Combating Middle East Stereotypes through Media Literacy Education in Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

Mass media and popular culture play a significant role in the development of children's understanding of people around the world. A university-school partnership supports the professional development of elementary-level teachers who were interested in using media literacy education to promote global understanding. This program used a range of specific instructional practices to help combat negative stereotypes and increase knowledge, tolerance and acceptance of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East. Grade 3 and Grade 4 children learned to identify inaccurate visual stereotypes of the Middle East and strengthened message analysis skills through asking critical questions about the representation of Arab people in popular culture, including advertising and animation. They gained knowledge about the many nations and cultures of the Middle East through the use of library resources and online databases. After creating simple videos to represent their own cultural heritage to others, they participated in an online collaborative forum sharing their work and responding to questions through a collaborative wiki with students from Kuwait, who shared their culture and family traditions. Evidence from interviews and student work samples shows that both students and teachers decreased their reliance on cultural stereotypes and increased their knowledge and appreciation of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East, even though teachers also demonstrated substantial resistance to exploring contemporary news representations of the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Keywords: stereotypes, Arab, Muslim, multicultural education, media literacy, technology, integration, wiki, video, elementary, education, media education, university-school partnership, curriculum, instruction

On June 4, 2009, when President Barack Obama offered an address at Cairo University in his first official trip to the Middle East, he acknowledged the great tension between the United States and the Arab world and the need to end the cycle of suspicion and discord. After describing his personal life history in Asia, North America and Africa, he explained, "partnership between America and Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't. I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear" (Obama, 2009).

By the time children enter elementary school, many already have some preconceived ideas and attitudes about other cultures that are influenced by their families, friends, and communities (Montgomery, 2000). Since American children are born and raised in a media-saturated society, another source of information from which they learn about other cultures is the mass media and popular culture. Fortunately, an increasing number of educators are aware of the influence of the media and other personal experiences in the shaping of their students' perceptions. Educators may try to intervene in this informal learning process through multicultural education. However, little work has been done with children to recognize and resist the stereotypical representations of people and cultures from the Middle East (Marquand, 1996; Montgomery, 2000). In this paper, we offer a case study of a university-school partnership designed to explore how media literacy education may be used to combat stereotypes and promote global understanding of the Middle East in the context of elementary education.

Stereotypes of Arab People and Cultures are Rampant

Media messages, including images of Middle Eastern people and countries, serve as the primary vehicle for the 'social imagination,' a term used by Appadurai (1996) to

refer to the interconnected global identities and possibilities for social action where ideas flow between fiction, current events, and social worlds. Children's media in the Middle East presents a world view that is simultaneously modern and traditional (Peterson, 2005), where Arabs, Muslims and Westerners are depicted as collaborative, engaged social agents in a modern world. By contrast, the common images of Arab males in the US popular culture are generally negative: villains, terrorists, oil sheiks, marauding tribesmen, and kidnappers of blonde women (Shaheen, 2000). While Arab males are portrayed in the media as sinister, brutal, violent, merciless and dangerous with robes and turbans, Arab females appear to be passive, weak and mute, and their faces covered by black hijabs. When these females are portrayed as vivacious, most of the time they are belly dancers. Both Arab males and females do not appear as ordinary people who have happy families and the usual jobs that most people encounter in their daily lives, like taxi or bus drivers, sales people, clerks, teachers, doctors or business people (Akram, 2002; Almaeena, 2007; Shaheen, 2000; Silverblatt & Zlobin, 2004; Wingfield & Karaman, 2006).

Such negative portrayals of Arabs are also found in US children's media. The famous Disney film *Aladdin (dir:* Alan Pakula), while at first glance conveys Arab characters in a favorable light, nonetheless portrays the hero and heroine as having light skin color and speaking with an Anglo-American accent while the villains by contrast have dark skin and an Arabic accent. The opening song of Aladdin also underscores stereotypes of Arab countries as mysterious and exotic. The lyrics of the opening song of the original film are: "Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but

hey, it's home." After protests by Arab Americans and challenges by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Disney modified the lyrics for the video to: "It's flat and immense, and the heat is intense. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." Although this alteration was considered as a slight improvement over the original words, this modification still did not satisfy those who are concerned about prevailing negative stereotypes of Arab countries and their people (Wingfield & Karaman, 2006).

