

DRAFT VERSION

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**Supporting  
International Inquiry, Holistic Language  
Development and Student Engagement in Real  
Time Learning Environments Online**

**With Teaching Strategies for:**

Building Personalized, Meaningful and Fun Learning Groups Online

Supporting Students' International Curiosity, Inquiry and Understanding

Supporting Students' Holistic Language Development and Interdisciplinary Learning

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*“One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world.” – Malala Yousafzai*

## Chapter 5

### Celebrating and Developing Our Vision as Dreamers - Malala Unit

Written by Sarah Koehler

In the American middle school where I taught prior to attending Harvard, our librarian encouraged students to read by asking each teacher to post a picture of their “Hot Read” outside their classroom door. My “Hot Read” was *I Am Malala*—the *Young Reader’s Edition*. The autobiography explores important themes around equity and education through the lens of Pakistani culture—a culture that was largely unfamiliar for my students—while remaining personable and accessible. Malala Yousufzai wrote the book, with the help of Patricia McCormick, when Malala was 16 years old, just a few years older than my seventh and eighth graders. I hoped that the passion that is conveyed when Malala describes her struggles and successes in working to increase women’s access to education, as well as the relatability of Malala’s pre-teen world view, would leave my middle schoolers feeling inspired to recognize their identity as change makers and act on it. Simultaneously, students would have a chance to explore the culture and context of the world’s fifth most populous country, a culture about which my students knew very little.

A semester into my involvement with Students for Students, when I was given the autonomy to design and teach my own curriculum, I immediately thought of *I Am Malala* for similar reasons. Though my students with Students for Students would be from China, not Tennessee, and would encompass a broader age range than my middle schoolers, I felt that the book’s value remained relevant. The text lends itself nicely to the goals of our International Inquiry Units at Students for Students. Namely, the book allows for the exploration of a specific global context, requires readers to engage with issues of international importance, including religious conflict, terrorism, and human rights, and introduces them to the customs and traditions of a largely unfamiliar culture. So I set off to begin writing a nine-class curriculum. What follows here is an overview of the unit, a discussion of the key themes that arose throughout the course, and a summary of our learnings from having taught this curriculum to five groups of students.

#### **Unit Summary:**

*I Am Malala* begins at the time of the Taliban’s rise to power in Malala Yousafzai’s home region of Swat Valley, Pakistan. Over the course of the book, Malala shares an in-depth look into her progression as a dreamer, from an average 11-year-old to a globally recognized advocate for girls’ education. The unit’s curriculum follows her story closely, with a somewhat broader investigation of Pakistani History, Islam and the Pakistani-Indian conflict in the first three classes. The lessons focus first on the context and response that led to the success of a specific dreamer (Malala), then expand by the second half of the unit to have students think more broadly about other dreamers who inspire them. We end by connecting what we’ve

learned to our own contexts and values, reflecting on the problems in our own communities and developing or further concretizing our own dreams for a better future.

## **Unit Overview**

### **Dreams for a Better World:**

#### **Exploring Pakistani Culture, Girls' Education, and The Power of Dreams**

Book: *I Am Malala* (Young Reader's Edition)

(9 Lessons – 90 Minutes each)

Homework for 3-week semester:

- Approx. 2 chapters of reading per night
- Some additional tasks as assigned
- Class 5: Mini dreamer assignment on dreamer of student's choosing
- Class 9: Passport Stamp Project: The Impact of One Person (culminating presentation on dreamer chosen for mini dreamer assignment)

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast similarities and differences between China and Pakistan. Students will identify some of the aspects of Pakistan's culture and history that make it unique through an examination of
  - a. Pakistan's split from India
  - b. the Taliban's rise to power
2. Describe some of the differences in lifestyles for men/women, boys/girls living in Pakistan and identify a few of the barriers to girls' education.
3. Explore in-depth the impetus for dreams and the impact of at least two dreamers—Malala and another dreamer of the students' choosing. Apply these findings to the students' own passions and dreams for the future.

### Broad Learning Goals:

As with all of our units, Students for Students hopes this unit will:

1. Strengthen students' language confidence through an application based approach--improving their speaking, listening, writing, and reading abilities in English.
2. Improve students' critical thinking skills through providing students opportunities to question, draw comparisons, and reason with evidence.

