Bridging a Cultural Divide with Literature about Arabs and Arab Americans

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Middle school is a time of many changes for young adolescents. They are "searching for individual identity, struggling with society's norms, and grappling with moral issues" (Boston & Baxley, 2007, p. 561). They are changing and maturing physically, cognitively, socially, and psychologically as they develop their identities; establish, maintain, and end friendships and social networks; develop interpersonal skills; build self-esteem; and critically examine themselves and their physical features (Manning & Bucher, 2005). They may explore different behaviors, ideas, and beliefs (Marcia, 1980), and they may undergo crises of identity (Erikson, 1963; 1968). Young adolescents are also involved in a series of changes imposed by the structure of the educational system as they transition from elementary school and begin anticipating a transition to high school.

While all young adolescents may feel developmental and transitional pressures, minority and immigrant students may feel these pressures more acutely than most majority students. For example, the transition periods leading from elementary school to middle school and then from middle school to high school may present special problems for minority students (Cauce, Hannan, & Sargeant, 1992). Akos and Galassi (2004) found that race may "play a role in school transition outcomes" (p. 102) and in feelings of connectedness. While students who are actively engaged in school may be somewhat protected from transitional problems (Eccles et al., 1992), many minority students have feelings of detachment from the education system.

Another area of concern for minority students involves the development of identity and self-esteem. As young adolescents mature, they begin to develop a sense of cultural and social identity as well as a sense of personal identity and self-esteem (Allen, 2004). While politics, economics, relationships, and public perceptions affect identity, identity development is also an "interplay with race, ethnicity, [and] religion" (Shah, 2006, p. 218). This interplay may be especially difficult for minority and immigrant students who must be able to merge their native or traditional cultures with a new or majority culture. Rather than forgetting one culture, they must assimilate both to achieve ethnic solidarity (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Immigrant children may face a sense of cultural bereavement or uprooting in which a loss of cultural identity has a direct impact on self-esteem (Eisenbruch, 1988). In addition, they may feel a sense of dissonant acculturation (Rumbout & Portes, 2001) as

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they outstrip their parents in learning the language and culture of a new country. When this happens, a young adolescent may feel alienated from his or her parents and from peers at school.

The issues described above may be especially acute for young adolescents of Arab descent who may possess feelings of detachment. Although many Arab Americans have traditionally been successful in school (Nieto, 1992), academic success is not always a predictor of psychosocial adjustment. Students may have high grades that mask feelings of depression and low self-esteem (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). Schools are key socialization and acculturization agencies (Hones & Cha, 1999; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990), and a student's perception of acceptance in school is a major factor in his or her overall adjustment to a new culture (Nguyen & Henkin, 1980). Because of these factors, teachers must ensure that Arab-American students have positive school experiences, especially during the critical developmental period of young adolescence. In this article, we provide information to help middle school teachers understand the Arab immigrant and Arab-American young adolescents in their classrooms. After briefly describing Arab history and culture and discussing specific problems facing Arab American and Arab immigrant students, we suggest literature about Arabs and Arab Americans to use in the middle school curriculum and place in the school library media center.

Arabs—their history and culture

There is considerable confusion about who Arabs are. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, an Arab is "a member of the Semitic people of the Arabian Peninsula" or "a member of an Arabic-speaking people." In the first definition, Semitic refers to "the Afro-Asiatic language family that includes Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Amharic" or to the Semites, "peoples of ancient southwestern Asia including the Akkadians, Phoenicians, Hebrews, and Arabs," to their descendents, or to people speaking a Semitic language (Merriam-Webster, 2009).

Arabs populate most of the Middle East and represent a varied blend of peoples from 17 countries commencing with Morocco on the western perimeter of the northern part of the African continent and spanning two continents to Yemen on the eastern border of the Saudi Peninsula (Schwartz, 1999). Although some scholars include additional countries, making a total of 21, it is practical to think of Arabs in three groups: those from the Northern part of Africa including Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan; Arabs from the Mediterranean region including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine (although the Israeli/Palestinian area is disputed at this time and is not officially recognized as a country, we prefer to include the Palestinian territories in this listing as a separate entity); and Arabs from the Arabian Gulf including Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Although living in different countries and regions with unique and distinctive cultures, these Arabs are bound by an Arab identity that is based on a common language and some shared traditions, such as

An Arab-American teenager reads Habibi *by Naomi Shihab Nye.*

> ## "A wide variety of traditions, dialects, religious practices, and customs exists within the far-ranging Arab countries."

mores and values of right and wrong, standards of public behavior, music, marriage rituals, and humor (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008). Although they reside in the Middle East, Kurds, Turks and Iranians are not Arabs, nor are Afghans, Armenians or Pakistanis.