Growing up in the United States, children also see Arab villains in television cartoons and comic books. They can even encounter them while selecting Halloween costumes. For instance, *Batman*, the Saturday morning cartoon on Fox Children's Network, featured Arabs as fanatic allies who conspire to occupy the Earth. In comic books, an Arab chieftain kidnaps Jane in *Tarzan* while the Arab terrorists in *Superman* are characterized as a repulsive oil sheik villain and hijackers of a U.S. nuclear carrier. Moreover, Halloween masks depicting Arab people had monstrous features after the events of September 11 (Wingfield & Karaman, 2006).

Education can Promote Global Understanding

Repeated encounters of negative representations may influence children to have inaccurate knowledge and skewed beliefs. Although some children may have the opportunity to learn about people from the Middle East in their real lives, even reliance on personal experiences to learn about other cultures may be limiting since the process of reflection, analysis, and action may be missing in personal encounters. Therefore, systematic educational efforts that promote global cultural understanding may play a crucial role in cultivating acceptance, tolerance and inclusion, preventing children from acquiring prejudicial views towards others in terms of their ethnicity, color, or nationality

(Almaeena, 2007; Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2002; Montgomery, 2000). We developed this project because of our belief that media literacy education can be used to combat negative stereotypes and deepen children's identification with the "other" through providing multimodal information and ideas using image, language, sound and music, thus enhancing children's understanding of Middle East countries and cultures.

UNESCO has made longstanding efforts to include media and information literacy as a basic component of global cultural awareness. According to the media education training kit by UNESCO, *Media Education: A Kit for Teachers, Students, Parents and Professionals* (Frau-Meigs, 2006), media education is defined as the process of teaching and learning about media and media literacy is the outcome the knowledge and skills learners acquire.

Because media often create, repeat or fortify existing stereotypes, which are defined as the "oversimplified conception of a person, group, or event" (Silverblatt & Zlobin, 2004, p. 76), media literacy education can be useful when analyzing the conventional tropes used to represent particular social groups (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2007; Silverblatt & Zlobin, 2004). As media stereotypes and are found in relation to many social groups, not only those from the Middle East, we believe that the instructional model offered in this paper may be useful in building the communication and critical thinking skills of students that can promote cultural understanding among other groups as well.

In fact, media literacy education already has been used in school settings to teach issues of stereotyping and misrepresentation. For instance, in a high school media literacy class in New Hampshire, English teachers used concepts of media literacy to teach the

ways that mass media shape social and cultural realities. From the class activities and homework, students explored how different races, genders, and body types are represented (Hobbs, 2007). In Malta, one of seven European countries in which media literacy has been practiced in the school curricula, the lessons about stereotypes in mass media are required to be taught in all schools, according to the National Minimum Curriculum designed by their Ministry of Education in 1999 (Borg & Lauri, 2009)

Scholars and educators have recommended that critical analysis activities explore how a selected country is portrayed in various types of texts, including those from mass media, popular culture, news media and educational resources. Some of the suggested questions include: "What topics have been included and omitted?" "What does this reveal about the relative importance that a culture places on particular issues?" "What does this reveal about a country's historical taboos – that is, topics that the media choose not to cover because of past events?" and "What topics are emphasized in the country's media presentations?" (Silverblatt & Zlobin, 2004, p. 77-78). But few educational efforts have explored how to support the development of critical analysis skills among children in the elementary grades.

University-School Partnerships Support Curricular Innovation

In the United States and much of the world, elementary teachers generally receive little exposure to media literacy pedagogy as part of their pre-service training (Flores-Koulish (2006). As a result, they may find this work unfamiliar and challenging. Therefore, outside assistance can be useful to support the process of facilitating media literacy educational programs using instructional approaches that include the use of mass media and online digital media. From an awareness of the fact that teacher development

does not end after graduating college, university-school partnerships have emerged as one model of supporting teachers' need for ongoing professional development (Trubowitz & Longo, 1997).

