Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT)

Teaching for Change: Listening to Muslim Voices about 9/11

Randa N Elbih

University of Saint Joseph, West Hartford, Connecticut, USA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randa N Elbih

I serve as Assistant Professor of Social Studies and Urban Education at the University of Saint Joseph, Connecticut, in the United States of America. My work centers on teacher development and preparation to teach the diverse pool of K-12 students in Connecticut public schools. I have been researching equitable teaching practices for the past 11 years and most recently published a book on teaching current events holistically. Growing up in Egypt and obtaining higher education in the United States provided me with multi-dimensional perspectives for examining ideas. Besides being a graphic artist for many years and using technology to engage Millennial and Generation Z students, I see the classroom as one of the safest and most sacred spaces for creative and transformative work. I teach my pre-service teacher candidates that good teaching is not just about mastering technique; it depends upon the integrity of their relationships – with themselves, their students, and the world.

Published Spring 2021

DOI 10.29173/assert17

Pages: 48-57

Keywords 9/11, Islamophobia, identity, school, Muslim students, teachers, citizenship, belonging, society

INTRODUCTION

Negative representations of Muslims have been wide-spread in the news media and popular culture way before 9/11– note Orientalism (1979) by Edward Said and "Real Bad Arabs" (2006) by Jack Shaheen. Nevertheless, after 9/11, negative representations coupled with laws that target Muslims, such as the Patriot Act of 2001 and The Muslim Ban of 2017—compounded with Islamophobia, a social fear-based association of Islam and Muslims with

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

terrorism and violence (Haque, 2004), pose daily discrimination against Muslims in day-to-day life.

Spurred by a need to address growing prejudice against Muslims, teachers play a critical role in educating students about 9/11, the War on Terror, Islam, and Muslims to challenge the Islamaphobia narrative that negatively shapes Muslim-American identities and school environments.

There is excellent literature focusing on Muslim American student identity (Abdo, 2006; Haddad et al., 2009; Sirin & Fine, 2008) and Muslim American youth's sense of citizenship and belonging (El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Maira, 2009). In terms of educating teachers on how to think critically about Arabs and Muslim voices in the classroom, there are also studies on Islam and Muslim representations in textbooks (Moore, 2006; Sewall, 2003); the Muslim American youth school experience (Merry, 2007; Zine, 2006); how teachers teach Muslim students (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009); and even those that propose anti-Islamophobia curricula (VanDriel, 2004; Zine, 2001). These are all important resources for understanding the critical nature of how Muslim students experience education and how to engage these experiences. This paper builds on the research in my book Dialectics of 9/11 and the War on Terror: Educational Responses (Elbih, 2018), in which I argue that the news media presents a lopsided dialectic about current events when certain voices are excluded from the conversation.

In this paper I show the reader how listening to Muslim students' voices - allowing their reflections of 9/11 in specific to guide the discussion on how teachers can teach for change - can alleviate discrimination against these vulnerable youth.

THE RESEARCH

I conducted this study in 2010 in New Mexico, a state located in the Southwest of the United States, where I completed my doctoral degree. I used the data gathered from this research also to write my book (2018), mentioned above.

As a Muslim woman, my familiarity with the Muslim community of New Mexico allowed me to directly approach nine Muslim Americans because of their religious and ethnic diversity. My participants identify as Sunni and Shiaa Muslims and Mexican, Iranian, Palestinian, Pakistani, Afghan, and Lebanese. They were second-generation or beyond, between the ages of 18-26. All were attending a public school in New Mexico, United States, during the 9/11 attacks.

I carried out one-on-one semi-structured audiotaped interviews with each participant and assigned participants pseudonyms throughout the research study. For the final write-up and presentation of the data, I included much of my participants' interview excerpts to allow their words to guide the paper's structure (Seidman, 2006).