A wide variety of traditions, dialects, religious practices, and customs exists within the far-ranging Arab countries. For example, not all Arabs are Muslims. Although the majority of Arabs follow the faith of Islam, there are also significant populations of Arab Christians, Druze, Marinates, Melokites, and Jews living within Arab countries. Although Arabs in all 17 countries speak Arabic, people in each area speak a different dialect, often making it difficult for them to understand each other. Most Arabs are trained in classical Arabic, which is the language that is used to converse across the various regions.

Arabs in the three regions also have different traditions and customs. In the North African Arab countries, it is traditional practice for men and women to greet each other by kissing on the cheeks four times, but in other areas, men may rub noses. Dress in each area varies as well. In North Africa, men's robes are wide at the bottom with a striped design topped with a hood, in Egypt the robes are solid white, wide at the bottom, wide at the cuff and have no hood, while in the Gulf they are solid white, straight at the bottom and may button or have a collar. The women's dress varies as well, with distinction apparent in the cloaks they may wear to cover their dresses—usually black in the Arabian Gulf area, trench coat style in the Mediterranean area, and of various bright colors in Northern Africa. Some adults in the Mediterranean region and teenagers of all the Arab countries may even dress in western style clothes. However, despite the rich array of traditions and diversity of customs, all Arabs are held together by the common identity of being Arab.

Problems facing Arab-American and Arab immigrant young adolescents

Arab is both a cultural and linguistic term used to describe people who share the Arab culture and Arabic language (Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2007). Arab Americans are further diversified by social class, religion, education, Arabic dialect, length of time in the U.S., and degree of acculturation (Moradi & Hasan, 2004). A special challenge facing Arab Americans and Arab immigrants is the perception of many Americans about their religion. Although almost 90% of Arab immigrants before the 1950s were Christians, the majority of recent immigrants are Muslims (Haddad, 1994; Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007). Following the rise of radical Islamic terrorists and 9/11, Arab Americans and Arab immigrants have often been the target of discrimination (Ibish, 2003), as many Americans associate Islam with terrorism (McMurtrie et al., 2001; Wingfield & Karaman, 1995). Thus, children often tease Arab-American or Arab immigrant young adolescents because of their foreign sounding names, traditional clothing, or practice of fasting during Ramadan (Carter, 1999).

In general, discrimination can lead to a number of psychosocial problems including low self-esteem and high distress (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998). Kanner and Feldman (1991) linked depression in children to a daily lack of control over their lives. Specifically looking at Arab Americans, Moradi and Hasan (2004) found a link between discrimination and depression, psychological distress, and lowered self-esteem.

Young adolescent Arab Americans or Arab immigrants may also face a conflict between personal identity and cultural identity. When young adolescents from cultures that place a high value on family loyalty come to the U.S. and try to adapt to the majority culture, they often have difficulties adjusting to the emphasis that Americans place on individual competence and competition (Eisenbruch, 1988; Ascher, 1989). For example, Arab values stress the importance of family and religion, respect for elders, and the importance of family before self (Moradi & Hasan, 2004). Arab society is both collective and authoritarian with children expected to adhere to their parents' and teachers' expectations and regulations (Dwairy, 2004, p. 277). Thus, in Arab cultures, the young adolescent identifies with the family and bases his or her self-esteem on family status and

reputation and on support and approval from the family (Dwairy, 2002). Using an authoritarian style, many Arab parents emphasize obedience, restrict autonomy, and maintain control. Even at school, when an Arab student encounters verbal, physical, or emotional abuse or aggression from an educator, he or she may assume that this is the normal role of a teacher and will not complain. As a result, many young Arab adolescents may have emotional and behavioral problems including depression and low self-esteem (Dwairy, 2004).

Role of multicultural literature

When students interact in schools, they bring their cultural differences as well as their physical, emotional, and cognitive differences. Through the use of good multicultural literature in schools, educators can "help to break down [barriers] … [and] can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community … with good stories that make us imagine the lives of others" (Rochman, 1993, p. 19). When authors incorporate themes such as friendship, family relationships, survival, justice, and conflict resolution into their books, readers can begin to make connections across cultures (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias, & Tinajero, 1998). Serving as a "vehicle for socialization and change" (Harris, 1997, p. 51), literature allows young adolescents to replace stereotypes with an understanding of the similarities and differences among diverse cultures (Bucher & Manning, 2006).

Imagine going through twelve years of education and never reading a story that reflects your life or your cultural heritage. Unfortunately, most Arab immigrants and Arab Americans graduate from high school never having read a single story that validates and reaffirms their culture to them or to their classmates (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008). In fact, most Arab Americans and their fellow classmates only receive a negative view of Arabs through hearing and reading sensational news headlines that highlight terrorist activities occurring in the Middle East.