University-school partnerships are a longstanding tradition in the United States and they can be an effective means to support teachers' professional development during the school year. The National Education Association (NEA) describes efforts at the turn of the 20th century to affiliate public high schools with higher education institutions (Su, 1990). In the 1950s, the collaboration between higher education and public schools became more widespread in the United States, mainly for the purpose of enhancing math and science education. During the 1980s, more than one thousand partnerships between universities and primary schools were reported (Su, 1990). The 1980s was also a decade when many other industrialized countries started to adopt school-university partnerships for teacher education, as schools were not able to promptly respond to the rapid social, cultural, political and economic changes. Such partnerships between schools and colleges not only have continued but also have exploded in many of these countries so that today we witness widespread examples of teachers' professional development and students' enhanced learning experiences (Maeroff, Callan, & Usdan, 2001; Tsui, Edwards, & Lopez-Real, 2009).

University-school partnerships benefit not only educators in primary and secondary schools, but universities as well as they pursue their research missions and make meaningful efforts to serve the community. Working with schools traditionally has been considered as opportunities to serve all members of a community because of the vital role that schools play in creating healthy neighborhoods (Su, 1990).

For these reasons, we wanted to explore how to use media literacy education with elementary school students as a means to promote media literacy education. This paper describes the work we conducted during the Spring of 2009, when third grade students at an elementary school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States learned about the Middle East using the pedagogical lens of media literacy education. A team of university researchers, elementary teachers and a librarian/media specialist collaborated to integrate media literacy into a unit of instruction elementary school students ages 8 – 10.

The Research Context

The children attend school in a community in the metropolitan Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The community of about 21,000 residents is predominantly wealthy to upper-middle-class, with a median family income of $119,000 and a largely White population. Many of the residents work in professional fields, including banking, health are, and pharmaceutical industries, and 32% of the population have a master's degree of higher. However, there is significant economic diversity in this community, with 35% of residents come from families earning less than $50,000 in household income annually. Fewer than 10% of the community consists of immigrant families, representing a smattering of Asian and South Asian immigrants. A total of 240 children participated in the project in some capacity, although 80 Grade 3 students (ages 8 and 9) experienced all elements of the program.

The school district is deeply committed to integrating technology into the curriculum and computers and interactive white boards are plentiful. However, like many U.S. elementary educators, teachers were unfamiliar with the pedagogy and practice of media literacy education. While teachers were somewhat familiar with the use of video

cameras for documenting student performances and wikis as a tool for collaborative writing, they were not familiar with the instructional pedagogy of media literacy, the key concepts and core principles of media literacy (NAMLE, 2008), or the use of film as a tool for exploring the constructed nature of media messages.

This pilot program was limited in scope to one year. We conducted only three planning meetings with the school principal and members of the educational staff to develop the program. One meeting consisted of a 90-minute staff development program introducing the key concepts and core principles of media literacy and offering a viewing and discussion mini-lesson to demonstrate the process of critical media analysis. Other work occurred as researchers modeled media literacy lessons to students (with teachers observing classroom practice). Researchers also offered technology support to small groups of students in project-based activities.

To document the partnership process, members of the research team conducted informal interviews with teachers, made classroom observations, interviewed teachers and children, and collected student work samples. Limitations of our schedule prevented regular daily access to the classroom, however. Teachers engaged in instructional practices related to this unit that we were not able to document carefully, so this paper is limited to report on only those aspects of the program that we were able to document through these methods.

Components of the Instructional Program

Nine components of the instructional program are described below: (1) activating prior knowledge, (2) identifying visual stereotypes, (3) researching the accuracy of visual stereotypes, (4) reading and art activities to build knowledge, (5) developing critical

analysis skills, (6) using film to develop emotional connected to the 'other,' (7) strengthening understanding of the constructed nature of film; (8) engaging in charitable action; and (9) strengthening civic dialogue through creative online expression. Where possible, we use evidence from observation and field notes to capture the unique characteristics of children's learning. A variety of learning activities were used in this project and were led by either elementary educators or researchers. Researchers demonstrated some lessons and activities that were then further developed and extended by elementary teachers and their students. Elementary teachers developed some lessons that were then shared among members of the educational team so that all Grade 3 students could benefit from them. The development of the nine components was a truly collaborative experience.

Activating Prior Knowledge. Teachers were uncertain what children actually knew about the Middle East. They wanted to determine what students' prior knowledge, so they asked children to write down their ideas. Table 1 shows that the majority of the responses demonstrated very little knowledge about the region and cultures that live there. Nearly half of these students had no knowledge of the Middle East, with 39% having some knowledge and about 13% knowing more details, including names of countries and languages spoken.

