used to assess what students understand and to plan instruction (Day et al, 37).

Dialectical journals come in all shapes and sizes, but the overriding consideration must be attention to detail and reflections that connect to the reading. Typically, a dialectical journal has two columns; the left contains a quotation from the book, and the right side contains a response to that quote. In this unit, anticipating the discussion in literature circles must also be a consideration. Therefore, the guidelines for the journal must include a basic explanation of questioning strategies so that students will go beyond Bloom's knowledge and comprehension questions and advance to higher level questions that will lead to rich discussions. [I am still working on a model for the journal.]

Unless a teacher plans literature circles effectively, discussions tend to get off-topic, little depth is achieved, and students participate in varying degrees. Therefore, in addition to preparing for discussion with the journal, each student will also assume a particular role during discussion. For example, one student will record the questions and answers while another one notes areas that need further research or investigation. Role sheets are available in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels as well as on many Internet sites. Rubrics and guidelines for literature circles are also available in *Moving Forward with Literature Circles* (Day, et al.).

I will use role sheets in my groups, but the answers will be group answers, and the roles will rotate from meeting to meeting so that all students will have the experience that each role sheet offers. Daniels discusses a situation in which one student was responsible for overseeing the meetings, including recording the questions that were going to be used. However, he noted that this procedure often resulted in one person assuming the "boss" role (actually, probably the teacher role). "Often group members would depend on the discussion director to bring good ideas to get things going, and to run the conversation. Further, this role could be an inadvertent license for kids who liked to dominate a conversation" (Daniels 104-105). I intend to have each circle maintain one notebook with information divided into sections. Encouraging the sharing of responsibility for the acquisition and maintenance of information will promote a greater feeling of ownership and collegiality than if each student were to work alone on his role sheet, trying to complete it without input from other members. Some proponents of literature circles include a role as *evaluator* of other members, but Daniels rejects this role as well. "It made one group member into more of a cop than a kid; it lent a kind of authoritarian tone to the proceedings. More important, the process checker role *does not set purposes for reading*" (Daniels 105). Marline Pearson suggests an alternative to the checker role sheet. She suggests that teachers create self-evaluation sheets to be completed by each student; when collected, she then uses the group's sheets as a gauge as to how effectively the students are working together during discussion. "I really like my latest checker sheets because they offer the student some time for reflection and clarification of ideas as well as for a bit of metacognitive work" (Daniels 214-215). It is counterproductive to designate a student to evaluate other students when the goal of literature circles is to promote cooperation and high level discussions.

## Point of View

One important aspect of this unit that became very apparent as I began to read potential selections is the importance of point of view in each novel. I wanted to include multiple perspectives in order to show that although people may have different experiences, those experiences may evoke similar reactions in order to survive the hardships they encounter. I also had to consider that my students represent many cultures, some of which are prominent in the books I have chosen. I also recognize that each book includes conflict between nations and cultures, and that those nations and cultures are represented in my classes. For example, the book about Afghanistan addresses Soviet occupation, and I have students from both cultures in my classroom. Not only that, but my students who are not from the Middle East have preconceived notions about the area based on what has been portrayed in the media, both television and the movies. For this reason, I have tried to find articles, books, and movies that dispel the inclination to bring international conflict into the classroom. For example, I will include clips from *Promises*, a movie that examines the Palestinian and Jewish points of view from children's perspectives. I found *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* by Deborah Ellis which reveals, through the words of the children themselves, how all of their lives have been affected by political choices.

Again, culture and historical context will be essential for students to understand why people living in the region may have very different outlooks on life and why conflicts have lasted so long, flaring up from time to time between periods of relative respite.

