

# **“Now our Arab students read Arabic books”: Arabic Curriculum Innovation through Children’s Literature**

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## **Abstract**

The quality of Arabic language teaching and learning can be improved through the implementation of engaging programs and innovative approaches. In an effort to revitalize a stodgy curriculum, a number of schools have piloted a literature-integrated approach to the teaching of Arabic language and have anecdotally reported successes in student attainment. However, the practices associated with these initiatives and their impact on the teaching and learning of Arabic have not been studied. This study explores the implementation and the impact of literature integration in Arabic classes using a multiple-case research design that included three pioneering schools in Jordan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The results demonstrate that the implementation of a literature-integrated approach entails a comprehensive change that influences and is impacted by teachers, the curriculum, the learning environment, and the school leadership. Challenges around time requirements, resources, and cross-school collaboration point to needs that cannot be solved by teachers but need to be addressed by policy makers. Successes affirm the findings of prior studies on the positive impact of literature integration. In conclusion, this approach may carry promising results for Arab children if the change is supported, the challenges are addressed, and the successes are amplified.

**Keywords:** Curriculum Innovation, Literature-Integrated Curriculum, Language Teaching and Learning, Arabic.

## Introduction

It is known that children's attainment in reading in Arabic lags significantly behind mother tongue reading attainment elsewhere in the world. Analysis of the results of standardized international tests, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), shows that Arabic-speaking students in the Middle East do not perform at the expected level in reading, scoring consistently below the global average (Eckert et al., 2020; Myhill, 2014). Expert voices have suggested that, amongst other factors, the quality of Arabic curricula in schools is a contributory factor to such underachievement. Specifically, the almost exclusive use of textbook-centered curricula has been identified as an impediment to student achievement in Arabic (Faour, 2012; Taha Thomure & Speaker, 2018). In this regard, Saiegh-Haddad and Everett suggest that a strict adherence to the course textbook, with the primary aim of exam preparation, is detrimental to the development of proficiency in reading in particular, and notes that "reading is seen as a product of classroom routine, involving little enjoyment and relentless practice" (p. 194) (Saiegh-Haddad & Everatt, 2017).

Traditionally, syntax, rhetoric, poetry, and traditional texts constitute the content-base of Arabic curriculum (Al-Hendawi, 2016). Thus, the curriculum has been seen as comprised of disparate rather than integrated elements, including reading, writing, syntactic rules, literature and rhetoric, and exercises in dictation, according to Almoaiqel,

who advocates for a paradigm shift from a knowledge-based to a skills-based approach to raise literacy standards in Arabic (Almoaiqel, 2014). Moreover, it has been observed that the Arabic curriculum has an excessive focus on accuracy, rules, and grammar, over engagement in reading for meaning and pleasure (Taha Thomure, 2008).

Another related issue is students' lack of motivation to learn Arabic. According to the 2014 Dubai private school inspections report, as cited in Badry (p. 205), classes are "too often repetitive and [do] not motivate or engage students." It is increasingly recognized that reading proficiency requires more than the cognitive skills of decoding, fluency, and comprehension, but also depends on motivated and engaged learners (Badry, 2015). An investigation into the results of the 2011 PIRLS standardized reading test in Abu Dhabi, for example, found that extrinsic motivation was a more effective factor than intrinsic motivation in encouraging Arab children to read (Yang et al., 2018). As another indicator of motivational issues, students complain about the difficulty of Arabic grammar, despite it being their 'mother tongue' (Prime Minister's Office, 2014; Taha Thomure, 2019). and Arabic tends to be their least-liked school subject (AlZeny, 2016). Complaints about the difficulty of Arabic in the UAE have been mostly associated with the focus on grammar (Prime Minister's Office, 2014).