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Identifying Visual Stereotypes. The research team wanted to demonstrate a lesson on using close visual analysis of images as a means to help children gain awareness of

their own stereotyped understanding of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East and as means to introduce media literacy pedagogy. We adapted the curriculum materials still images from Media Construction of the Middle East (Project Look Sharp at Ithaca College, 2007). These materials are designed to explore common visual stereotypes about clothing, weather, geographic features, and cultural aspects of daily life. We adapted the materials to be developmentally appropriate for young children, creating a simple worksheet for children to document their reasoning process. With each class, students worked with a partner or in a small group. Each group was given a worksheet with three images. The images were also displayed on an overhead projector. No other information about the images was provided. The directions: look carefully at an image and decide whether or not this image was taken in the Middle East, writing down reasons to explain your answer. Figure 1 shows a sample of the worksheet children used and the responses of one team of children who completed the activity. In the example, we can see that children did not identify the image of the snorkelers (actually from Malaysia) as located in the Middle East because "there is not water there." They did not identify the image of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock and Wailing Wall as located in the Middle East because "it looks like a palace." However, they did believe the cotton fields (actually from Israel) were located in the Middle East because "there are a lot of fields there."

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Working with their partner, children grappled with the images, expressing their expectations and persuading their partner of their ideas. Each team was asked to present

their reasoning to the whole group. When students did not unanimously agree, they were encouraged to present to the whole group the range of arguments offered by team members. As they worked, students were reminded to ask questions about the image and use specific visual evidence to support their reasoning. For example, children were asked to point to elements in the image that were relevant in making their determination about image's geographic location. For example, one child said, "This image shows mountains with snow. We don't think it snows in the Middle East." Another child said, "This shows women who are wearing long gowns. Women are covered up in the Middle East." Through this discourse, it was evident that students were actively engaged in a process of making meaning of both the more familiar and less familiar images.

After all groups of third graders presented their findings, the teachers informed students of the correct answers. Children responded with delighted pride when they discovered that some of their knowledge was accurate and offered responses of surprise when some of their inferences were inaccurate. The lesson inspired children's curiosity. Table 2 illustrates the some of the stereotypical ideas that were activated by this lesson, showing children's limited understanding of certain aspects of the Middle East including geography, weather, gender, culture, and development.

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Researching the Accuracy of Visual Stereotypes. The teacher of a group of Grade 4 students used this activity as a launching pad for a research activity. Teams of children were asked to select a particular country from the Middle East, and using books,

library resources and online database tools, they checked to see if the stereotypes were accurate or inaccurate for their particular country. For example, a team of children who researched Qatar discovered that there are many skyscrapers and modern architecture in that nation. The group of children who researched Saudi Arabia confirmed that the country does have a lot of desert land. Each team of children offered their informal presentations to a group of Grade 3 students in an example of near-peer sharing to an authentic audience. Grade 3 students were respectful and responsive listeners and proud to describe what they had learned from the near-peer students in an informal writing activity:

> *I learned that the Middle East isn't poor, that they are a little bit richer.*
>
> *I learned that there is still war going on.*
>
> *In some countries it is against the law for women to shake hands with men.*
>
> *They speak Italian and French and not just Arabic.*
>
> *They wear different clothes.*

By encouraging students to seek information independently and present their findings, both groups of children deepened their knowledge of the region and de-mystified common misconceptions. It was evident that Grade 4 children took a great deal of pride in the new knowledge they had gained and were able to share with their peers. This teaching opportunity heightened both the children's curiosity and their confidence.

Children were also able to identify that popular mass media had contributed to the development of their stereotypes about the Middle East, as shown here in a conversation

between the researcher and Grade 4 students:

> Researcher: *Many of things we thought were true about the Middle East are not true. So, where do these ideas come from?*
>
> Student 1: *In the beginning we had a talk* [with the classroom teacher]. *We found that movies have the most [stereotypes] like Iron Man and Indiana Jones, especially at the beginning of Iron Man.*

Asked to explain stereotypes at the beginning of *Iron Man*:

> Student 2: *A really barren dessert, and then when they come to the camp everyone is poor, wearing really ragged clothes…*
>
> Student 3: *and killing each other.*
>
> Student 4: *…carrying guns all over the place.*

