Muslim Youth Yearning for "Normal" Lives

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Asma Ahmed

I am a Senior Instructional Designer of the MAC (Muslims Association of Canada) Schools. I work in Mississauga, the treaty land of Ojibwa, Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. The overall objective of my research is to support and improve a more equitable education system. My work focuses on examining the barriers and supports that affect marginalized students. My current focus is on the experience of Muslim students in public schools and private Islamic schools in Ontario, Culturally Responsive Teaching, anti-Islamophobia education, and particularly, educating against Islamophobia for teachers. I also have research interests in anti-racist education, multicultural education, and critical pedagogy. I have mainly been spending my time writing about how teachers can use culturally responsive teaching for Muslim students in k-12 schools and also developing strong character education programs in K-12 MAC Islamic schools. I am a mother of four children and I think motherhood is one of the hardest jobs I have ever undertaken. My kids are my biggest life mentors. They help me be resilient and to live my priorities.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to an increasing association between Islam and terrorism in the public consciousness, Muslim youth face distinct challenges, and often feel like "the Other". Much of the research involving Islam and Muslims make evident that Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the world. In particular, Muslims in the West are a "poorly understood" minority group

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(Environics Institute, 2016). As a result, Muslim youth have found it difficult to lead "normal" lives, as one participant in my research noted, because of their religion's association with terrorism, and because of the discomfort others may feel when witnessing them practice their religion. Despite these facts, Islam is the largest growing religion in Canada (NHS, 2011). The latest National Household Survey (conducted every ten years) showed that the Muslim population has exceeded the one million mark; the population has doubled for the third consecutive decade, with a 72.53% increase (2011).

Muslim youth need spaces in their communities, including their schools, where they are free to be themselves and do not have to worry about other people's prejudices. Being a young person already has countless challenges (Silbereisen & Kracke, 1997; Wolfe et al., 2006), so youth need their schools to be safe havens to build their positive sense of self.

THE RESEARCH

My research explored the experiences of Muslim students in an urban public high school in Ontario with a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence. I used a case study approach (Yin, 2003) to explore from different participant groups the challenges encountered by and supports for Muslims students attending a public high school. I sent a letter of invitation, requesting participation in my study, to all teachers and students in the school. Over the course of a few weeks, I received emails and calls from potential participants. All of the teachers and administrators interviewed were non-Muslim except for one teacher. All the other participants (parents, students, and the Imam) were Muslim. I utilized semi-structured interviews with 32 participants, including students (9), teachers (10), parents (10), administrators (2), and the local Imam of the city (1).

The political climate during the time of my interviews, which took place between February 2015 and April 2015, was hostile toward Muslims as reported by police-reported hate crimes (Statistics Canada, 2017). This was during a time when numerous terrorist attacks were committed in the name of Islam, such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the 2015 Copenhagen shooting, the Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon, and the France Dijon attacks. While these events may not have influenced how all teachers viewed their Muslim students, or felt about Islam, the general public and media atmosphere (Minsky, 2017; VonSikorski et al., 2017) appeared hostile towards Muslims, as articulated by the student participants.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study had two main findings. First, some of the teachers that I interviewed in the public high school had negative biases and preconceived notions about Islam and Muslims. For example, one teacher said that what they saw in the media was indicative of the Muslim population in general, except those in Canada: "… there seems to be a difference in Islam in Canada and Islam in other places in the world." Although the students felt that the teachers, generally, were kind and respectful, they also thought at times that negative biases surfaced. Students recalled incidents of teachers speaking ill of Muslims and of Islam, for example one

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student mentioned that "they [the teachers in this school] feel that we are all really terrorists …they think that we are the cause of the troubles in the world…like he [the teacher] told us that to our face." The administrators spoke about these same incidents, and said that when it came to teachers, there was very little they could do.

Furthermore, teachers also made statements such as "I treat all my students the same." Teachers may believe that treating all students the same ensures that they are not discriminating against any specific group, however, this very thinking is discriminatory (Banks, 2006; Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). What does it mean to view or treat all students the same? Jewell Cooper, Ye He, and Barbara Levin (2011) indicated that such statements of being faith-blind or colorblind may have three underlying meanings: teachers may not want to think about their own race and ethnicity, which may be accompanied with privilege; teachers may not want to admit that they have biases toward certain groups; teachers may not feel comfortable talking about the differences among the students for numerous other reasons. However, of all students, teachers express the most discomfort when teaching Black students (Milner, 2015).

The second major findings from the interviews revealed that the youth who were interviewed felt the pressure to represent Islam in their school. Students did not want their peers and teachers to be misled by the media, so they felt a sense of responsibility to defend Islam when it was attacked or undermined in their classrooms. Most youth are still exploring, understanding, and constructing their identities, and therefore they are not in a position to defend the religion they adhere to because they have yet to fully understand it themselves. Many Muslim adults, let alone adolescents, have limited knowledge of Islam and Islamic history (Bassiri & K, 1997). In other words, Muslim youth are put in a position to defend their religion and stand up for it even though they do not know enough to articulate a defense and thus are not comfortable being ambassadors of their faith.

