

The Need for Anti-Islamophobic Classrooms

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Growing up Muslim in America, in a time before 9/11, left me feeling largely invisible in the classroom. I always felt as though an imaginary line existed between home and school—one that prevented the culture of my home life from being reflected in the classroom. In the seventh grade, I remember sitting quietly off to the side of the room while my social studies teacher read slowly from the textbook. “Muslims around the world pray three times a day.” He paused, glanced up at me, and asked, “Isn’t that right, Sarah?” (though my name, Saira, is pronounced Sigh-ruh). In one moment all eyes turned towards me and my face flushed red with heat. No other students carried the burden of fact checking our textbook. “Uhh.. I think it’s five,” I somehow managed to get out, murmuring something about the difference between the two main sects of Islam; Sunni and Shiite. Slowly, my classmates bored faces turned away and I exhaled. It was over.

That moment marked the only time in my entire adolescent school experience that my religion was acknowledged inside the classroom. Most of my classmates and teachers seemed to know very little about my faith—Islam. Religion was largely hidden, neither used to discriminate nor to understand. I walked the halls feeling like an outsider. Not only was I different from most of my peers, I felt understood by almost no one. I was American, by birth and by culture, but I felt foreign, largely ignored by the dominant culture that loomed in the classroom. This was my experience growing up Muslim in America almost 30 years ago.

Growing Up Muslim Today

Today the world is drastically different. For many Muslim students who roam the halls of the American educational system, the cloak of invisibility has been ripped off. Classmates, teachers and administrators have more consciousness of Islam. But consciousness and knowledge are two completely different things, and knowledge is never neutral (Howard, 2006). Yet despite these differences, one thing remain the same; Muslim students still feel separate from their classmates (Spiegler & Sisaye, 2016). The ‘otherization’ of individuals who do not share the faith of the dominant Christian narrative continues (Manseau, 2015).

The concern for anti-Muslim related bullying in the classroom is at an all time high. As the number of Muslim students continues to increase (Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States), and as the public ignorance regarding Islam continues, anti-Muslim sentiment is likely only to increase (Lipka & Hackett, 2015). Many of our Muslim students (and *seemingly* Muslim students, as in the example of Sikhs who have experienced a rise in “Islamophobia” despite their differences in faith (El Nasser, 2015)) continue to feel disconnected from their school environment as harassment and bullying increases (Spiegler & Sisaye, 2016).

In 2012, CAIR’s California Chapter issued a report entitled, “Growing In Faith” (Growing, 2012). In it they cited a Muslim Youth at School Survey in which 471 Muslim American students across 21 counties were asked ten multiple choice questions with room to comment. The questions focused on how American Muslim youth felt in their public school experience.

The majority of students reported feeling safe in their schools, feeling respected by teachers, and having little backlash from peers for their faith choices. Of those who did experience Islamophobia, however, a whopping 52% said they would “never” or “rarely” tell

a teacher or principal. And 40% said they would not tell a parent. When asked if reporting the incident to an adult solved the problem, 64% said “rarely” or “never”. This would imply that there is either no mechanism for dealing with issues of Islamophobia, or that it is flawed.

Islamophobia and Its Roots

Islamophobia refers to an irrational or unfounded fear of Islam or its followers (Driel, 2004, p.1-2) “perpetuated by negative stereotypes, resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life” (“Islamophobia”, 2015). “Phobia” is used in psychology to denote an irrational or unfounded fear. Islamophobia, therefore, would refer to an irrational or unfounded fear of Islam or its followers (Driel, 2004, p.1-2) “perpetuated by negative stereotypes, resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life” (“Islamophobia”, 2015). Though this definition could be problematic, for our purposes the term is necessary due to the need for vocabulary that references any prejudice against a Muslim minority group.

Although Islamophobia existed before 9/11 (as seen by the 1997 report by the Runnymede Trust in the UK in which eight components of Islamophobia are identified), it has increased significantly in the last 15 years in the U.S. (“Islamophobia”, 2015). Since 9/11, research has shown that although the United States has identified more than 160 Muslim-Americans terrorist suspects, this constitutes only a small percentage of the thousands of acts of violence committed in the U.S. each year. Yet media coverage of terrorist activity disproportionately covers Muslim terror, creating the impression there is more to fear. Little to no coverage is given to the fact that the Muslim-American community has worked with law enforcement to prevent 2 out of every 5 al Qaida terrorist plots within the United States (“Islamophobia”, 2015).