Classes:

1. **Prologue-Chapter 3:** Pakistani Customs, Differences for Men and Women
2. **Chapters 4-7:** Pakistani History, Red Flags of Conflict in the Region

3. **Chapters 8-11:** Islam in Pakistan and the Taliban’s Rise to Power
4. **Chapters 12-15:** Girls’ Education in Pakistan, Dreams for a Better World
5. **Chapters 16-19:** Inspiration and Courage—Mini Dreamer Presentations
6. **Chapters 20-23:** The Attack Against Malala, Opposition to Dreamers
7. **Chapters 24-27:** Connecting the Dots, Setbacks
8. **Chapters 28-31:** The Importance of Allies, Perseverance and Support
9. **Chapters 32-Epilogue:** The Power of Dreams (sub-topic: Differences between Pakistan and England)—Passport Stamp Presentations (The Impact of One Person)

## Key Themes

### Developing our Vision as Dreamers through Local-to-Global Connections

Malala’s story serves as an amazing example of someone who pursued her dream for a better world, despite enormous obstacles. *I Am Malala* details this journey, beginning with events that led her, at age 11, to decide to speak out courageously against repressive policies that prevented girls from obtaining an education. A few years later, in October 2012, she was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman for voicing her beliefs. Following her miraculous survival and recovery, she has continued to fight for all girls’ right to learn. In 2014, she founded Malala Fund to increase educational opportunities for girls around the world and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. Since 2014, Malala and Malala Fund have worked to build schools, amplify girls’ voices, develop teacher leaders to combat gender discrimination, and advocate for policies that support equal access to education (Malala Fund, Malala’s Story, 2020). Despite the enormity of the problem before her, Malala has remained optimistic, stating that she believes she will see every girl in school within her lifetime (Malala Fund, 2018). Now in her early twenties, she continues to advocate for every girl’s right to learn, while studying at Oxford University. Her boundless determination has been quite contagious, attracting the attention of youth around the world, including, now, several young people in our Students for Students online classes.

One of our main goals with the *I Am Malala* curriculum is for students to understand the potential positive impact of just one person, not only in the Pakistani context but in their local and global contexts as well, and for them to reflect about their passions, values, and personal call to action. The OECD’s PISA framework includes “tak[ing] action for collective well-being and sustainable development” as one of the four core components of global competence (OECD, 2018). But what’s required to take action? And what are the risks? Various activities within the curriculum ask students to reflect on what it means to take action and “dream” for a better context. They’re encouraged to make connections between Malala’s dream and their potential as dreamers in their home communities. In exploring Malala’s success, we discuss her resilience in the face of setbacks and how her dream is still in progress. Malala ends her autobiography with the powerful reminder that “One child, one teacher, one pen, and one book can change the world!” And yet, this can’t happen without dedication, passion, and unyielding persistence.

To make this message more relevant and tangible to our learners, as part of the curriculum, students give two “Dreamer Presentations.” The first requires students to come to class with a list of three dreamers or change-makers who have inspired them. In breakout rooms, students discuss their “whys” for each selection and ask their peers for feedback to help them narrow the list down to one. Each student researches their selected dreamer outside of class and develops a presentation with an accompanying visual element (e.g. PowerPoint, Mind Map, Digital Storyboard, etc.). Their first presentation should answer the following questions:

- i. What is your dreamer’s cause and what is their dream?
- ii. What or who inspired their dream?
- iii. Has your dreamer experienced any setbacks or barriers to achieving their dream?
- iv. Has your dreamer’s dream been realized/achieved, or is it still in progress?

The second “Dreamer Presentation” asks the students to turn inward, reflecting on their own vision for a better world and how they might act (or continue acting) on it. Again, they’re asked to create a visual element to accompany their presentation and answer the following questions:

- i. What is a cause about which you are passionate/What is your dream for the future?
- ii. What or who inspired your dream?
- iii. What setbacks or barriers might you experience to achieving your dream?
- iv. What steps will you take to ensure that your dream is realized?

In my first two rounds of teaching this curriculum, I used my 1-on-1 check-ins with each student at the beginning of the semester to better understand their passions and prompt them to start reflecting on their dreams. I learned that my student, Stella, is passionate about education reform. The non-traditional university she attends, which allows students to drive their own learning more so than most Chinese universities, has opened her eyes to new educational possibilities. For her first “Dreamer Presentation,” Stella chose to present on Yinuo Li, an educational reformist and Director of the China Country Office at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In her second presentation, Stella drew on examples from both Yinuo Li and Malala in sharing her vision for a more student-centered, less test-focused Chinese education system.