## Assessment

Assessment of the students during this unit is varied. One of the most invaluable assessment tools will be the dialectical journal. As the literature circles meet, I plan to circulate in the room and discuss the journals with each group, recording anecdotal notes as we discuss that group's activities and progress. I also plan to collect journals during the reading to evaluate progress and depth of understanding and thought. I want to ensure that students are generating material that will be useful and lead to an effective presentation. At the end of the unit, I will review the journals in order to gauge progress over the course of the unit. Elaine Handloff and Joanne M. Golden studied the journals of Ms. Handloff's students over the school year; they compared initial entries and closing entries to record progress based on a chart they had constructed which categorized responses. They documented three basic changes in the responses. First, the responses were generally longer. Second, students used evidence to support their assertions. Third, students demonstrated a shift from narrative to interpretive responses (Roser and Martinez 203). While I plan to develop my own chart for evaluation, I do plan to use student journals not only as an evaluation of their work for this unit, but also as a tool to evaluate student progress and implement individualized plans when necessary, not at the end of the unit, but as the need arises. "Using student journals, teachers have a unique window available to them to observe literacy processes in each of their students" (Roser and Martinez 207). Other assessments will include response essays (such as the essay in Lesson 2 which is included in this unit), performance (Lesson 1 storytelling activity), and research skills (a lesson in which students research the historical and social background of the novel they choose). Geography objectives will be tested using a teacher created *Jeopardy* game.

## LESSON PLANS

### Lesson Plan One: Scheherazade and the Arabian Nights

#### *Objective*

#### **ELA.6.5C**

Present dramatic interpretations of experiences, stories, poems, or plays using appropriate communication skills.

#### *Material and Resources*

Walt Disney film *Aladdin*

Rimsky-Korsakov's symphony *Scheherazade*

<http://www.kusc.org/kids/sche/>

PowerPoint: Persian Miniatures (teacher created)

Selection of stories from *1001 Stories of the Arabian Nights*: students will complete a graphic organizer in order to record important information

Assignment Sheet/Instructions for story-telling

#### *Procedures and Activities*

Day 1:

- Play 10 minutes of the Disney film and ask students to summarize the story
- Have students explain what they know about *Arabian Nights*
- Play a few minutes of *Scheherazade* and ask students if they have every heard the symphony; explain the basis of the composition to the students.
- Explain that we are going to look at stories from *Arabian Nights* as an introduction to literature of the Middle East
- Briefly preview the stories that are available for groups to read; I will choose stories that they are unlikely to know and which are appropriate for my students.
- Students will begin reading the stories in class and begin the storyboard. They will complete the stories for homework if necessary.
- Storyboards: Students will draw a picture for each action point in the story on the storyboard sheet. The storyboard sheet is simply a piece of paper with nine rectangles in which students draw an action point for the story. They may need more than one storyboard.

Days 2, 3, and 4:

- Small group discussion of the story using storyboard. Students in a group must come to consensus on the action points.
- Power Point of Persian Miniature Painting
- After a limited discussion (20 minutes), students will begin working on their presentations (dramatic) in order to share the presentations with the class. They will have today and Days 3 and 4 to prepare the Persian miniature, the script, and the costumes/characters for the story and to practice the presentation. Because the stories are fairly short, students will have ample time to plan the presentation.

DAY 5:

- Class Presentations and Debriefing
- Literary Terms: Enter into Literary Terms Log (maintained for the entire year)

### ***Assessment***

Students will be graded on their contribution to the presentation. Each student will describe what they did to contribute to the presentation.

1001 Stories of the Arabian Nights Storytelling Assignment
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- With your story group, you will produce the story that you read so that the entire class will become familiar with the story. Remember the premise of the stories: the narrator begins the story, and as she tells the story, the characters may come alive and assume their parts.
- Method for portraying the characters: paper hand puppets, popsicle stick puppets, etc. Choose a method of representing your characters; of course, students may act as the characters as well.
- Write the script: Begin by comparing your storyboard with the boards other students have made. Each sketch on the board will represent an action point of the story. By looking at the board, you should be able to tell the entire story (adding details, of course).
- The story will begin with the narrator; the narrator may continue the story or other characters may take over speaking parts (interrupted by the narrator as necessary). Each group will have one computer on which to record the script. Be sure to print out one script for each character.
- Other members in the group may begin construction of characters or minimal costumes for actors.
- When the story is printed, groups should begin practicing the story including stage movements, and so forth.
- Dramatic presentation:
  - Address the audience; know the story well enough that you feel comfortable establishing eye contact with your audience.
  - Project and emote: Since this is a dramatic reading, you must change pitch, tone, and volume to take on your character.
  - Move around the stage as necessary. The narrator may even move, as if she is telling the story to her husband.
- Audience: Record a brief (4-5 sentences) summary of the story including the main characters.