Here is another exchange during that same conversation:

> Student 4: *In Iron Man [the main character] was captured by people in Afghanistan. So that would give us a very…*
>
> Student 5: *Bad impression.*
>
> Student 6: *Bad influence.*
>
> Student 3: *Yeah, exactly. That would give us a bad impression on Afghanistan because if we're seeing a movie where Afghanistan is terrorists, than we would think that everyone in Afghanistan is a terrorist. Also we were talking and we thought that they would have a lot—just as many stereotypes about us. And I don't think many people we would be very surprised if they were doing the same project about us.*

Children had grasped the idea that popular culture and mass media messages can and do distort our understanding of the people and cultures of the Middle East.

Reading and Art Activities to Build Knowledge. Traditional instructional activities were used to support children's knowledge of the cultures, nations and people of the Middle East. Teachers offered large-group oral reading of storybooks about the people of the Middle East and drew pictures, collages and other forms of artistic representations of their knowledge, learning about the flags of various nations, the languages spoken, and traditional foods of the region.

Developing Critical Analysis Skills. Children explored how to apply the critical questions of media literacy to various types of familiar and unfamiliar texts, including popular culture and mass media texts. Researchers wanted to model the process of critical media analysis with children in ways that would encourage their teachers to observe the level of abstract thinking that was possible through the use of media literacy questions. Table 3 displays the critical questions used in this curriculum. Interviews with the teachers revealed that teachers had thought these questions to be "too abstract" for children, and they were pleasantly surprised to discover that children responded quite well to these questions, offering solid reasoning and use of visual evidence to support their ideas.

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In the first activity using the critical questions, students in small groups were assigned one of the five media literacy questions to focus on as they watched a

McDonalds commercial from Egypt. The commercial (available on You Tube) presents a situation in which a man wants to demonstrate his love for his girlfriend. With the pop soundtrack, "I Would do Anything for Love," we see him jumping into water to retrieve a lost flower, buying expensive clothing, pushing the girl's out-of-gas car off the highway. But when the girlfriend attempts to take some of his French fries, he fights her for them and they break up. He sits and eats contentedly in the concluding moments of the ad.

This activity was an effective way to introduce these questions because it was very brief, quickly engaged students and had a range of complex layers for students to tackle and think about. After viewing the commercial twice from beginning to end without pause, students presented their responses to these critical questions. Children were fascinated to see how McDonald's is marketed in Egypt, and they were able to identify the target audience, cultural stereotypes around gender, cultural norms about relationships and attitudes about fast food. Children recognized how humor can be interpreted differently depending on one's cultural background. In analyzing the ad's stereotypes about gender and relationships, children also challenged each other about what is acceptable, normal and funny—ideas that showed their interest in applying critical analysis skills to their lived experience as media consumers.

As students gained familiarity with applying the key questions of media literacy to analyze a media text, they were excited to repeat the activity using a 13-minute excerpt from the Disney film *Aladdin*. Unlike the commercial, when watching *Aladdin*, teachers paused the film at key moments, asking students questions about the characters, the plot and the setting. Teachers also introduced media literacy concepts again here, stopping the film and asking questions that fostered critical thinking, particularly focusing on narrative

structure. For example, teachers asked, what did you see or not see? And, what can you predict is going to happen next? This type of instructional modeling enabled the elementary teachers to see the close textual analysis at work in the 'reading' process.

After viewing the *Aladdin* clip, students divided into small groups and were assigned a collaborative writing activity. Their assignment: answer one media literacy question based on evidence provided in the film. Because students had already practiced using these question with the commercial, this task was somewhat familiar and they were eager to report their findings back to the entire group. After the lesson, one teacher described his surprise at seeing his students engage in this activity, stating, "I didn't know my students could do this—take apart a movie like they take a part a book."