Before 9/11, most educators were not aware of Arab immigrants or Arab Americans sitting in classrooms across America (Nieto, 1992). No special efforts were made to include the literature of Arabs in the curriculum or school library or to affirm their cultural identity. Americans had a vague idea of life in the Middle East, and stereotypes of the camel-riding man in flowing robes and head scarf persisted. They had no specific details of exactly who Middle Easterners were and what their values and culture were. Since 9/11, Arab Americans and Arab immigrants have increasingly become targets of hate crimes and discrimination (Wingfield 2006), with some Arab-American students relocating due to excessive taunting and teasing at school that resulted in psychological trauma (Spiegel, 2006). Young adolescents should not have to sit in a classroom and fear for their safety due to their ethnic heritage.

However, before educators can help young adolescents, they must overcome their own prejudices, misconceptions, and knowledge gaps (Timm, 1994; Blakely, 1983; Trueba et al., 1990). A number of researchers have found that culturally-based misunderstandings arising from the incongruities between the life experiences and cultural backgrounds of teachers and students can be devastating to the learning process (Duckworth, Levy, & Levy, 2005). To

Sadu is an ancient hand weaving technique used for centuries by nomadic Bedouins.

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combat this, teachers must become globally aware with flexibility, respect, and tolerance toward all cultures (Duckworth et al., 2005). As teachers begin to understand the backgrounds of students, they become more compassionate (Hones, 2002).

Arab and Arab-American resources for teachers

Within the confines of an article, we cannot provide a complete, detailed description of Arabs and their culture. There are, however, a number of excellent resources for teachers who want to learn and teach more about Arabs. Two useful resources are *Understanding Arabs* by Margaret K. Nydell (2005) and *Books About the Middle East: Selecting and Using Them With Children and Adolescents* by Tami Craft Al-Hazza and Katherine Toth Bucher (2008). Figure 1 includes complete information about these and other resources as well as some online resources.

Arab literature

By introducing Arab literature into the middle grades curriculum, teachers can help Arab students develop positive self-images and help other students increase their awareness of and sensitivity to diverse cultures. As they identify with Arab characters in the literature they read, non-Arab students will develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the Arab culture. In this article, we focus on high-quality Arab literature featuring Arab adolescents. The books are separated into two themes: *friendship across borders* and *overcoming struggles and conflicts*.

Friendship across borders

Several books address the theme of friendships that cross cultural and even political borders. *Samir and Yonatan* by Daniella Carmi (2000) is a thought-provoking, well-written story about a young Palestinian boy, Samir, who is forced to travel through roadblocks and unfamiliar territory to an Israeli hospital to receive treatment for his injured leg. The underlying theme throughout the book is one of tolerance and seeing beyond stereotypes as Samir overcomes his fear of being in a Jewish hospital surrounded by Israelis and, ultimately, replaces his fear with the friendships he forges with the young Israeli children who share his room in the hospital.

Interspersed throughout the book, flashbacks of Samir's life give the reader insight into the emotional consequences that living in an occupied land has on a child and his family—something that most American students have never considered. Samir also reflects on his fears, his identity, and his past decisions. He contrasts his previous friendships with the new friendships he is establishing and reflects on his current view of a people he had previously considered his enemy, the Israelis. The writer reveals Samir's analytical reasoning concerning his brother's death, his father's emotional distance, and his grandfather's profound sadness. The story ends with Samir establishing a close friendship with an Israeli boy named Yonatan and, in the closing moments of the book, even Tzahi, who had antagonized him throughout the story, makes gestures of friendship.

This book truly promotes tolerance and crossing cultural divides. It was the winner of the 2001 Mildred L. Batchelder Award given by the Association For Library Service to Children, and it received honorable mention for Children's Literature in the Service of Tolerance sponsored by UNESCO. Relationships, friendships, and family are concerns for all adolescents; and adolescent American readers will be able to relate to Samir and his struggles, albeit the surroundings and culture may be very different.

Continuing with the theme of friendships, an especially enlightening introduction to the Arab culture is *Habibi* by Naomi Shihab Nye (1997). The story revolves around Liyana, a 14-year-old Palestinian-American girl whose family decides to relocate to Palestine just as she is becoming a teenager. Young adolescent readers become immersed in the vibrant cultural of the Middle

East as Liyana chronicles the experience of becoming an immigrant and explores her Middle Eastern heritage.