Kinchloe refers to ‘contemporary Islamophobic miseducation’ of the West as being shaped in large part by a cultural conflict model originating during the time of the Crusades, and continuing throughout Colonialism. The clash of civilizations model, popularized by Samuel P. Huntington and Bernard Lewis, argues that there will inevitably be a clash between Eastern Islamic and Western Christian nations (Kincheloe, 2004). This model now serves as the undercurrent of U.S. foreign policy. Kinchloe further argues that Western Scholars, when researching Islam through the “lenses of Western modernity, employing its assumptions about knowledge production, the ways human societies should develop, the nature of civilization, and the writing of history”, found Islamic culture inferior (Kincheloe, 2004, p.18). Christendom's centuries old struggle against Muslims has shaped its history significantly and is often memorialized in novels, such as *The Algerine Captive* (1797) (Austin, 1997).

That’s not to say that criticism of the Islamic World is unfounded. Questioning or disagreeing with Islam or Muslims is not Islamophobia, nor is denouncing crimes that are committed by individual Muslims or by some who claim to use Islam as a motivation for their actions (Legislating Fear, 2013, p.ix). Looking at history through a critical lens is not meant to right wrongs or rewrite events. It is simply calling on the importance of providing multiple narratives in order to understand the complexity of history. Kincheloe argues that Islamophobic miseducation was and is a strategy used to paint the Islamic world as inferior to the Western world, thereby creating a Western self-consciousness of superiority (Kincheloe, 2004). It is this self-consciousness that justifies the United States intervention in the internal affairs of other, sovereign nations, installing new governments that are more favorable to U.S. interests.

Dalia Mogahed, former Executive Director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, finds that polls taken from 2000-2013 of anti-Muslim sentiment, backup Kincheloe’s

argument. Spikes in anti-Muslim views from the public didn't occur after the terrorists' attacks during 9/11 or the Boston bombers. Instead, they rose in the build up to the Iraq war and during the election cycles of 2008 and 2012. Islamophobia, she argues, is a manufactured political phenomena (Mogahed, 2015).

“The Bridge Initiative, a Georgetown University research project on Islamophobia, released *Twenty Years of Americans' Views on Islam and Muslims*. This report traces 20 years of polling data on Americans' views on Islam and Muslims. The key finding was that the Iraq War — not 9/11 — was a turning point for Americans' views of Islam. Polling data found that during the middle of the Iraq War, positive views of Muslims' religion declined, with negative views outweighing positive ones, the report states” (Zuberi, 2015).

The Need for Religious Literacy

I spoke recently to some colleagues about what things were like for their Muslim students today. Almost all recounted conversations in which students were discussing Islam or Muslims, and the conversation turned negative. When asked whether they felt comfortable stepping in, many declined. “I didn't feel comfortable chiming in because I don't feel like I know enough to say anything,” one colleague said.

How can we meet the unique needs of all our students without addressing this proverbial elephant in the room? With a 24 hour news cycle that appears to flatten the Muslim narrative and manufacture Islamophobia, how can teachers better utilize classroom spaces to provide more contextualization? The “Muslim” issue is not simply a topic for textbooks, nor one that can be swept under the rug. All students, both Muslim and non-Muslim, need help in navigating the waters of religious diversity and literacy (Prothero, 2007). The world, but particularly the United States after Johnson's signing of the

Immigration Act of 1965 which eliminated quotas that put caps on immigration to a person's national origin, has increased in religious pluralism. This also includes approximately one billion people worldwide who self-identify as atheist, secular humanist, agnostic, freethinkers, or simply uninterested (Bishop & Nash, 2010). If the goal is that classrooms become inclusive spaces in which all students become engaged members of their community then teachers must be better equipped to meet the needs of students whose needs have gone unmet.