Although, the media often outlets highlights Muslim's lack of affiliation to Canada, the interviews showed that the Muslim students saw themselves as Canadians and as part of the wider social fabric. Similarly, in a wider context, the most recent survey by The Environics Institute (2016) found that 83% of Muslims stated they were "very proud" Canadians, versus 73% of non-Muslims. With respect to their sense of belonging to Canada, 94% of Muslims suggested that their sense of belonging in Canada was very strong. Even in the context of rising hate crimes against Muslims, 58% of them said that their sense of belonging has become stronger in the past five years. More and more Muslims feel are feeling that they belong in Canada; however, many of the youth—around 83%—continue to fear discrimination (Environics Institute, 2016).

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Acknowledging that Islamophobia exists is one of the very first steps to teaching against it. The responsibility to help reduce prejudices and to create a safe classroom where media and stereotypes can be discussed fall on the teachers and not the Muslim students. Educators who are committed to equity use evidence-informed understandings in their classrooms to

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make changes to their teaching practices to be effective teachers for all students. Below are suggestions, some inspired by Zine (2003), on what teaching against Islamophobia looks like for social studies teachers:

- **Examining your own biases of Muslims and Islam**: Ibram X. Kendi (2020), an anti-racist educator, says that racist ideas have been raining on our heads for a long time. Similarly, associating Islam/Muslims to terrorism has been very clear in the media we have been consuming. This practice will be very difficult and uncomfortable, but it is necessary. A short Project Implicit may be useful to help reveal individual and societal biases.

- **Understanding the diversity and plurality of Muslims:** Muslims are not a homogeneous group of people. There are over 1.8 billion Muslims in the world; that is about 24% of the world population (Lipka, 2015). Muslims are "as diverse as humanity itself" (Gregorian, 2011, p. 2). Muslim cultures, beliefs, opinions, thoughts, experiences, educational backgrounds, cuisines, dress codes, and so on, vary tremendously, even when Muslims live in close proximity to one another (Lipka, 2015). Making general statements about Muslims leads to prejudices and negative stereotypes. The culture and practices of Muslims differ from family to family, and even from individual to individual.

- **Identifying and undermining the colonial narrative:** Review textbooks or class materials (e.g., articles, videos, poetry, literacy books, etc.) for negative stereotypes of Muslims depicted as fanatical terrorists, sexually enticing, and/or the despotic other. Abukhattala (2004) searched Canadian textbooks and found that "their portrayal of Islam contains erroneous factual claims, questionable assertions and omissions that reinforce negative stereotypes" (p. 164). Asking questions like: How do you think the way Muslims are portrayed in this text is shaping our perception of Muslims in the world? How are Muslims dehumanized or "Othered" or undermined in this portrayal? Who is benefiting from negatively stereotyping Muslims?

- **Offering alternative or counter narratives of Muslims:** Prejudice reduction focuses on reducing racial attitudes and finding ways to use teaching approaches and materials to develop positive attitudes (Levy et al., 2010). But how can teachers build positive attitudes towards Muslims, if the media predominantly shows negative portrayals? By showing alternative and counter narratives and positive images of Muslims and Islam, negative stereotypes are broken down and positive ones are cultivated. Furthermore, knowledge of Muslims and their contributions may act as a healthy barrier against fear, racism, and discrimination. Additionally, in Canada, Eurocentric knowledge continues to be the starting point for all sciences, social sciences, and literature in the curriculum (Dei et al., 2002; Guo, 2012; Hopson, 2013; Rezai-Rashti, 2004; Zinga, 2006). Students can benefit from other worldviews and ways of knowing as it challenges the dominant Western paradigm and expands a learner's horizons beyond that which is familiar to them (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998).

Teaching against Islamophobia also means supporting your own Muslim students in your schools and in their school journey. Educators must move beyond just providing prayer areas, celebrating different Muslim cultures, and offering accommodations for taking time off for Eid holidays. Muslim students want to go beyond mere accommodation; they are working towards ensuring that their identities are taken seriously, however it is

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expressed. They long for spaces in their schools that are free of any pressure to fight for their faith or to defend either of their multiple identities, as both Muslims and Canadians.

Q & A WITH ASMA AHMED

Question # 1

Teacher's Question

What are some counter narratives teachers could employ to represent Muslims positively and authentically?