Associated challenges to the development of robust formal literacy among Arabic-speaking children have been identified. In the Gulf countries, these include a lack of exposure to books in the home (Barza & Von Suchodoletz, 2016), and home-based literacy

activities such as bedtime routines with story time are not commonly practiced (Gregory et al., 2021). In addition, there is a lack of teacher training and a lack of teacher training courses for teaching Arabic to young learners (Gallagher, 2020). Moreover, until recently, the quality and range of reading material for children in Arabic was limited, with few attractive illustrated story books to entice children to read (Dünges, 2011; Mdallel, 2003).

We explored the extent to which two of the above issues - namely, a staid textbook-based curriculum and low student motivation - may be ameliorated by the adoption of a literature-integrated approach to Arabic language arts in the elementary school classroom. The study assumed a process model of curriculum inquiry (Stenhouse, 1975) as its theoretical framework, and thus focused on the experiences of teachers, learners, leaders, and other stakeholders in the implementation of curricular innovation, and also reports on stakeholders' perceptions of its impact. We investigated the implementation and impact of a children's literature-based language arts curriculum for Arabic in three schools in three countries, namely Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In this study, the term "literature-integrated" is used to refer to the systematic utilization of children's literature, at varying levels, in language classrooms for instructional purposes, within a balanced literacy (Honig, 1996) orientation to the language arts curriculum, as discussed below.

## **Literature Review**

This section explores the relevant research in areas pertaining to the implementation and impact of literature-based programs. First, however, we briefly examine efforts at Arabic curricular reform, including the recent introduction of standards-based curricula in some schools. This is followed by a brief history of literature-based approaches within standards-based language arts curricula. Following that is a discussion of the use of authentic children's literature, and the features of a literature-integrated curriculum. It should be noted that the body of literature reviewed here draws upon the use of children's literature in English language classrooms, as there is little scholarly work available thus far on the use of children's literature to develop Arabic. The review includes a short discussion of the benefits of children's literature within the language arts curriculum and concludes with an overview of the state of children's literature in Arabic today.

Traditionally, curriculum in the Arab world has been textbook based, in the sense that there is one centrally produced and prescribed textbook which contains everything to be taught and learned at each level (Clarke & Gallagher, 2008). In a textbook-based approach, reading materials are sparse and are typically non-authentic, being written for didactic grammatical purposes (Taha Thomure, 2008). By contrast, a curriculum based on authentic literature is meaning-based and offers a range of diverse and authentic reading texts. It emphasizes the simultaneous development of all four skills [reading, writing,

listening and speaking] (Lapp & Fisher, 2018) within a communicative classroom environment, while emphasizing close reading and appreciation of literature (Sellman, 2016).

Following the publication of *The California Language Arts Framework* (1987), and focusing particularly on the skill of reading, literature-based reading instruction became widespread in the USA in the 1990s, transforming the existing basal or graded readers into so-called literature anthologies (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2018). Since then, the popularity of literature-based approaches has waxed and waned. Literature tends to be popular when child-centered approaches to reading are promoted, but less so when technocratic approaches with an emphasis on basic skills and prescribed approaches are dominant (Wolf et al., 2011). The extensive use of literature and the literature-based approach has been associated with “whole language” and the natural approach to teaching reading that was popular in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, there has been criticism of the whole language approach (e.g. Hanford, 2018), and an emphasis instead on the systematic teaching of phonics. Alternatively, a balanced approach to literacy instruction between bottom-up approaches, such as phonics instruction, and top-down approaches including whole language, has been advocated since the 1990s (Tomkins, 2010).

Amongst the advantages of a literature-based approach is that it cultivates higher-order thinking skills and develops skills for critical analysis, and, in focusing on reading

comprehension and on understanding words in context, it introduces skills in a meaningful manner. Moreover, a literature-enhanced approach develops not just language skills, but aesthetic, moral, social, emotional, empathetic and critical thinking skills as well (Short et al., n.d.). Children's literature can also support the teaching of contemporary issues in education, such as children's wellbeing (Pulimeno et al., 2020), and sustainable development (Bhagwanji & Born, 2018). Literature-based programs may not deliver their potential benefits in many cases, however, due to implementation-related challenges.