Using Film to Develop Emotional Connectedness to the "Other." Film has long been recognized as a powerful tool to promote cultural understanding (Nadaner, 1981). We wanted to use film to support children's emotional identification with the people and cultures of the Middle East. Raouf Zaki's short independent film entitled, *Santa Claus in Baghdad* (www.santaclausinbaghdad.com), based on a story of the same name by Elsa Marston, tells the story of a family whose lives are disrupted by the U.S. embargo in 1980. In this story, a young boy believes that Santa Claus is coming to Baghdad when his teacher reads a book about the mythical character and his family awaits a visit from Uncle Omar from America. Students watched the film and discussed the moral lessons embedded in the film that focus on the value of family love, appreciation of teachers, books and learning, and the blessings of a generous spirit. Some classroom teachers also read the short story that the film is based on to explore basic concepts in literary adaptation. Teachers also used the film to stimulate writing activities and art projects

related to students' feelings and thoughts about the film.

Strengthening Understanding of the Constructed Nature of Film. We also encouraged teachers to view the film multiple times, encouraging students to look carefully at the narrative structure, character development and editing. Critical analysis of film was a new concept to educators in this school. As part of the staff development program for teachers, we modeled the process of character analysis, inviting viewers to examine how the filmmaker constructs characters through strategic use of action, dialogue, appearance, setting, thoughts, and the reactions of others. We encouraged teachers to screen the "making of" video that accompanied the feature film, where they learned about the process of recreating the Baghdad book market, which was filmed in a warehouse in Framingham, Massachusetts.

This portion of the project culminated in a visit from the filmmaker, Raouf Zaki, who participated in question-and-answer session with students. We observed high levels of engagement from students during this activity. Children asked a range of thoughtful questions. Interview data revealed that teachers saw connections between the children's ability to recognize stereotypes as this combined with their careful viewing of the film and their new knowledge of Middle Eastern culture. All these factors contributed to the quality of their interaction with the filmmaker. Intrigued by the student work and analysis skills that students demonstrated along with the initiative that teachers took in using his film as a springboard for learning, the filmmaker expressed an interest in hearing from students and teachers about their learning experience. What initially began as a Q&A session focused on the film developed into a genuine dialogue and sharing opportunity for all participants, adults and children alike.

Engaging in Charitable Action. Elementary teachers initiated a project for children to participate in the "Pennies for Peace" project, where small donations were gathered to support the development of building schools for children in Afghanistan. Children visited the program's website to learn more about the benefits that resulted from their donations of $450 to this program. Pennies for Peace, a program of the 501(c)3 non-profit organization, Central Asia Institute, was founded by Greg Mortenson. Greg is the co-founder and executive director of Central Asia Institute, and co-author of *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace…One School At A Time.* The Pennies for Peace program is designed to help students broaden their cultural horizons and learn about their capacities as philanthropists. It educates students about the world beyond their experience and shows them that they can make a positive impact on a global scale, one penny at a time. Students contributed money to bring hope and education opportunities to the children in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Strengthening Civic Dialogue through Creative Expression. As a final component of the program, children had the opportunity to interact with people from the Middle East through a pen-pal type exchange with students at Kuwaiti University, coordinated by Professor Rawia Alhumaidan. About 12 university students from a lower-division educational technology class participated in this project. In order to manage the interaction of the elementary school children with older students, we decided to use a wiki space rather than individual emails, making this a small group sharing experience for students. Each Kuwaiti student was paired with three to five elementary children. This opportunity allowed students from both cultures to use media technology to forge a connection intended to deepen their understanding of each other's culture and thereby

challenge misconceptions and stereotypes.

This component of the project was challenging, due to timing, technology, miscommunication and cultural attitudes. When elementary school teachers were ready to initiate a cross-cultural interaction, Kuwaiti students were on semester break. The use of online software was a novelty for all participants. We learned that a simple list of steps in the process (of how to contribute to a wiki) was not adequate instruction for either teachers or students. Only after hands-on demonstration were students able to effectively contribute to the website. Culturally, some Kuwaiti students were hesitant to contribute to the wiki due to feelings of "intruding" into an unfamiliar space--- that of a school-created webpage from a foreign country.

However, once they became familiar with the website, Kuwaiti students uploaded photos and contributed writing in ways that the elementary children found fascinating. The elementary school children also contributed with informal videos, made with a simple Flip video camera, that shared their ideas about aspects of daily life at school and at home. Some of these videos included role-playing of a family meal, for example. A review of the wiki shows that there was some meaningful interaction between elementary children and Kuwaiti students. Because Kuwaiti students were writing in their second language (English), the level of communication was perhaps more effective than if we had worked with younger students, who would likely not have been as skillful in expressing themselves in English.