Many educators believe in the mantra "Good teachers anywhere are good teachers everywhere." (Gay, 2000, p.22). They contend that "good teaching transcends place, people, time and context. [That] it has nothing to do with the class, race, gender, ethnicity, or culture of students and teachers" (Gay, 2000, p.22). To be blind to religion in the classroom seems no more beneficial than being blind to race, socioeconomic status, language, or any other aspect of a child's culture. While we strive for equity within our classrooms, regardless of our students' religious preferences (or lack thereof), this can only be achieved by understanding the unique needs of all our students. In order to teach them, we must know them. And it is by knowing them that we free ourselves from "negative attitudes, anxiety, fears, and the seduction temptation to turn others into images of ourselves" (Gay, 2000, p. 23).

Looking Critically Within

In order to begin the process of creating an inclusive, multicultural classroom we must first be honest with ourselves. If we don't acknowledge what really ails us, we will never find the right medication to heal what is broken. Honesty begins with recognizing our own assumptions and identifying the knowledge and understanding we may lack about Muslims and the Islamic faith. Great harm can come when one disguises ignorance in perceived knowing (Howard, 2006).

But more than being honest with our own assumptions, we must acknowledge the ‘otherization’ of Muslim students. In order for us to create inclusive classrooms, we need to recognize that there exists a dominant, privileged group (ie, those of the Judeo-Christian tradition) (Manseau, 2015). Often, Muslim students are relegated to the sidelines of mainstream education. Muslim students who fast are sent to the library during lunch periods. They may also be given the choice to sit out during Christmas parties or other religious functions within school hours, or given spaces to pray. Yet their distinct cultural practices are often overlooked *inside* the classroom. Their classmates are taught little about their Muslim peers and their practices, missing the opportunity to bridge a divide. In fact, the burden of education is often placed on the students themselves. In order to break the dominance paradigm, the burden of accuracy must come from the the dominant group, not the marginalized students (Howard, 2006).

Building Bridges/Filling Gaps

For many students who fall outside the dominant group, the feeling of ‘otherness’ never quite escapes them. For educators intent on creating inclusive classrooms, we must understand and empathize with those feelings. Empathy is the ability to feel for another. When we empathize, we do not actually transform into the other, we simply hold space to hear and connect with their stories. A student’s shame in their own cultural uniqueness is often an indication of a lack of safe space to express their ‘otherness’.

Islamic narratives, which have often been excluded from the classrooms, now must find their way inside. The Muslim empires of Asia and Africa, which may not yet correlate to curriculum standards must be brought in to give students an accurate global perspective. More importantly, the absence of Muslims in western civilization must be rectified (Manseau, 2015). American Muslim stories must also be woven in. “In 1539, Estevanico was one of the

first of three Americans to cross this continent. At least two states owe their beginnings to the Muslim, Arizona and New Mexico” (Muhammad, 2001, p. 5). Mohammed Ben Abdallah and Yarrow Mamout were two Muslims who fought on the American side in the American Revolution. Yarrow’s correspondence with President Washington is still in existence. Some of the earliest slaves were also American Muslims. Job Ben Soloman, a Muslim from Senegal, was captured and held briefly as a slave in the early 1700’s. His memoir is one of the earliest slave narratives from American history (Curtis, 2009)). Other prominent Muslim slaves include Omar Ibn Said, AbdulRahman Ibrahima Sori, and Nicholas Said (Diouf, 1998). A list of resources about American Muslims is found in Table 1. The inclusion of these Muslim slave narratives is crucial to our broader American context because they dispel the notion of the ‘ignorant slave’. Many of these men who were captured and enslaved unjustly were educated, wealthy, and prominent individuals from cities much more cultured and advanced than the American cities they were taken to (Austin, 1997). Muslims continued to play a role in the shaping of our history, from their participation in the Civil War, to modern day Muslims who excel in a multitude of areas, such as sports, sciences, and social justice (Muhammad, 2001).

Additionally, both students and teachers would benefit tremendously from direct contact with Muslims and Muslim spaces. The Islamic Networks Group (ING) is comprised of hundreds of Muslim speakers placed all around the country. Educators are welcome to contact ING to invite a speaker to speak to them or a class. Teachers are also encouraged to contact local mosques to plan visits.