Literature-based instruction is defined as "an instructional approach for language teaching that uses authentic materials, including children's and young adult literature cutting across genres (e.g., poetry, nonfiction, fantasy)" (Hadaway et al., 2001). As such, literature-based programs favor the use of real books over basal or graded reading schemes (Hancock & Hill, 1988). Literature in literature-based programs is *the* agent for language development (O'Sullivan, 1991) and constitutes the primary, if not the total material, for reading in the language arts classroom (Giddings, 1991). Literature-based reading programs include shared reading, read-alouds, guided reading, independent reading, literature discussions, strategy discussions, interactive writing, guided writing, and independent writing. Children are supported in integrating the language cueing systems (syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic) to predict and construct meaning from texts (Arya et al., 2005).



Lamb has outlined the main features of a literature-based curriculum in action in the classroom, based on a review of published studies in the area (Lamb, 2006). First, there is integration of the four skills around literature: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Second, there is student choice of reading text, selected from multiple genres and at multiple levels of readability. Third, there are a variety of interaction patterns around reader response: one-to-one (whether student to teacher, or peer to peer), in groups, or as a whole class. Fourth, there is significant time devoted to independent, silent reading. Fifth, there is a daily read-aloud by the teacher, from a variety of genres. Sixth, reading progress is monitored closely by the teachers and support is provided, as required. To this list, one may add the presence of “print-rich and book-rich classrooms” (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2018). Finally, according to Tunnell and Jacobs’s review of the research, literature-based programs include the following additional features: the use of natural texts, the use of big books and reading pairs, teacher modeling, self-selected books, and an emphasis on developing positive attitudes to reading, all within a context that emphasizes meaning over form and that integrates output activities such as process writing (Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989).

The use of authentic materials in language classrooms can be mapped across a spectrum that varies in terms of the type and number of resources and materials used and the methods of instruction employed. Authentic literature includes stories (narrative texts) as well as informational or expository texts. In line with the notion of

child-centered education, Giddings ( p.4) connects the use of authentic literature to students' needs and interests, in the belief that literacy teaching should draw upon "real literature and meaningful print rather than with fragmented language or language constructed for instructional purposes(Giddings, 1991)." In addition to exposing children to authentic literature, a literature-based approach engages children in naturalistic response tasks. This includes opportunities for children to talk with each other about a book they enjoyed, instead of answering a list of comprehension questions about the book (Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989).

The degree of literature integration in the curriculum can range from the mere existence of literature in the classroom to the full-fledged teaching of literacy skills through literature, in what is often described as a literature-based approach. Within the classical education model of primary school, students are given plenty of time to read books of their own choice for them to begin their acquaintance with literature from a young age using stories that "offer rich character development, fascinating settings, complex plots, and beauty of expression" (Bauer & Wise, 2016, p. 64)).

Finally, turning to the quality of children's literature in Arabic, the professionalism of authors and illustrators has increased in recent years, and the quality and variety of books has been improving accordingly (Dünges, 2011). During the past ten years, the Arab world has witnessed a spread of specialized publishing houses in children's literature and an increased intensity of exhibitions and activities that seek to push

children and young people towards reading (Taha-Thomure et al., 2020). Although there is growing interest in Arabic children's literature, as Anati points out, there is little research into it; and while there is growing interest in literature-enhanced teaching of Arabic, there is yet little research in the area (Anati, 2020). The sparse regional literature on the pedagogic use of children's literature in the Arab world relates mostly to the use of literature to teach English as an additional language, rather than to teach Arabic (See, for example, Abdulmughni, 2016)). One exception is Sellman who focuses on the use of children's literature in Arabic for the development of multiple skills within a communicative approach, while also emphasizing close reading of texts within their literary contexts (Sellman, 2016).