The author examines numerous social and emotional issues that immigrants experience, such as leaving established social networks, creating new friendships, feeling like a stranger in a strange land, and the experience of leaving almost all worldly possessions behind. Liyana, the main character, has to develop a new set of interpersonal skills to be able to relate to and communicate with the people of this new culture; and she has to critically examine the values, beliefs, and behaviors that she had internalized and considered socially acceptable.

The young adolescent reader will learn about a wide and wondrous variety of exotic practices and customs and a diverse set of characters who have different beliefs and who view the world through the lens of a different culture. Due to the author's extensive experience in the Middle East, the book offers in-depth insight into the culture with detail that enriches the reader's understanding of the region. *Habibi* has won many awards, including the Jane Addams Book Award and recognition as a 1998 ALA Best Book for Young Adults.

Other books that can be used to deepen and enhance students' understanding of the Arab world and the theme of friendships across borders are *Running on Eggs* by Anna Levine (1999), *Crossing the Line: A Tale of Two Teens in the Gaza Strip* by Alexandra Powe-Allfred (2003), and *Teen Life in the Middle East* by Ali Akbar Mahdi (2003).

Overcoming struggles and conflict

Many books address the problems associated with overcoming obstacles. An excellent book that gives insight into young adolescents who grow up facing conflict and struggle is *Children of Israel, Children of Palestine: Our Own True Stories* by Laurel Holliday (1998). In this book, Holliday attempts to help students understand the Middle East conflict by relating real-life stories instead of giving a narrative of historical events. She believes that this approach will enable young adolescents to relate to and truly understand the emotions, feelings, and struggles adolescents from a very different culture are experiencing.

Tasting the Sky by Ibtisam Barakat (2007) continues with the theme of young people facing immense struggles. Barakat talks about her life growing up in Ramallah and her experiences as a child living during times of occupation and invasion. The story provides a dramatic narrative, an account that will enable young adolescent readers to feel the uncertainty, fears, and struggles of young people who live in war-torn areas.

A number of other novels that explore children and teenagers living through occupation, invasion, and war can be placed in the classroom library for students to gain a more in-depth understanding of how adolescents' struggle during these difficult times. These books can be assigned as outside readings and used in post-reading

Figure 1 Additional information about Arabs for middle grades teachers

Print Resources

Al-Hazza T. C., & Bucher, K. T. (2008). *Books about the Middle East: Selecting and using them with children and adolescent*. Worthington, OH: Linworth.

Al-Hazza, T., & Lucking, R. (2005). The minority of suspicion: Arab Americans. *Multicultural Review, 14*(3), 32–38.

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Who are the Arab Americans? (2001). *Curriculum Review, 41*(4), 8.

Wingfield, M., & Bushra K. (2002). Arab stereotypes and American educators. In E. Lee, D. Menkart, & M. Okazawa-Rey (Eds.), *Beyond heroes and holidays: A practical guide to K–12 anti-racist, multicultural education and staff development* (pp. 132–136). Washington, DC: Teaching for Change.

Internet Resources:

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. www.adc.org

Arab American Institute. www.aaiusa.org

Arab American National Museum. www.arabamericanmuseum.org

Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services. http://www.accesscommunity.org/site/PageServer

Arab World and Islamic Resources. www.awaironline.org

Caught in the Crossfire: Arab Americans—Information from PPS http://www.pbs.org/itvs/caughtinthecrossfire/arab_americans.html

National Council of Arab Americans. www.arab-american.net

Teaching Tolerance.org. *Who are the Arab Americans?* http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?p=0&ar=155&pa=3

discussions to increase comprehension of the Middle East and youth who face enormous struggles. Our recommendations are *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* by Deborah Ellis (2004), *A Little Piece of Ground* by Elizabeth Laird and Sonia Nimr (2006), *Youth in the Middle East* by David Abodaher (1990), and *A Stone in My Hand* by Cathryn Clinton (2002).

Conclusion

As Laurel Holliday (1998) notes in *Children of Israel, Children of Palestine: Our Own True Stories*:

> When country of origin, religion, native tongue, skin color, height, weight, ability/disability, age, gender, sexual preference, etc., are no longer the measures of a person's worth, we on this planet may have a chance of living together in peace. Until that day comes, let us listen to each other's stories and teach our children the meaning of equal opportunities and justice. (p. xxi)

We believe when teachers are aware of and respect the cultural heritage of Arab immigrant and Arab-American young adolescents, and when they select and use quality literature about the Arab experience with all students, they will have taken an important step on the road to understanding, equality, and peace for all peoples.

Extensions

The authors discuss the importance of using multicultural literature to enhance the self-images of ethnic minority students and to increase the cultural awareness of all students. Work with the school media specialist to inventory the multicultural resources in your school media center. Identify gaps between the cultural backgrounds represented in your school and the resources available to teach about them.

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