Books That Bridge

Stories have the power to shape our thoughts, feelings and actions. Human beings need stories. When we hear a story, we deconstruct it and rebuild it in our own knowing,

connecting us with what was once unknown (Gay, 2000). The number of books with Muslim characters is still relatively small but continues to grow as the need increases post 9/11. As the market grows, so too does the number of Muslim authors, giving voice to their own narratives.

There are several picture books that can be used to build bridges with Muslim students. Table 2 provides a list of resources to use in an Elementary classroom. A number of books are available that center around Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims. *Lailah's Lunchbox*, by Reem Farouqi, tells the story of young Lailah as she manages the duality of feeling excited for the approaching month of fasting, while feeling worried that her teacher and fellow students won't understand her faith. *Under the Ramadan Moon*, by Sylvia Whitman, and *The White Nights of Ramadan*, by Maha Addasi, also tell stories that weave in many Ramadan traditions. *National Geographic's Holidays Around the World* series includes a *Celebrate Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr* volume showcasing photographs of Muslims celebrating this holiday around the world. To help integrate many of these sources in the classroom, Table 3 provides additional resources and lesson plans for the elementary classroom.

Young adult literature that embraces Muslim characters and narratives is slowly increasing as the We Need Diverse Books movement has taken flight (We, 2016). Table 4 includes a list of several young adult books as well as some adult fiction that may be appropriately used at the high school level. Table 5 include additional lesson plans that cover a variety of topics from countering anti-Muslim bias, teaching empathy, basics about Islam, and Muslims in America.

Rules of Engagement

The discussion of Islam and Muslims is often one that becomes quite heated these days. Students who have not yet benefited from an anti-bias learning environments often resort to name-calling and harassment of their Muslim peers (Spiegler & Sisaye, 2016). Parents, who are largely ignorant of Islam but more than likely hold a bias against it, are increasingly challenging any and all attempts to incorporate the teaching of Muslim culture inside the classroom (“Islamophobia”, 2015). The backlash only indicates how great a need there is to cool anti-Muslim prejudices. The role of educators is crucial in this endeavor.

The best medicine is prevention. Before students resort to anti-Muslim sentiments, familiarize your students with the effects of bias, discrimination, and stereotypes. “Deconstructing bias and stereotypes will help students reflect on their origins and will ultimately help build empathy among young people.” (Spiegler & Sisaye, 2016) Create a safe space for students to discuss their thoughts and feelings. As much of the media still presents inaccuracies with respect to its coverage of Muslim headlines, draw on current events to proactively seek out examples of bias and stereotypes, and encourage students to look critically at media representation.

When emotions do rise and students express anti-Muslim sentiment that bullies or harrasses, an immediate response is needed. That is not to say that students may not criticize Islamic beliefs or actions of Muslims. Questioning or disagreeing with Islam or Muslims is not Islamophobia, nor is denouncing crimes that are committed by individual Muslims or by some who claim to use Islam as a motivation for their actions (Legislating Fear, 2013, p.ix). Incorporating Muslim narratives in an attempts to create empathy and understanding does not come at the expense of critical thinking. It is simply calling on the importance of providing multiple narratives in order to understand the complexity of history and global understanding. More importantly navigating dissenting narratives and opinions gives students the

opportunity to learn *how* to disagree, how to voice dissent respectfully, and how to shape their criticism after a more thorough understanding.

It should be noted that the reaction to this discourse on Islam may be mixed for Muslim students. Some may feel comfortable, if not relieved, to have a place for discussion. Others might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. It's important to remember that the burden of 'teaching', or even representing, should never be placed on students involuntarily.

Becoming Proponents of Social Justice

As educators, it is not simply enough for us to talk the talk. "Transformative action is the highest goal of multicultural education" (Howard, 2006, p.82). We must move past simply responding to a crisis and instead embrace a more proactive role in shaping the way our students embrace diversity. Anti-bias education will only be achieved if both teachers and students alike face ignorance and discrimination head on and eradicate it. Inclusive, multicultural education will only be achieved when American Muslim voices are heard as part of the greater American collective.

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