### **Study Objectives**

As part of the gradual awakening of interest in innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching Arabic language arts, a limited number of private schools have piloted a literature-integrated approach and have anecdotally as well as through qualitative records reported successes in student attainment. The results of implementing an Arabic literature-integrated curriculum and its impact on the teaching and learning of Arabic in schools has not been studied, however. Additionally, the process of curriculum implementation, the accompanying changes, the anticipated challenges, the encountered successes, and the solutions found, have not yet been investigated.

Simply put, in this study we sought to answer the following question: How are selected schools in three countries implementing a literature-integrated Arabic curriculum in their elementary-grade classrooms, and how do stakeholders perceive its impact?

## Methodology

This study employed a multiple-case research design, based on three purposefully selected schools in three countries: Jordan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Case data were collected between November 2019 and March 2020 in the schools through interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations.

**Table 1**

*Primary and Secondary Data Collection Methods*

No.	Type	Data	Instrument	Analysis
1.	Primary	Interviews	Interview Protocol	Qualitative Analysis
2.		Focus Groups	Focus Group Protocol	
3.		Observations	Classroom Observation Tool	

## Population

The three schools were identified through purposeful sampling, as representative cases where the literature-integrated curriculum was implemented in Arabic language primary

classrooms. Five schools were identified and approached to participate in the study via email. Three of these responded positively and participated in the study. Once schools agreed, written permission was obtained to allow the researchers to visit the school and collect the required data. All three private schools have a population of over 90% native Arabic speakers and offer an international curriculum. English is the medium of instruction in two of these three schools, and all subjects except Islamic education and social studies are taught in English. In order to investigate the *implemented* and *experienced* curriculum in the three schools, stakeholders were interviewed, both individually and in groups, and observations of lessons were conducted.

### **Interviews and observations**

The data collection instruments were created by the research team and validated by sharing with four experts in Arabic language teaching and learning who provided their feedback, which was then incorporated into the instruments. Standard ethical procedures were followed and a full ethical clearance (ZU18\_84\_F) was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Zayed University. All participants were invited to give their informed consent to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, and data were then transcribed and translated into English by the research team.

### **Individual interviews**

In depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with key curricular stakeholders in elementary grades in each school: teachers, literacy coaches, curriculum developers, principals, students, and parents. Interviews were 45-60 minutes in length and included mostly open-ended questions about the implementation of the approach and related challenges and success. Open-ended interview questions were selected because they enable participants to create responses unconstrained by the researchers' view (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were identified by the school leadership based on the minimum requirements of the research team, as shown in Table 2 below. The number of interviews, focus groups, and observations conducted in each school is presented in Table 3.

**Table 2**

*Participants' Characteristics*

<b>Informant Category</b>	<b>Requirements</b>
<b>Teachers</b>	Grades 1-5 Minimum of two years of teaching experience Bachelor or higher degree in Arabic Language or in Education
<b>Coaches/ Curriculum Developers/ Decision Makers/ Principals</b>	Minimum of three years teaching experience Bachelor or higher degree in Arabic Language or in Education
<b>Students</b>	Grades 1-5 Enrolled in the school for more than one year Arabic is the mother tongue
<b>Parents</b>	Active in school community Has one or more children in the school

**Table 3**

*Summary of Data Collection by School*

	School 1	School 2	School 3
<b>Interviews</b>	2	3	4
<b>Classroom Observations</b>	8	3	6
<b>Focus Groups</b>	3	5	4

### **Focus group interviews**

In addition to individual interviews, focus group interviews were also conducted with parents and students. Focus groups offer an in-depth exploration (Stewart et al., 2000) of issues, in this case issues in the implementation of literature integration. These hour-long sessions revealed participants' collective attitudes, emotions, beliefs, and reactions in ways that other methods do not (Gibbs, 1997).