### Female Empowerment

Malala’s fight for all girls to go to school naturally lends itself to class discussions around gender equity and female empowerment. I’ve long been a believer that female representation begets female participation, particularly in leadership roles, and believe that young girls benefit from seeing other girls and women taking charge. They learn that if they can see it, they can be it. In a 2018 talk given by Malala’s father at Harvard University, Ziauddin Yousafzai summarized this idea simply but aptly. What is sometimes referred to as ‘breaking the glass ceiling,’ he referred to as “breaking the iron bar in patriarchal societies.” When asked what steps we can take to increase equality for girls, he responded, “We should have more girls in leadership positions. When we see more girls in leadership roles, more girls are inspired.” The way to achieve this,

Ziauddin Yousafzai says, is that “Girls should believe in themselves, but boys should respect equality and freedom of girls. Curriculum is a powerful tool” (Yousafzai, 2018). My secondary aim for the *I Am Malala* curriculum, after inspiring students to take action around their own dreams, was to expose students to a stellar *female* example of someone who had done just that.

The first time I taught this curriculum, my class consisted of three young Chinese women with vastly different educational backgrounds, ranging from seventh grade to sophomore year of college. There was something very special about exploring this curriculum in an all-female virtual classroom. I fed off of their energy, as they became increasingly empowered by Malala’s outspokenness and leadership. Many of our interactions between classes in WeChat ended with “girl power” hashtags or messages like “You all inspire me!”

This was, no doubt, facilitated by their high English proficiency. (All three girls tested into our highest proficiency level at Students for Students.) Less time was needed to check for their understanding of the assigned chapters, and, as a result, we were able to devote more time to investigating supporting resources, such as articles on women’s right to vote in Pakistan, images of women wearing a hijab, and footage from Malala’s Netflix documentary *He Named Me Malala*. Following the final class, one of the students asked for more resources about female resistance, and another student sent everyone several articles about the dreamer she had investigated throughout the semester, one of her female heroes. This level of engagement was powerful to witness and set the bar high for future groups of students.

In my second round of teaching *I Am Malala*, the class makeup was a mix of genders and the average English proficiency much lower than during my first round with the curriculum. Working with these students confirmed my assumption that Malala’s message of gender equity transcends gender and proficiency level. Though we spent more time in the text itself, questioning the meaning of various words and confirming timeline of events, students’ engagement and presentations again demonstrated their ability to make real-world applications to the content that challenge systemic oppression. Multiple students raised examples of the gender dynamics in their own families, comparing and contrasting the roles played by their mothers with the expectations Malala describes for women in her society. The male in the group went so far as to express a desire for more gender parity in his future relationship than what he’d witnessed in his own family. To me, giving students the space to engage in these conversations in a way that they may not typically at school, and with students from various regions and experiences across China, is the value at the core of Students for Students.

## **Learnings**

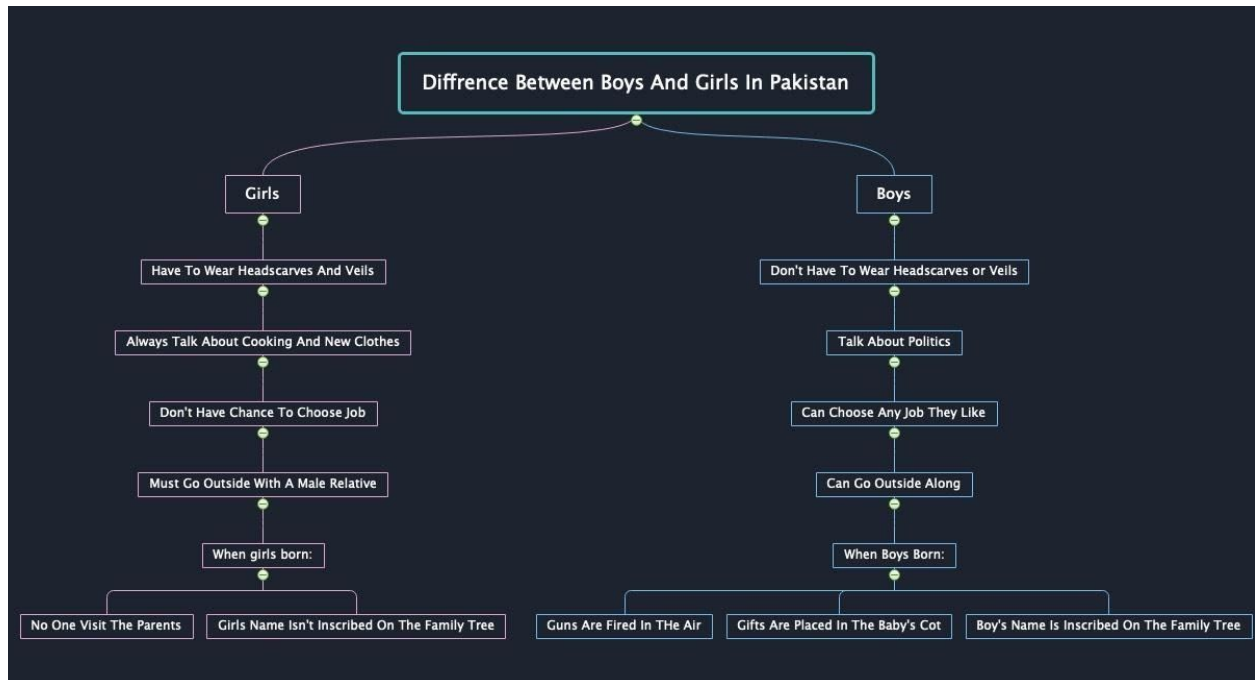
### “The Danger of a Single Story”