### **Lesson Plan Two: Short Stories from the Middle East**

#### ***Objectives***

#### **ELA.6.12F**

Identify, describe, and analyze important characters, including their traits, points of view, causes of feelings and motivations, relationships, conflicts, and their solutions, and the changes they undergo.

#### **ELA6.15A**

Write to express, discover, record, develop, reflect on ideas and to problem solve.

## **ELA.6.20D**

Use outlines, conceptual maps, learning logs, and timelines in useful ways to organize and summarize ideas gained from notes taken from multiple sources.

### ***Materials***

Marston, Elsa. *Figs and Fate: Stories about Growing Up in the Arab World Today*.

Stories included represent Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon, and Iraq.

Blue Books: Composition books to be used as initial dialectical journals.

Assignment Sheet (Included)

### ***Procedures and Activities***

Day 1:

- Explain to the students that this lesson is a prelude to Literature Circles we will use to read, discuss, and share novels about young people from the Middle East.
- Review briefly the five stories that are included in *Figs and Fate*.
- Students will have the books and be able to follow the stories as I describe each of them.
- Students will indicate choices by moving to the wall sign of the story they want to read as I randomly call their roll number. Since this is a relatively short piece, I am not as concerned that I match groups as carefully as I will with the novels. The stories are similar in length and reading level and should not pose a problem with any of the students. Maximum in a group is six.
- We will break into groups and go over the assignment and role sheets.
- Students will read the story in class (silently) as they work on the dialectical journal.
- Students must complete the assignment as homework if not completed in class.

Day 2:

- Groups will reconvene for discussion of the story. Before they actually begin, we will review the process, the role sheets, and students will determine who will do what for this story.
- Discussion: 30 minutes
- Debriefing: After the discussion, students will share their information with the class by completing the Short Story Matrix on butcher paper on the front board. Each student will also have a desk copy of the matrix to complete as we go through each element of the story.
- After the debriefing, we will address the focus questions of the unit:
  - How did historical events fashion the political policies that framed the story?
  - How was the main character affected by political policies and the culture in which he/she lived?
  - What qualities did the main character exhibit that allowed him/her to overcome the adversity caused by a political or social situation?
- How does the story connect with your experiences?
  - Using the matrix, students will consider the focus questions and write a response in essay form. (see assignment sheet)

### ***Assessment***

- Dialectical journal completion: Has the student included aspects of the story outlined in the assignment sheet?
- Contribution to matrix based on literary circle discussion.
- Reflective Essay (rubric will be provided)

ASSIGNMENT SHEET  
Short Stories by Elsa Marston: *Figs and Fate*

**DIALECTICAL JOURNAL**

- As you read the story you have chosen, maintain a dialectical journal.
- Remember the format that we used earlier this year. Divide the page into two columns.
- In the left column, record a phrase or sentence from the story along with the page number.
- In the right column, record your reflection and/or reaction to that statement.
- Your selections should include the political aspects of the situation, the position of your character in his/her society, the obstacles your character faces, how your character copes with the situation, any connections you feel with the characters, supporting character actions that assisted or detracted from the character's actions, and any other information you feel is important.

**LITERARY CIRCLE DISCUSSION**

- Compile comments for the following questions on your matrix after coming to a group consensus.
- What is the political situation that is depicted in the story?
- What are particular challenges that the character(s) faced personally because of the political/social situation?
- How did the character(s) deal with the situation?