### **Classroom observations**

A classroom observation instrument was created, focusing on areas such as teacher-student interaction, communication, teaching strategies, student engagement, and observable attitudes towards learning and attainment within the literature-based classroom. Classroom observations assist in drawing connections between what teachers say in the interviews and what was observed in the actual lesson delivery session, as the same teachers who were interviewed were also observed. The observation method allowed the researchers to check definitions of terms that participants used in interviews

and to observe events that the participants may have been unable or unwilling to share (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

## **Data Analysis**

Interview, focus group and observational data were first transcribed and translated into English, prior to analysis. Transcriptions were then analyzed collectively using an inductive qualitative approach (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative data analysis involved preparing, cleaning, and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally presenting the data in a suitable format (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), using NVivo 12 plus software. Open coding technique line by line was used and each sentence/ paragraph was coded with at least one code (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The participants' own words were used as much as possible to develop codes and sub-codes, to maintain authenticity. The same codes were consistently used to code text that represents certain ideas, not necessarily exact word matching. A constant comparison method was systematically used to allocate and compare codes (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Codes were developed or amended based on an emerging understanding gained from the data (Schilling, 2006).



## **Results**

The findings are presented below under the following three categories: (1) the accompanying changes, (2) the experienced challenges, and (3) the encountered successes.

### **(1) The accompanying changes**

The accompanying changes were found to be related to the teacher, the curriculum, the language learning resources, and the school leadership.

#### ***The Teacher***

Teachers described a shift towards a student-centered approach and an on-going professional learning journey. Instead of a sole focus on covering a textbook, the focus became that of developing language skills amongst students, based on where they are and not where the textbook is, and to scaffold them so that they reach the desired level. This change required teachers to join professional learning programs and to form professional learning communities, as noticed in all three schools. In School 2, for example, teachers examine and discuss samples of student work and view teacher feedback. In this school also, the subject supervisor emphasized that the primary focus is on student learning rather than teaching strategies. The teachers in all three schools also conduct visits to their colleagues' classrooms and share feedback. In addition to the professional development programs that are offered in schools, the Arabic language

supervisors expressed the need for teachers to be readers themselves, as role models for students.

### *The Curriculum*

Upon the adoption of a literature-integrated approach, multiple changes occur gradually in the Arabic language curriculum. Although language skills and phonics continue to be taught separately, an integration between different language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) through literature was evident in most of the visited classes. A teacher in School 3 describes the integration as follows:

“We use literature as a teaching tool, so we all have goals that we can achieve in many ways through literature, whether it is for the purpose of improving reading comprehension or working on specific skills such as mind maps for Grade 1. So, I can achieve any goal through literature. “

The supervisor in School 2 also described the integration of language learning objectives through literature, including vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, grammar, and writing. The curriculum was also modified to include daily time for reading aloud, individual reading, and discussions around reading literature. Pedagogy was modified to include engaging teaching methods such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, and project-based learning, as reported during participant interviews and as observed in the classrooms.

### *Language Learning Resources*

The participants in all three schools described the shift as a move from the complete reliance on textbooks to the balanced utilization of children's literature alongside textbooks. The reported resources in literature-integrated classrooms included classroom libraries that include fiction and nonfiction books ranging in number from 120 (In School 1) to 400 (in some classrooms in School 2), in addition to online children's literature platforms such as "I Read Arabic"<sup>2</sup> and "3asafeer"<sup>3</sup>. These platforms include leveled literature and allow students to transition from one level to the next, track the number of books they read, and keep a record of student scores through comprehension quizzes.

### *School Leadership*

Participants stressed the role of school leadership in supporting literature integration. This support was described as a source of motivation, through the allocation of additional time, securing funding for resources, and providing professional development programs. For example, in School 2, the supervisor stated that two extra classes were allocated to Arabic on a weekly basis to contribute to developing students' reading skills.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ireadarabic.com/ar/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://3asafeer.com/>

## **(2) The challenges experienced**

The challenges that emerged from participants' feedback were related to time constraints, resources, and cross-school collaboration.