I initially hesitated to write this curriculum at all, out of concern that my limited understanding and experience with Pakistani culture would lead me to create a unit that misled students or gave them a too-general, broad-stroked view of Pakistan. In one of my favorite TED Talks,

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the dangers of a single story. She says, “I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar” (Adichie, 2009). Without being a local to Pakistan, or having ever been there myself, how could I hope to accurately represent the richness and diversity of all of Pakistan? And in teaching a unit that focuses so intensely on one person and her family, how could I ensure that her story did not become representative of all Pakistanis, in the eyes of my students? In just a nine-class unit, this is a daunting task. Here are the steps I took to mitigate the chances that I might misrepresent Pakistani culture:

1. In designing the unit, I consulted several locals, whose opinions I highlighted throughout each lesson. Interestingly, this exercise actually illuminated the nuance within Malala’s own story. Two of my Pakistani friends, with whom I spoke most often while designing the curriculum, disagree sharply about the value that Malala has brought to Pakistan. One sees Malala as a hero, a champion for women’s rights, and a role model for young people. The other has referred to Malala as a “pawn of the West,” a figure whose story has been capitalized upon by white Westerners for ammunition toward their own foreign policy agendas (a view she confronts as well towards the end of the book). Highlighting these two opinions in class helped students to think critically about the text—to see that there’s always more to a story than what’s on the page—and led to a lively debate.
2. To build on this notion, I often reminded students that Malala’s story does not reflect the experience of all girls in Pakistan. This led to an opportunity to briefly explore the difference between biographies and autobiographies. We discussed examples of girls in Pakistan who have not faced barriers to education and examples of people who disagree with Malala’s methods. Here you can see an example of a mind map one of my students created to summarize her reading assignment. She summarizes all of the gender differences described in the text but in a way that suggests uniformity of experience within gender groups. The wide-sweeping generalizations used, including language like “always,” led to a discussion on the importance of acknowledging nuance and differences within various populations. In subsequent classes, when one of us made a broad-stroked claim or assumption about a group of people, someone in the class stepped in to encourage that person to avoid using generalizations.





3. Finally, in an effort to more fully incorporate the triangular approach of relying on the student perspective, teacher perspective, and other resources, I invited more knowledgeable guests to join one of our lessons. Students prepared questions in advance for our guests, who were born and raised in Pakistan, and the guests prodded them, in turn, to think more deeply about how they could relate Malala’s activism to their own passions and experiences. The students loved this class, in particular—jumping off one another with questions both raised by the text and their own research of Pakistan.

The success we’ve seen, five times now, with regard to students’ engagement with this curriculum, knowledge of the Pakistani context, and enthusiasm to become more involved in their communities, demonstrates, to me, the power of the International Inquiry Unit. The Malala unit described here and provided in full in **Appendix B** is not just about improving English abilities; it’s about shifting mindsets, increasing global competencies, and activating youth to realize their potential. Through presenting myself as a learner, alongside my students, also eager to learn about a new culture and context, and through drawing from a diverse set of resources, I felt comfortable exploring these topics with students. It turns out, you don’t have to be a local or to even have traveled to a country to feel capable teaching about that context. Students are eager to connect to and engage with stories from around the world. We just need to provide them with the structure and opportunity to do so.