Interviews with participants indicated that it was a useful experience. Kuwaiti students were well aware of the negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern people that are common in Hollywood films and on the news. They were eager to offer a meaningful

counterpoint to these negative stereotypes. Representing themselves as normal teenagers with interests in family, friends, music and popular culture – something these students already do on their own social networking websites--- was now positioned as a kind of social activism, part of a process to help correct cultural misunderstandings. Interview data revealed that Kuwaiti students felt like they were making a social impact far away, while sitting in their homes and classroom interacting with US elementary children. For most participants, this was a first-time experience thinking of oneself as an activist. Before this, many Kuwaiti university students did not see themselves as agents for social change.

Discussion

Teachers' overall lack of interest in using news and current events as a dimension of the learning experience deserves additional reflection here. In offering a critique of new literacy practices in education, Fabos (2006) worried about over-celebrating such practices without acknowledging the political economy in which the message content is framed. She asks, "Which kinds of content, for example answer important questions, challenge stereotypical views, inspire critical analysis, offer hooks on which to hang other information that can be used for discussion and debate and conflicting opinions? (p. 245).

As researchers, these questions resonated as we struggled with teachers' lack of interest in exploring the representation of current U.S. involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of this project. It was important that the researchers gain sensitivity to concerns that teachers shared about the topics of terrorism, war and violence, which occasionally entered classroom conversations. Although researchers

were eager for these topics to be discussed by children, teachers were uncomfortable with these conversations and concerned about them. Researchers wanted teachers to use examples of photos of war and terrorism in the local and national news, for example. When asked to explain their lack of interest in using news, teachers acknowledged that fear was a factor in their disinclination, since the community residents were politically diverse. Teachers were concerned that children would simply offer up opinions heard in their homes and that such dialogue would be polarizing. In this community, parents were equally likely to support or disapprove of U.S. military involvement in the Middle East.

Similarly, elementary teachers were not comfortable with classroom talk that activated children's exposure to mass media and popular culture that featured topics related to war, terrorism and violence. They were not comfortable when students used examples from film and television, especially if they were unfamiliar with the references children were making. Teachers' sensitivity to "appropriate content" reflects their naturally protective attitudes towards young children. For example, although some children were eager to discuss the film *Iron Man* and it was discussed informally during the program with researchers present in the classroom, the film's PG-13 rating meant that the film trailer could not be screened as a means to stimulate discussion of stereotypes. Teachers did not make active use of popular culture and mass media texts without support from researchers—they used more traditional texts, including children's literature, informational websites, and other school-appropriate materials.

Another limitation was that of time. It was impossible to devote sufficient time to incorporate a meaningful program of staff development into the learning experience for teachers. Only one 90-minute session was provided for educators during the semester,

which introduced them to the key concepts of media literacy and the practice of close analysis of film. In terms of their own learning about the Middle East, teachers were largely on their own, asked to generate activities to support student learning through reading, discussion and art activities. This substantially limited our work.

Because teachers themselves tended to focus on technology as a tool to promote learning, they sometimes devalued the role of student engagement in media production activities. Due to time constraints, some media production activities that should have been student-centered sometimes became teacher-centered. In one case, a teacher prepared Powerpoint slides for students' oral presentations, including the selection of photographs to accompany their ideas. More emphasis on the value of process learning in student-centered media production projects is needed to support the planning and preparation involved in student media composition work.

As with any collaboration between university researchers and classroom teachers, teachers' perceptions of the value and relevance of the project are crucial. Some teachers began the project with some hesitation, wondering at first about the relevance of learning about such a far-away place. The social studies component for Grade 3 students is more likely to focus on children's immediate community, not the countries of the world. But not only was it important for teachers to be on board, they needed to also be prepared. In this case, teachers were teaching about the Middle East using media literacy pedagogy for the first time. This goal was both unique and challenging, in that it asked teachers to learn about two new subjects simultaneously. All but two of the authors were non-experts in the field of Middle Eastern studies and we were all on a learning curve throughout the program. Additionally, while the team of researchers possessed competence around

media literacy education, they were less familiar with the teaching at the elementary level and in addressing the developmental needs of young children. On several occasions, the elementary teachers provided advice on classroom management tactics that proved necessary and helpful.