### ***Time Constraints***

Since students have some individual choice in the literature-integrated approach and do not produce similar work, teachers need to provide individualized feedback which can be time consuming. A teacher in School 1 expressed this as follows:

“It is not easy! Imagine that a teacher has 20 students in the class, and each student writes, for example, 2 pages [in a reading response log]. The teacher has to read them all and give them detailed feedback, not just a word or a grade like “good or excellent”, but two or three sentences which differ from one student to another.”

### ***Resource-related Issues***

The supervisor in School 2 pointed to a significant shortage of Arabic children's literature, in terms of the volume of published books and the breadth of topics. Participants also mentioned the absence of a unified leveling system amongst publishers, making it difficult for teachers and children to select ability-appropriate books. To overcome this issue, Arabic teachers in most classrooms categorize the books in the classroom library under three categories: beginners, intermediate, and advanced readers. As for online reading platforms, some participants noted that online publishers do not include experts

in Arabic which makes it difficult to tailor their texts and accompanying activities to the actual needs and contexts of students.

### ***Lack of Cross-Schools Collaboration***

Participants indicated that they are not aware of other schools that implement literature integration in their Arabic classrooms. They perceive this as a major missed opportunity, as they could cooperate and share knowledge and insights, rather than depending on their individual efforts alone. The fact that there are no symposia or conferences that focus on the sharing of curricular initiatives such as this represents a hindrance to implementation for these pioneering schools. The supervisor of School 2 mentioned a conference he had attended on Arabic teaching and learning, for example, and indicated that sadly the conference didn't present a single school's experience, as all the presentations were merely theoretical.

### **(3) The Encountered Successes**

The common successes that were alluded to by the participants included a positive impact on students in the following areas: attitudes toward Arabic language, reader habits, and the development of language skills.

#### ***Improvement in Student Attitude towards Learning Arabic***

While integrating literature into their daily practice, it was found that the teachers employed engaging methods which facilitate students' enjoyment of learning. Engaging

teaching methods observed in classrooms included provision for student choice, which was seen to contribute to positive student attitudes towards learning Arabic. For example, a teacher in School 3 shared, “Not having a specific book and the availability of options gives the students an opportunity to select the story that they like”. A teacher in School 1 described the integration of literature in the curriculum as making “students excited and eager to learn”.

An Arabic supervisor in School 2 shared his reflections on the change in student attitudes thus:

“If we go back in memory 5 years ago, we used to ask students to read for only 20 minutes of the class, but they used to find one way or another to waste it and not read. However, now the students themselves ask and wish that the class can be a reading class, and this came out of them getting used to reading.”

### ***Student Acquisition of Reader Habits***

Given their frequent engagement with literature, it was observed that students were acquiring lifelong reading habits. Students expressed how they have become curious about stories and look forward to discovering the ending, how they have developed individual preferences for certain genres, how they search for novels in the same series, look for books on certain topics of interest, borrow books from the school library, have conversations around the books they read, connect their readings to their real-life

experiences, and read frequently at home. Several teachers described students' unprecedented interest in reading Arabic books in the following way: "Now our Arab students read Arabic books".

### ***Development of student language skills.***

Teachers reported that engagement with literature enhanced students' language skills. This included development in writing skills, oral language, and communication skills in standard Arabic, and in comprehension. The increased focus on comprehension skills was a significant change that accompanied the new approach and one that leaders and teachers emphasized. The connection between reading and writing was also underscored by many teachers. Students were found to develop in terms of their ideas, creativity, imagination, and desire to write - even outside of the classroom - and then share their writings with the teacher. It was observed though that there was an over-emphasis on the skill of summarizing by some teachers, who applied it over-zealously. The students also showed growth in research, communication, critical thinking, and self-management skills in Arabic classes, according to the teachers.