Listening to Muslim Voices

Experiences at School During and Post 9/11

Heidi remembers:

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

"So, I woke up and got ready to go to school and expected it to be like any other day to go to school, and then I went to my first class and everybody is talking like they are in a frenzy, and I don't know what's going on, and they turned on the TV in the classroom, and they turned on the news, and we saw what was going on. Apparently the US was under attack; there was a terrorist attack. The Twin Towers went down. And they were saying, like, some terrorist extremist groups is doing all this work and they are Muslims and it's their fault. And when they were saying that, all the kids in the classroom turned around and started staring at me." – Heidi

Heidi, like the eight other participants, was sitting in a classroom when 9/11 happened. All participants experienced "fear," "confusion," and "concern." Heidi felt even more scared as she sensed that her fellow students stared at her as if she was somehow responsible for the attacks. All participants felt they were targets of racism, discrimination, and harassment for being Muslim. They were harassed at school with verbal and physical abuse from their peers. For example, Henry stated that in his middle school, "There was always someone making stupid jokes about me being a terrorist because of being a Muslim and then it started happening a lot in high school." Besides losing friends and noticing people avoid her at school, Heidi also got into fistfights with female peers over her perceived identity.

After 9/11, teachers' interactions with Muslim students changed. For example, Francis' teacher asked Muslim students to provide information about Islam. Francis said, "We said something positive and people actually wanna hear it. The teacher twists it around and turns it negative." When Francis complained about the teacher's harassments, the school administrations appeared non-responsive.

Additionally, Darla, Francis, Heidi, and Mark believed that their teachers' ignorance of Islam and Muslims made them reluctant to teach about the topic altogether and therefore indirectly fostered Islamophobia (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Nevertheless, Heidi's teacher understood that 9/11 was not her fault, or any particular religious or ethnic groups fault "but a group of people who tried to take things in their own hands." Heidi felt supported by this teacher, whose goal, according to her, "was to educate students about the community and what's happening in the world."

Experiences Outside of School Post 9/11

Wayne's parents advised him, "if anybody asks you, we are not Muslims and not from Afghanistan. Say you are Mexican or Italian or something like that." In addition to hiding their ethnic and religious identity, government policies such as the Patriot Act led Muslims to assimilate and show their allegiance to the nation-state visually through actions such as flying the American flag and wearing all-American T-shirts on the anniversary of 9/11.

While riding public transportation, Bridget felt "people were sometimes scared of sitting by me or sometimes they would give me weird looks." Bridget later experienced racism within her government job. Bridget explained:

"One of my bosses told me, you know, you are a very bright woman and you could go so far in your career, but because you are wearing a veil it is gonna limit you to how far you could go especially with government entities."

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

When she returned from Iran, airport security officials questioned Mary about her identity, her Iranian last name, and the reasons why she visited Iran. She believed that being a Muslim Iranian also adds to the tension due to the character of the United States' relationship with Iran.

These stories highlight how various sectors of society brand many young Muslim Americans as potential terrorists. These young adults reflect to varying degrees the media's stereotypical image of what a terrorist looks like, thereby eliciting harassment from the government and in public spaces (Naber, 2008). Altogether, these experiences reinforced for the Muslim American Students their identity as perceived by Americans influenced their self-confidence and sense of citizenship and belonging.

Coping with Discrimination Post-911

The students I interviewed used a variety of methods to cope with identity issues and discrimination.

Darla's civic and political engagement was one way to deal with discrimination, her hyphenated sense of identity, and feelings of exile. Sirin and Fine (2008) might argue that Darla's civic engagement is a way to reclaim Muslims' rights and full membership in American society by giving her the voice to say "we are here and you cannot do this to us" (p. 111). In many ways, this discourse provides a vocabulary with which to understand her reality, and a network of people with whom to discuss it.

Another method for coping was through increasing awareness about Islam. For the individuals in the study with familial ties and a personal connection, this was a time-consuming but straightforward task. However, educating peers and teachers was often described as frustrating. Bridget explained:

"It takes a long time to establish for other people a good vision about Islam. They start to accept it and start to believe that it is good, and then something bad happens and then I get put on the spot again."

Although aware of education's power to change negative perceptions about Islam, Bridget recognizes that it takes patience and persistence to educate.

Heidi dealt with discrimination by confronting people's negative remarks with evidence to the contrary, and directing people to resources that could provide them with more accurate information.