**CLASS DISCUSSION**

- Each group will present one story to the class by completing the matrix on the SmartBoard. All groups will record information from other groups on their individual matrix.
- After the class matrix is completed, groups will again meet to determine the commonalities/generalizations they can make about the stories/characters. Be sure to reference in initial focusing questions for the unit. [see Introduction]

**INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIVE ESSAY:**

- How have historical events and political situations affected the lives of individuals?
- How do people cope with events over which they have very little control?
- What kinds of connections can you make with the characters considering you are not in the same situation?
- Incorporate your reactions and reflections to these questions in a well-constructed essay using evidence from the text.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Works Cited

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- Buncombe, Andrew. "Six out of 10 Young Americans Cannot Find Iraq on a Map." *The Independent World*. 3 May 2006. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/six-out-of-10-young-americans-cannot-find-iraq-on-a-map-476580.html>>.
- Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002.  
Daniels is a recognized authority in the planning and use of literature circles. Individual chapters are cited in the unit.
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Edidin covers significant events in the United States-Iran relationship over the past seventy years including a timeline, photos, and commentary about events from the Shah's alliance with the US to the confrontational relationship with Ahmadinejad.
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Eleven year old Parvana has rarely been outside since the Taliban took over Afghanistan until her father is jailed and the young girl must dress as a boy in order to help her family survive.
- . *Mud City*. Berkeley: House of Anansi Press, 2003.  
The third book in the Ellis trilogy focuses on Parvana's best friend Shauzia who has also fled Afghanistan, accompanied only by her dog.
- . *Parvana's Journey*. Berkeley: House of Anansi Press, 2002.  
The second installment in the Ellis trilogy finds Parvana separated from her family, traveling alone in wartime Afghanistan, and finally finding some respite in a refugee camp, always searching for her family.
- . *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*. Berkeley: House of Anansi Press, 2006.  
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- Henderson, Kathy. *Lugalbanda, The Boy Who Got Caught Up in a War: An Epic Tale from Ancient Iraq*. Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 2006.  
*Lugalbanda* is the oldest-known written story, predating even the epic of Gilgamesh. The story is detailed in the unit.



“Interactive Scherezade.” <<http://www.kusc.org/kids/sche/>>.

This website is used in lesson 1. It includes maps, diagrams of Persian miniatures, a lesson on storytelling, and links to the Rimsky-Korsakof music itself.

Laird, Elizabeth. *Kiss the Dust*. New York: Puffin, 1994.

Laird bases her novel on experiences of a Kurd family forced to seek peace outside of their homeland. Escaping Iraq is only temporary when war follows Tara and her family to their mountain home and they must seek peace in London.

--. *A Little Piece of Ground*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006.

Karim, a young Palestinian, must remain inside his home due to a curfew imposed by the Israeli military after a Palestinian suicide bombing. Unable to be contained by circumstances, Karim and his friends overcome war to play a simple game of soccer.

Marston, Elsa. *Figs and Fate: Stories about Growing Up in the Arab World Today*.

This is an anthology of stories about Arab teenagers living in modern-day Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq. The young characters face Middle Eastern issues, but they also have universal concerns of all teens: loyalty to friends, dreams of a future career, and feelings within a divorced family. Each selection is followed by a note that explains social issues relevant to the story.

Mortenson, Greg and David Oliver Relin. *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Journey to Change the World...One Child at a Time*. Young Reader's Edition. New York: Puffin Books, 2009.

This book is an adaptation of the adult version of the same name. After a near death experience, Mortenson promises himself that he will build one school at a time in Pakistan to honor his sister's memory and to change life for the children in that country.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Habibi*. New York: Simon and Shuster's Children's Division, 1997.