### **Discussion**

A literature-integrated approach to teaching and learning Arabic in primary classrooms has been introduced during the past ten years in some pioneering schools across the Arab world, at varying levels. However, the process of implementation in such schools has not

been investigated. Despite variance in the level of implementation, similar changes, challenges, and successes were observed in all three school sites.

This study found that students exhibited an increased love of reading, as a result of literature integration. Literature-rich classrooms are a particular need in Arab countries, as it has been reported that, for example, only 9 percent of children in Morocco and 18 percent of children in Saudi Arabia are in a school with a well-stocked library (Gregory et al., 2021). Research consistently shows that access to quality literature and immersion in literature-rich classrooms contributes to improving children's attitudes toward reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2017). Immersion in an abundance of reading materials leads children to develop their own interests and reader habits (Al Hashemi, 2011; Krashen, 2009; Morrow & Young, 1997). This is related to another challenge that was raised by participants in this study around the breadth, quality, and grading of children's literature in Arabic. This issue was highlighted by Taha-Thomure who pointed to the lack of texts for beginning readers, and the lack of child-friendly language in many children's books (Taha Thomure, 2008). The need for a text leveling system has also been identified (Harb, 2019) as an important tool to support the appropriate matching of student to text.

The interaction of teachers and children over books was shown to support the development of their oral language (Clark & Rumbold, 2006) and to improve their attitudes toward reading (Al Hashemi, 2011). This was observed in the visited sites where the teachers held discussions around books consistently and reported the impact of this



practice on their students' attitudes toward reading and on the students' oral language development. Such practices are related to children's self-reported engagement in reading instruction (Mullis et al., 2017). Studies have found that reading for pleasure is the most important indicator of a child's future academic success (OECD, 2002, cited in Gregory et al., 2021).

The newly adopted pedagogical practices that were observed included read aloud time by the teachers and independent reading time secured for the students. These and other practices that promote engagement with reading materials in and out of the classroom were considered key components of the literature-integrated approach. Such practices help prepare children to meet the demands of the 21st century, for which the following goals of reading have been identified: (1) making personal connections to texts, (2) reading deeply to understand, (3) reading critically, (4) reading with an eye toward the craft and structure of texts, and (5) making connections across texts (Martinez et al., 2017). The teachers in this study also pointed to the connections between reading and writing. This is in line with the conclusion of Leland et al. who confirmed that literature provides a structure that supports students in taking on an authoring role (Leland et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of a literature-integrated Arabic curriculum in three schools. The findings reported on the accompanying changes, the challenges faced, and the successes encountered. These findings can provide educational leaders and teachers with landmarks to guide their planning of a roadmap toward effective implementation. The results demonstrate that a literature-integrated curriculum entails a comprehensive change that influences and is impacted by the teacher, the curriculum, the learning environment, and the school leadership. The challenges encountered around time requirement, resources, cross-school collaboration and professional learning point to needs that cannot be solved by teachers but need to be addressed by policy makers and educational leaders. The reported successes affirm the consistent findings of prior studies on the positive impact of literature integration.

Further research can build on this study to investigate implementation at a large scale, such as that of the new Arabic curriculum recently rolled out in public schools in the UAE (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, 2020) and the newly released Pearson *Bil-Arabi* curriculum, which is currently implemented in 20 schools in 11 countries (Gregory et al., 2021). A second important area of study that will yield critical insights is the measurement of learning outcomes data for students in literature-integrated programs, compared to traditional programs. Furthermore, since addressing student attitudes towards Arabic language learning needs to be a priority in the region,

it would be important to conduct research that focuses on “practices for motivation” where motivation support engendered through children’s literature can be explicitly designed and delivered (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2018). Between the two extremes of a romantic natural approach that discarded phonics and structured language skill lessons altogether, and rigid textbook-based approach that teaches skills in isolation, this study supports a literature-integrated approach that balances the two approaches and that can carry promising results for Arab children if the change is supported, the challenges are addressed, and the successes are amplified.

## **Declarations**

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## **Conflicts of interest/Competing interests**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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