A third strategy for dealing with discrimination and identity issues was deepening their faith. Mark believed that by "being steadfast on the Islamic religion, being patient with difficulty and dependable on Allah (God) things will eventually get better." For Mark, deepening attachment to his Islamic faith helped him stay strong in times of adversity.

Finally, some Muslim American students dealt with discrimination by trying to blend into American society by following the American dress code and having White friends.

In each of these examples, Muslim American students took matters in their hands when American society at large doubted their citizenship and excluded them. They felt compelled to design strategies to cope with discrimination. This burden should not have to fall on the shoulders of minority youth. I am here to say there is more that educators can do to create

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

safe spaces for them.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Despite already substantial curricular and classroom management responsibilities, teachers can play critical roles in teaching against Islamophobia. As I mentioned previously in my book (Elbih, 2018) and paper (Elbih, 2015), teachers can help resolve misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, 9/11, and the War on Terror. They can also provide support systems for Muslim students at schools (in balance with their support of any student demographic), particularly those who visibly express their Muslim identity and/or those exposed to harassment. As well, teachers can blend units on Muslims, Islam, and Arabs into existing curricular requirements (Elbih, 2015). Finally, teachers can organize events and activities that develop tolerance, understanding, and democratic values, including critical discussions within the schoolroom walls or among the wider community.

Teachers are given a unique opportunity in our society. Their classrooms bring together unique groups of students that might otherwise never spend time together. We must embrace current events such as 9/11 as opportunities to address the pain, ignorance, and grief resulting from miseducation that impacts many of our most vulnerable students. There is a whole chapter in my book (Elbih, 2018) that provides examples and lesson plans to teach against Islamophobia. Nevertheless, one recommended activity is to facilitate a critical dialogue in the class that involves multiple perspectives and viewpoints of those at stake; Muslim students to share their experiences with 9/11 and students who had loved ones who died on 9/11 or in the War on Terror to express their feelings and losses. By listening to all perspectives, teachers can cultivate a critical dialogue in the class built on respect and foster democratic ideals and practices.

Another idea is to invite guest speakers or community leaders to visit the class and tell stories of what Muslims have endured after 9/11. It is also essential to highlight Muslims' diversity in the United States and break down the stiff perception that Muslims are a homogenous group. Perhaps show the different Muslim cultures and the many ways that Muslims express themselves and their identities. Highlight prominent American Muslims such as Dr. Ugur Sahin and Dr. Özlem Türeci, the couple who founded BioNTech and developed the leading vaccine for COVID-19 (Gelles, 2020), and other Muslims' contributions to the American society and the world. These are just a few out of many examples that a teacher can do to teach for change.

Q & A WITH RANDA N. ELBIH

Question #1

Teacher's Question

You mention the research literature on Muslim representation in schools. Can you please elaborate on what the research shows and what early steps teachers can undertake to challenge these representations?

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Randa N. Elbih's Response

After 9/11, Muslim Americans, particularly those who fit a certain physical profile, were labeled as terrorists and were often treated as a threat to American national security by authorities (VanDriel, 2004). Among other policies, the Patriot Act paved the way for numerous acts of discrimination and marginalization for Muslims. Because of the Patriot Act, tens of thousands of Muslim and Arab immigrants must submit to a call-in interview that is not required for other immigrants. The FBI collects data and conducts surveillance predominantly on Islamic centers and mosques. Besides a discriminatory political framework, direct acts of discrimination and violence against Muslims and their businesses have become more frequent nationwide (Haque, 2004). Inflamed by Islamophobic rhetoric in the media and political discourse, many Muslims living in the United States have experienced verbal and physical abuse (Ahmed, 2004). Mostafa Abu Sway, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Islamic Studies at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, added that there is much "discrimination in employment" and "in the provision of health services, exclusion from managerial positions and jobs of high responsibility and exclusion from political and government posts" (2005 , p. 15). Further, emergency medicine physician, Dr. Aasim Padela, and Dr. Michele Heisler, University of Michigan Professor in the Department of Internal Medicine, conducted a study that gathered face-to-face data from Arab American adults in the greater Detroit area to assess the relationship between abuse and discrimination with stress levels in a post-/911 world. They found that post-9/11 discrimination directly impacted the rise of psychological disorders among Arabs (Padela & Heisler, 2010). Further, psychology professors Selcuk R. Sirin of New York University and Michelle Fine at The City University of New York confirmed that discriminatory acts challenge Muslim Americans' ability to attain an education, improve socioeconomic status, and their development of a sense of identity and belonging (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Because of the crooked perspective that generalizes Muslims as oppressors, many face persecution or experience systematic discrimination that hinders their self-affirmation. This systematic discrimination is also prevalent within public schools.