Liyana's father, a native Palestinian, decides to move his family back to Jerusalem from St. Louis. Arriving in Jerusalem, Liyana and her family are greeted by the Palestinian side of the family, but she discovers that the free life she led in the states is over – from simple rules about clothing and boy-girl relationships to the Palestinian-Jewish violence.

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Ali, a young boy in Baghdad finds inspiration and peace by studying Arabic calligraphy. His hero Yakut, a 13th-century calligrapher, also took solace in his art during the Mongol invasion. Like Yakut, Ali finds comfort in practicing his letters during the turmoil that has consumed Baghdad since 2003.

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In her graphic novel, Satrapi recounts her youth growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution.

Slackman, Michael. “Growing Up Saudi, Part 1: The Boys.” *The New York Times Upfront*. September 1, 2008: 20-23.

Slackman provides words from the young men themselves to explain how they live under Fundamentalist rules while still being influenced by Western cultural infiltration.

Steinbeck, John. *The Pearl*. New York: Penguin, 1992.

White, Timothy R. and J. E. Winn. "Islam, Animation and Money: the Reception of Disney's *Aladdin* in Southeast Asia." <<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/white951.htm>>.

The authors examine elements of Disney films that have been noted as nationalistic and discriminatory. They concentrate on the surprising acceptance of such films in Southeast Asia, but they also address the protests that Arab-Americans have made about the way the culture is represented.

Wiggin, Kate Douglas and Nora A. Smith. *The Arabian Nights: Their Best-Known Tales*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993.

This is a selection of stories that is easily accessible to students.

Williams, Karen Lyon and Khadra Mohammed. *Four Feet, Two Sandals*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2007.

When aid workers deliver a shipment of clothes, Lina and Ferozi race for the sandal, each girl able to grasp only one. When Ferozi's grandmother points out the foolishness of wearing only one shoe, she offers her sandal to Lina who then suggests they share the sandals by wearing them on alternating days. The story ends when the friends must separate and decide what to do with the sandals.

Zoepf, Katherine. "Growing Up Saudi, Part 2: The Girls." *The New York Times Upfront*. September 22, 2008: 8-11.

Zoepf provides both serious and humorous anecdotes that explain how young Saudi women accommodate both traditional Fundamentalist rules for living as they struggle with incorporating bits of Western culture into their lives.

### **Supplemental Resources**

Gallo, Donald R. ed. *Join In Multiethnic Short Stories*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1993.

Gallo solicited these stories about American teenagers of different national origins from well-known authors in order to provide teachers with diverse literature in the classroom, primarily the middle school. Most of the authors are from the ethnic group about which they write.

Hickox, Rebecca. *The Golden Sandal: A Middle East Cinderella Story*

A retelling of an Iraqi folktale "The Little Red Fish and the Clog of Gold," a Cinderella theme with an Arabian twist.

Mazer, Anne, ed. *America Street: A Multicultural Anthology of Stories*. New York: Persea Books, 1993.

This anthology includes short stories about challenging cultural encounters immigrant children experience in America.

<<http://www.chiff.com/travel/guides/Mid-East.htm>>.

This website provides basic information/facts about each Middle Eastern country. Students may use this to determine attractions in each nation.

<<http://www.edselect.com/Docs/novmus.pdf>>.

This website suggests a novel museum as a culminating activity, and this idea might work well with literary circles to make the students accountable for particular information. I would adapt the ideas to fit my students.

<[http://www.sheppardsoftware.com/Middle-east\\_Geography.htm](http://www.sheppardsoftware.com/Middle-east_Geography.htm)>.

This website provides free geography games on all areas of the globe. Of particular interest for my unit is the regional map which shows and explains the topography of many Middle Eastern countries.

<<http://www.teachersfirst.com>>.

This site includes basic information that would enhance the unit. It includes geography, current events in the Middle East, and so forth.

<<http://www.yourchildlearns.com/geography.htm>>.

This website provides free geography games for locating countries and capitals that makes learning the basics fun for students, and something they will choose to do at home.