Technology and communication obstacles made the pen pal exchange the most challenging component of this project. These obstacles sometimes fueled misunderstandings. As described earlier, we made some wrong assumptions about how technically savvy Kuwaiti University students were about the use of the wiki. Lack of clarity in technical instructions slowed the exchange process and caused frustration for both elementary teachers and Kuwaiti students. In the future, including clear, culturally sensitive instructions with a user-friendly online tool could help avoid such roadblocks.

Teachers' use of film tended to focus on its value in moral education and researchers struggled with their own ambivalance about the benefits and liabilities of this approach. Because of their limited exposure to media literacy education, some teachers did not engage in close analysis of the film as fully as researchers had expected. However, the importance of film as a tool for moral education should not be discounted. Given the strong focus of the film on family values, love of books and learning, and the unexpected joys associated with generous giving, this was an appropriate strategy and one that deepened children's emotional engagement with the people of the Middle East. Educators need to be careful in ensuring that, with all their focus on critical analysis skills and appreciation of the constructed nature of film, they do not lose the strong emotional learning that comes from film's inherent potential to change hearts and minds.

This project explored the power of disrupting stereotypes, encouraging children to

recognize and resist the common stereotypes of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East. It activated learning through the power of narrative, using fictional film to activate children's emotional engagement, imagination and curiosity. The techniques of close analysis combined with the filmmaker visit supported the process of children's understanding of the constructed nature of film, as children were able to "go behind the scenes." We capitalized on the educational benefits of using online social media to promote feelings of empowerment by all participants. Evidence from student work samples show that the program was effective in meeting its goals.

For most children, this was the first independent (non-Hollywood) film they had ever seen, and that also could have provided with some meaningful opportunities for discussing the economics of the movie industry. In the future, we would like to develop instructional support material to help young children understand the economics of both Hollywood and independent films. Independent media can provide alternative visions of people of the Middle East and even young children can appreciate the value of having access to diverse points of view about this part of the world.

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Table 1. Students' prior knowledge about the Middle East

Percent	**Level of Prior Knowledge** Writing Samples
48%	**No Knowledge** I think the Middle East is the middle of Washington, Montana, Portland and California. The only thing I know about the middle east is that sometimes I go there for wrestling and soccer. I think the Middle East is were the indeins used to live I think the middle east to us is New Jersey. It's were cowboys live I think the middle East is the middle east of the united states of america why I am thinking it is the middle east because my aunt lives in utah. I think the middle east is a huge island
39%	**Some Knowledge** Warm air comes to the middle east…oil in the water there. It is very hot and it isn't usually cold. I think the middle east is in asia and is around rock and indo and is dry, hot, and away from the sea and is southwest from china. It is hot and it is kind of like the desert and people live there. I think it's open land with pyramids and also with maybe towers. I think the Middle East looks like a hot desert. I think there will be lots of camels and tents or shelter and peramids.
13% **N = 23**	**More Knowledge** In the middle east here are some of the contries in the Iran, Irack, Isreal, Turkey, Morraco, and Quate. The Middle east is in arab. They speak in hebru and islam and they go to tempils.

Table 2. Children's Stereotypical Ideas about the Middle East

It does not snow in the Middle East.
There are no malls.
There are many wars there.
There are not very many cars in the Middle East.
They ride camels.
People live in tents.
There is no water and no ocean in the Middle East.
They do not have big buildings.
Women do not wear makeup.
Women and girls do not wear fashionable clothes--- they are all covered up.
They do not grow much food in this region.

Table 3. Critical questions of media literacy education

Who is the author and what is the purpose of this message?
What values and points of view are shown?
What techniques are used to attract your attention?
How might different people interpret the message differently?
What is left out?

Figure 1. Identifying visual stereotypes

Group 4

DIRECTIONS / Alex / Katelyn / Cloe / Danny /

Select an answer for each of the photographs. Give an explanation for each of your answers.

___ Yes, Middle East

_X_ No, not Middle East

Explanation: This cannot be the Middle East because there is not ocean there.

_X_ Yes, Middle East

___ No, not Middle East

Explanation: It can't be because that looks like a palace.

_X_ Yes, Middle East

___ No, not Middle East

Explanation: Yes because I think there are alot of fields there.

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