Despite the many cultural forces at play that lead to these identity challenges among Muslim Americans, teachers do have power that influences marginalized students' identities and sense of belonging. According to Erikson (1968), when people see you differently than how you see yourself, it often leads to identity consciousness, or awareness about a certain aspect of one's identity. For example, Muslim American youth did not equate their religion with terrorism, as did the world around them. This dissonance between external perception of identity and internal understanding of identity can lead to a temporary identity crisis, or war within oneself (Erikson, 1968). When the person or system that produces and maintains the external perception of identity is in a position of power—such as a parent, teacher, or the dominant culture—the dissonance between a positive internal identity and a negative external one can be especially great, and lead to more personal challenges for the individual (Erikson, 1968). However, there is also an opportunity for liberation from the alienating negative external identity through greater awareness of the self as well as affirmations from adults or authorities, such as teachers.

Question #2

Teacher's Question

The article provides general suggestions to teachers, such as organizing events and blending units. Can you provide a concrete example of an activity that develops critical discussions that teachers can use as a template?

Randa N. Elbih's Response

Investigate Who has been an "Enemy" or "Ally" in the United States' Past and Present. The enemy is constantly changing. This will help students understand the political and economic motivations for the war, and encourage greater critical probing of the reliance on a religious or cultural framework as an explanation. For example, students could compare the War on Terror to the Cold War. How does the fear of Islam compare to the fear of communism? How were the Russians represented during the Cold War, and how do those images compare to representations of Muslims now? How are Russians represented today in comparison to during the Cold War? Are they considered allies of the United States in the present time? Teachers can have students read the article "Is Islamophobia the new McCarthyism?" by journalist Andrew Bacevich (2012) featured in Mother Jones. It may also be useful for teachers to do a Google image search for anti-Muslim propaganda and anti-Communism propaganda, and then ask students what the similarities and differences are between these images. This will help students to recognize propaganda tactics and patterns, and help them make up their own minds about what level of concern they should have about Islam.

Question #3

Teacher's Question

Your article calls for teachers to educate against "misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, 9/11, and the War on Terror." What are the most pernicious stereotypes and misconceptions teachers should combat? Does the author recommend that teachers address these issues as they arise or take a more proactive approach?

Randa N. Elbih's Response

I recommend that teachers combat misconceptions about Islam that it is a religion that promotes terrorism and violence and about Muslims as terrorist, violent, and barbaric. I recommend that teachers take a more proactive approach to dispel myths about the religion and its followers.

Question #4

Teacher's Question

What advice would you give to teachers who would like to be strategic about incorporating teachings about Muslims and Islam into existing curricular frameworks that may not

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

include this content?

Randa N. Elbih's Response

Teachers can incorporate teachings about Muslims and Islam into existing curricular frameworks that may not include this content.

For example, develop lessons that demystify stereotypes about minority groups, including Muslims. Teachers can do this by deconstructing the media and textbooks for hegemonic ideologies that have targeted minority groups and Muslims. They can instruct about ethnic diversity, explaining that not all Blacks are African American and there is a difference between Muslims' and Arabs' history, culture, and religion (Elbih, 2018).

Teachers can develop a unit on government policies and laws that targeted minority groups. They can do so by conducting historical analysis and comparing Muslim American experiences to Japanese Americans in camps, to the civil war, the violations of civil liberties, and civil surveillance. Showing parallels between the Cold War and Terrorism will allow students to see how the government used both wars to instigate fear among people and establish national laws that have taken civil liberties in the name of safety (Elbih, 2018).