Asma Ahmed's Response

The Muslims who live in your own community and who go to your school provide a strong counter narrative to the ones portrayed in the media. Starting a dialogue with Muslims of your community and bringing them into your classroom and schools virtually can be a strong force against Islamophobia. Listening to Muslim's lived experiences will also help understand their plight and struggles. This kind of dialogue will help your students humanize Muslims and recognize them as just "regular" people. Furthermore, providing a contrasting narrative to the negative mainstream media stories on Muslims can be used to show them in a positive light; the likes of Ginella Massa (the first CBC news anchor in Canada who wears Hijab); Ahmed Hussen, the Minister of Families, Children, and Social Development; and Omar Al Ghabra, the Minister of Transport, are all successful examples of this. Other personalities students might recognize are Malcolm X (civil rights activist), Muhammed Ali (boxer), Ibtihaj Muhammad (the American olympic fencer), Bella and Gigi Hadid (supermodels), DJ Khaled (DJ), Yuna (singer), Zayn Malik (singer), Malala Yousafzi (activist), Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib (US representatives), G. Willow Wilson (creator of the new Ms. Marvel), Nura Afia (beauty blogger) Hasan Minhaj (comedian and host of The Patriot Act), Dave Chapelle (comedian), Akon (rapper and producer), Halima Aden (Supermodel) and Bilqia Abdul Qaader (Basketball Player) and Dr. Oz (cardiologist and talk show host).

Question #2

Teacher's Question

Are there curricular resources that present Muslim identity accurately and with nuance? Can they help us move beyond "celebrating different Muslim cultures" and toward a more meaningful and critical approach?

Asma Ahmed's Response

There are a few curricular resources out there that help show the complexity of Muslim identity. The resources below help teachers understand how students and educators are implicated in the overarching geo-political and socio-political narratives and agendas. Sultan

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Rana's (2016) Neglected Voices, the National Council of Canadian Muslims' (2019) Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence and Islamophobia, The Aga Khan Museum's Curriculum Resource Guide for Teachers, Grades One to Eight (Bentley & Kana'an, 2015), and the Islamic Heritage Month website are all excellent resources to get started with.

Question # 3

Teacher's Question

How do negative biases surface in the classroom, and how can these situations be addressed and eliminated?

Asma Ahmed's Response

Teacher Biases   A few examples of teacher biases are when a teacher holds white students to a higher academic standard than students of colour (Hattie, 2003; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Another example where negative biases show up is in suspension rates (James, 2012), whereby people of colour have higher rates of suspension than white students. Generally, women in STEM are not well-supported or encouraged, and those who are faced with the intersectional identity of being both a Muslim and a female of colour face even more difficulty entering into and succeeding at STEM programs (Beede et al., 2011). I am an educator, so when I am around marginalized students, I try to do some reflective practices like ask myself questions, such as: What do I believe about this student? What do I believe about their capabilities? Do I treat my students the way I want my children to be treated? This is really difficult for me because I am a Muslim, and I am a visible minority, yet I find myself falling prey to the conditioning of our society. Kendi (2020), the anti-racist educator says that we are either a racist or an anti-racist. The way I interpret this is that our default, because we are a product of our society, is to be racist — that is how we have been conditioned. And therefore, in order to not be racist it is not sufficient to be "non-racist," rather, we must actively work as an "anti-racist" to challenge the "racist" conditioning in our mind.

Student Biases   Teasing other students, using derogatory terms, and making jokes about Muslims are some of the ways negative biases may show up. Sometimes these are "well-intended" and sometimes they are malicious. It is important to discuss these things in the classroom, explore their logic, and explore how irrational jokes and derogatory terms are. Another way to tackle these biases, in conjunction with the logical approach, is to explore their emotional impact. How does it feel to be called a name? Putting ourselves in someone else's shoes can help build our empathy. Additionally, the teacher sets the tone in a classroom. Ensure that everyone feels safe and a sense of belonging, and that other students are not jeopardizing or comprising that with comments by clearly dealing with these issues in a wise and respectful manner.

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Question #4

Teacher's Question

The practical wisdom under the heading "examining your own biases of Muslims and Islam" teaches us to ask important and hard questions about our perceptions. Some of these questions address gender, praying, and religious attire. Are these the primary aspects of Muslim identity that are negatively portrayed in classrooms?

Asma Ahmed's Response

What is negatively portrayed in the media specifically is belief. The media portrays Muslims as terrorists and they make it sound like Muslims actually believe in terrorist agendas and support terrorism acts. When you see a Muslim wearing Hijab, the head covering, what do you make of that? Images of being oppressed, or being docile or shy, or women being forced to wear it is what comes to a mind that has not examined their implicit biases. On the contrary, most Muslims who wear a hijab see it as empowering, unobjectifying, and freeing from societal standards of beauty.

Question #5

Teacher's Question

If an incident occurs in another classroom, how can teachers support their Muslim students?

Asma Ahmed's Response

In this case, I think teachers are encouraged to treat this just like any other situation students of colour face in other classes. (1) Holding space for them to talk about their feelings and their pain is crucial so that they feel a sense of belonging and fitting in; (2) Asking them how they want to be supported; (3) Using your own acumen to offer support such as providing a space for dialogue between your student and the one whom he/she has been wronged by; (4) Depending on the situation, making suggestions to your administration for anti-racism workshops, and if the situation is purposefully racist and recurring then informing your administration.

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