Finally, developing lessons on the United States Constitution and the rights and responsibilities of American citizens will help every student grow a sense of belonging and citizenship, address concerns in the community, and develop strategies to tackle these issues (Elbih, 2018).

Question #5

Teacher's Question

5. What are some examples of "events or activities" that you have found effective for developing the "tolerance, understanding, and democratic values" you call for? Which of these should take place in the classroom with students and which should involve the broader community?

Randa N. Elbih's Response

There is a teacher's institute called Dar Al Islam in New Mexico (www.daralislam.org) that sponsors the attendance of non-Muslims in an Islam Education workshop for two weeks in the summer. Interested teachers may apply online. The institute pays teachers to attend this training as a way to educate Americans about basic Islam and defy misconceptions.

REFERENCES

Abdo, G. (2006). *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America after 9/11*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Abu Sway, M. (2005). Islamophobia: Meaning, manifestations, causes. *Palestine -Israel Journal*, *12*(2). Retrieved from https://pij.org/articles/342/islamophobia-meaning-manifestations-causes

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. New York, NY: Routledge.

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Bacevich, A. (2012). Is Islamophobia the new McCarthyism. *Mother Jones. Retrieved October*, *12*.

Elbih, R. (2015). Teaching about Islam and Muslims While Countering Cultural Misrepresentations. *The Social Studies*, *106*(3), 112–116. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2015.1015712 10.1080/00377996.2015.1015712

Elbih, R. (2018). *Part of the series, "Counterpoints: Studies in the Post-Modern Theories of Education* (S. Steinberg, Ed.). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

El-Haj, T. R. A., & Bonet, S. W. (2011). Education, Citizenship, and the Politics of Belonging. *Review of Research in Education*, *35*(1), 29–59. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0091732x10383209 10.3102/0091732x10383209

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Gelles, D. (2020). The Husband-and-Wife Team Behind the Leading Vaccine to Solve Covid-19. *The New York Times*.

Haddad, Y. Y., Senzai, F., & Smith, J. (2009). *Educating the Muslims of America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Haque, A. (2004). Islamophobia in North America: Confronting the menace. In B. V. Driel (Ed.), *Islamophobia in educational settings* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–19). London: Trentham House. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.1186/1745-9974-1-1 10.1186/1745-9974-1-1

Maira, S. M. (2009). *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Merry, M. (2007). *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling: A Philosophical Approach*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press.

Moore, J. (2006). Teaching about Islam in Secondary Schools: Curricular and Pedagogical Considerations . *Equity and Excellence in Education*, *39*, 279–286. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10665680600788479

Naber, N. (2008). *Look Mohamed the Terrorist Is Coming!' Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism and the Intersectionality of Oppression after 9/11* (Jamal, A. Naber, & N., Eds.). New York: Syracuse University Press.

Niyozov, S., & Pluim, G. (2009). Teachers' Perspectives on the Education of Muslim Students: A Missing Voice in Muslim Education Research. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *39*(5), 637–677. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873x.2009.00463.x 10.1111/j.1467-873x.2009.00463.x

Padela, A., & Heisler, M. (2010). The association of perceived abuse and discrimination after September 11, 2001, with psychological distress, level of happiness, and health status among Arab Americans. . *US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health*. Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2804633/

Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Sewall, G. T. (2003). *Islam and the Textbooks.*

Shaheen, J. (2006). Real Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a [Motion picture. *United States: Media Education Foundation*.

Sirin, S. R., & Fine, M. (2008). *Muslim American Youth: Understanding Hyphenated Identities through Multiple Methods*. New York: New York University Press.

VanDriel, B. (2004). Confronting Islamophobia in Educational Practice. Stoke-on-Trent: UK: Trentham.

Zine, J. (2001). Muslim Youth in Canadian Schools: Education and the Politics of Religious Identity. *Anthropology <html_ent glyph="@amp;" ascii="&"/> Education Quarterly*, *32*(4), 399–423. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2001.32.4.399 10.1525/aeq.2001.32.4.399

Zine, J. (2006). Canadian Islamic Schools: Unraveling the Politics of Faith, Gender, Knowledge, and Identity. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry